

ORAVA PROJECT EVALUATION REPORT

Executive Summary

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One assumption underlying USAID's support to the Orava Project is that such programs can help establish new social and political norms that value an active and informed citizenry necessary for the transition to a stable democracy. Therefore, the Mission has valued the project's efforts "to

¹ We have been unable obtain budget information from USAID.

² FY2001 Results Review, USAID Slovakia, March 1999, p. 13.

institutionalize its democratic pedagogical practices to educate future generations of Slovaks in the types of behaviors and attitudes they will need to be responsible members of a democratic society.”³

CONTEXT AND PROGRAM GOALS

During most of the twentieth century, education in countries under the Soviet sphere of influence was aimed at transmitting knowledge, methods, and skills in the service of spreading the ideology of the State. The purpose was to create good citizens for a Communist society by indoctrinating students with certain “truths” that they would follow in their daily lives and by preparing them for a State-determined profession.

In this system, the roles of students and teachers were rigidly defined. Students believed that the responsibility for learning rested with teachers, who “knew everything.” Students did not look to their teachers as sources of knowledge and learning, but as people who could tell them what was “right.” In turn, teachers believed that the responsibility for teaching and learning rested elsewhere, usually with those of greater authority, such as the Ministry of Education and the authors of textbooks.

Teachers, who were State employees, viewed their job as disseminating information contained in the standard textbooks, demonstrating methods and skills, and evaluating students’ performances as measured by examinations that required students to restate information from the textbook. Strategies used to transmit knowledge were rote memorization, drill, and practice. This authoritarian system yielded near universal literacy; at the same time, it actively discouraged and punished independent thinking.

Since its independence, Slovakia realized that “they must resurrect democracy as rapidly as possible in an effort to avoid the turmoil that has engulfed neighboring territories. To this end, the Orava Project [was] designed to help the Slovaks restructure their indigenous educational system, not only to reflect their commitment to new democratic processes, but also to prepare new ‘citizens’ for participation in them.”⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Orava Project: A Slovak Republic/ University of Northern Iowa Collaborative National Education Restructuring Program, University of Northern Iowa/ Iowa International Development Foundation, 1993, p. 2.

The Orava Project addresses several areas believed to be critical elements in developing such citizens. The underlying assumption here is that classroom communities can provide a significant way to prepare students to assume active roles in a democratic society. These critical elements include:

- Increased opportunities to develop critical thinking skills by altering the types of activities,
- A more developed partnership between students and teachers that increases student choice and
- Increased focus on inquiry and discovery and less on rote memorization and traditional methods of
- New and “authentic” approaches to evaluating student learning that measure the more complex aspects of learning such as conceptual understanding and writing for different purposes

Slovakia’s transition to democracy has faced setbacks and substantial challenges. Planning for this project began while the Ministry of Education was in favor of education reform, but with the subsequent change in government, UNI’s original partner was replaced by an unreceptive administration. Before elections in 1998, the project was conducted under a repressive regime that thwarted reform.

Maintaining the project during difficult times has been a major accomplishment for UNI and a credit to the project’s leadership. As a means of dealing with the political context, project staff interested individuals who were willing to volunteer their time and energy to change their own practice—whether they were working in kindergartens, basic schools (grades 1-9), or the university. The complex components of the Orava Project were developed within this network of committed individuals.

Program Goals

Conceived as a seven-year “systematic school restructuring program” scheduled to complete its work in 2002, this multilevel education reform effort is now in its dissemination phase and has sought to effect change at three levels:

- the Ministry of Education, focusing on the teacher certification and recertification processes.
- the university, developing an exemplary teacher training program at both the in-service and pre-service levels.
- school practitioners, providing staff development programs for teachers and school administrators. These efforts have been implemented for kindergartens and for grades 1-4 and 5-9 of basic schools. Work in secondary schools has recently begun.

UNI's original overall goal was described in its proposal as follows: "to infuse democratic concepts and procedures into the Slovak educational system." Related sub-goals were:

- "To establish within the Ministry of Education a support structure for educational reform to be initiated throughout Slovakia.
- To establish a model program for the preparation of teachers and school leaders at Comenius University and to disseminate this model to other teacher preparation programs throughout Slovakia.
- To establish a model school program at the basic level in the Orava region of Slovakia and to disseminate this model to schools throughout Slovakia."⁵

PROJECT EVALUATIONS

Since its inception, there have been three previous efforts to assess the Orava Project. The 1995 evaluation was conducted by Dr. Charles Temple, six months after the USAID grant began. The June 1999 evaluation was commissioned by the UNI project staff and performed by the Slovak organization Partners for Democratic Change. The August 1999 evaluation by USAID/E&E Bureau consultant Peter Pelham focused on management issues.⁶

This EDC evaluation, which is a follow-on study to the one undertaken by Dr. Pelham, focused on the educational practices of the Orava Project. Specifically, we:

- examined educational issues and practice
- conducted direct observations of classrooms

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶ Evaluation of the Orava Project Phase I, Dr. Peter Pelham, June 1999. Available through CDIE, Attn: Document Acquisitions, 611 N. Kent Street, Suite 600, Arlington, VA 22209-2111, www.dec.org, Telephone 703-351-4006 or fax 703-351-4039.

- collected data from key stakeholders from the Ministry of Education, Methods Centers, and Comenius University through interviews and surveys
- performed a comparative analysis of program results with similar programs in the region through administration of EDC's *Teaching Skills Inventory*
- reviewed records and evaluations of training programs kept in the Orava Association offices in Bratislava

In these ways we have attempted to add to previous assessments and provide USAID with additional evaluative information as it reviews the Orava Project and its current sponsoring agency, the newly established Orava Association.

Limitations of time and resources for this evaluation allowed us to focus on five of the ten program components. We chose those which most critically affect educational practices. They include teacher in-service training, teacher pre-service training, school/university partnerships, Educational Leadership Programs, and Early Childhood Programs.

Research Questions

Our qualitative evaluation addressed eight research questions identified by the E&E/USAID officials who commissioned this study.

Questions related to the effectiveness of the program include:

- Has the Orava Project made progress toward reforming the educational system to incorporate democratic practices?
- What evidence exists that the Orava Project has influenced participants' teaching practices in classrooms?
- Does the UNI program for Slovakia represent an important adaptation and/or innovation to what is known in the U.S. as best practices in education?
- Do the UNI program teaching guides and training materials incorporate the known, best pedagogical approaches?

Questions related to program impact include:

- What evidence is there that the Orava Project is being disseminated?

- What evidence is there that the project was able to bring about a well-coordinated effort that is mutually reinforcing?

Questions related to sustainability include:

- What changes have been made in Comenius University and other pre-service institutions as a result of UNI's efforts?
- Is UNI likely to produce continuing and sustainable development impacts after USAID funding has stopped? Through policies of the Ministry of Education? Through the Methods Centers? Through the establishment of an NGO and its current personnel?

Methodology

In conducting this qualitative program evaluation, we employed a range of methods. After conducting a document review and analysis, we attended a meeting with the UNI project co-directors and key USAID leadership to clarify questions raised by our analysis. In preparation for our site visit to Slovakia, we identified key respondents and designed the instrumentation and processes. During our eight-day site visit, we traveled to three regions that represent key implementation sites and gathered data from school personnel (Orava Project participants and non-participants) and other key stakeholders. Data collection methods included focus groups, interviews, surveys, and classroom observations.

We deliberately built redundancy into all instruments to obtain multiple perspectives on critical data elements. The six instruments we developed include four interview schedules for university faculty, the Ministry of Education, NGO staff, and Methods Center officials. In addition, we developed a school/classroom observation guide and a participant survey. EDC's *Teaching Skills Inventory* was also employed, since it has been used extensively in Eastern Europe and the New Independent States as a way of gathering data on democratic educational practices.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Our major findings regarding the effectiveness of program content are:

- The content taught in the key Orava training programs that we reviewed reflects best practice when compared with similar programs in the U.S. and in Eastern Europe and the New Independent States. This includes content in areas such as critical thinking, theory and frameworks, teacher

questioning methods, lesson planning, cooperative learning, using reading and writing for critical thinking, early childhood education, and school improvement.

- Effective, well-accepted methods for training participants are evident in the training materials reviewed.
- Orava participants who completed EDC's *Teaching Skills Inventory* demonstrated that they were familiar with the meaning of best educational principles and practices. This suggests that training delivered reflected the best practices contained in the materials.
- The use of "home groups" and the model for delivering the Early Childhood Program appear to support the adoption of complex, innovative practices promoted by the Orava Project.

The major findings regarding the effectiveness of democratic educational practices are:

- The Orava Project appears to have had a positive effect on participants' attitudes toward democratic educational practices. All those surveyed rated the program in which they participated as "excellent." They felt they had learned how to facilitate critical thinking, foster cooperation by and with students, and respect students as individuals.
- The program development process used by UNI was highly democratic and collaborative. This served as an excellent model for participants in a democratic educational process.
- Through analysis of EDC's *Teaching Skills Inventory*, we found that Orava participants valued highly specific democratic educational practices and began to use them in their classrooms.
- Classroom observations revealed teachers actively using the innovative methods. Use of these methods varied in effectiveness, depending on the individual skill of the teacher.
- An issue which arises, from the classroom observations and from the *Teaching Skills Inventory* analysis, is whether participants are using the innovative methods, sometimes at the expense of more traditional methods. In some cases traditional methods, such as lecture, might better serve the educational purposes.

The major findings regarding program impact are:

- There has been a high level of impact on individual participants as a result of their involvement in the Orava Project.
- There is a cadre of 62 core teacher leaders who are committed volunteers, working to disseminate the program in three regions of the country.
- While the volunteer nature of the dissemination effort is a definite program asset, there appears to be a need for strengthened systems to ensure quality control, especially as the program expands.

- The Orava Project’s Early Childhood Program provides an excellent example of well-coordinated and mutually reinforcing activities. Ongoing consultation, support, and feedback lead to the refinement of classroom practices. Moreover, the ECP creates the connections among the kindergarten programs, the university, and the project that can strengthen the overall impact of the program on multiple systems.

The major findings regarding sustainability are:

- The political context during the first five years prevented large-scale institutionalization of the project’s programs. However, there is evidence that sustainability of various activities will occur through the strong cadre of committed educators who have been trained.
- The number of participating pedagogical faculty from Comenius University was estimated to be one-quarter. We consider this to be a critical mass of involved university participants.
- Sustainability, through changes at Comenius University, appears to have taken root and to be on-going. This has led to changes in their practice and institutionalizing of courses with content derived from the Orava Project.
- Recently, the political context has become more open to reform, and the next several months could represent an important opportunity to sustain the gains made through institutionalization.
- The Ministry of Education is open to an application from the Orava Association in regard to applying for official status as an officially sanctioned “experimental” program. This official certification would be important for long-term sustainability. The Ministry is also receptive to UNI participation on the expert committee that is currently reviewing educational finance and management.
- The education reform process currently under way in the Ministry includes the participation of several Orava participants on expert committees. These committees will issue white papers for public discussion and eventual legislation.
- The Ministry of Education has appointed a high-level liaison to the Orava Project. It is hoped that an agreement can be negotiated regarding the official status of the Orava Association NGO.
- The Orava Association has begun to work with the Methods Centers in an official capacity. The Western Bratislava Methods Center has received accreditation for one of the Orava Project’s courses and is currently offering it for credit for 25 participants.
- The Orava Association NGO is undergoing transition. A strategic planning process has begun.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Over the past five years, the Orava Project has made a deep impact on the lives and work of participating Slovak teachers, school administrators, and university faculty. The continuity of its leadership has consistently provided a positive, guiding force for all project activities. The constancy of project leadership, combined with the internal integrity of the program design, has led to the development of a community of local educators committed to the values and practices inherent in democratic education.

This is an impressive accomplishment, especially since the past political situation necessitated changes in the program implementation strategy. The project was initially designed to work simultaneously at the grassroots level and the Ministry of Education. However, formal work with the Ministry and government institutions was not possible, given the difficult political climate of the recent past. Consequently, project energy was devoted to developing the grassroots approach.

The conclusions that appear below consider the political conditions that dominated the past. They also take into account the Orava Project's current stage of development, based on conception of the work and its timeline. According to the original proposal, the project was designed to span a seven-year period, concluding in the year 2002. Currently the UNI work is in the midst of its Phase 3, which was planned as a time for dissemination and diffusion activities.

A summary of our main conclusions follows.

- The Orava Project has achieved its goal, as stated in the original proposal, “to infuse democratic concepts and procedures into the Slovak educational system.” It has accomplished this by recruiting and developing a strong, enthusiastic cadre of educators (i.e., teachers, school leaders, administrators, and university faculty).
- Orava Project participants have demonstrated that they share a common set of values regarding democratic educational methods. It is also clear that they have begun to use these innovative methods frequently in their classroom practice.
- Democratic education has been modeled for participants as well as taught to them. The co-project directors have used consensus building, negotiation, and collaborative methods in developing the programs and activities. This has served as a further model for participants in their own work in classroom teaching, teacher training, and education reform programs.

- The Orava Project has made an impact on pre-service education of teachers. This is particularly evident in the adoption of innovative methods and programs by the pedagogical faculty at Comenius University. Specifically, the project has successfully developed and implemented the “model program for the preparation of teachers and school leaders,” which was one of its stated sub-goals.
- Since involvement in the Orava Project is voluntary, alumni represent a cadre of self-selected people. This was an excellent strategy for the program thus far. However, for the program to become truly sustainable, a supplemental strategy is needed to secure the participation of mainstream educators.
- The current systems used by the project to monitor program activity are ad hoc. As the program moves forward in its dissemination phase, a more cohesive system is needed to monitor and support the ongoing work of program alumni as they apply the Orava methods in their own classrooms and as they train “second generation” participants.
- The NGO is in a critical transition year. Without the on-site involvement of the project’s co-directors who have returned to UNI, there is a need for organizational development (e.g., planning, staffing, staff training, and fundraising). There is also a need to continue to build institutional relationships with other agencies in order to ensure systematic dissemination and sustainability of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on our findings and conclusions and build on work currently in progress by the Orava Association.

The recommendations are organized in two categories, which are essential for implementing and sustaining systematic change: (1) developing and implementing a plan for systematic disseminations and (2) increasing the management capacity of the Orava Association.

Developing and Implementing a Plan for Systematic Dissemination of the Orava Project

Recommendation 1: Develop and Implement Quality Control Mechanisms

In order to disseminate the activities of the Orava Project and the lessons learned, it is important to build systems and procedures that will ensure quality as participants attempt to apply what they have learned. Specifically:

- There should be support for and monitoring of program alumni, who are attempting to use the methods with students in their own classrooms.

- There should be a defined process of selection, accreditation, and train-the-trainer workshops for those alumni who will train new participants.

Recommendation 2: Formally Involve Other Stakeholders and the “Unconverted”

The time is right to expand the universe of participants and to involve former non-volunteers and other stakeholders in program planning. Furthering the relationship with the Ministry of Education is especially important at this juncture, since it has expressed a new openness to collaboration.

Recommendation 3: Create a Focus at the School Level

As an important interim step between the program’s focus on highly motivated individuals and its ultimate goal to reform the educational system, we recommend concentrating effort at the school level. In developing schools where critical masses of educators have been trained in the various Orava programs, there will be mutual support for education, articulation between and among the programs, and the opportunity for all constituents to work together to demonstrate how reform can result from the excellent course work provided by the Orava Project.

Increasing the Management Capacity of the Orava Association

Recommendation 4: Develop a Management Information System

It is critical to develop a database in order to manage the activities, monitor progress, and facilitate subsequent training and alumni networking. Although individual attendance is currently manually recorded, program staff should be able to identify which participants have attended particular programs. As program alumni begin to train others in large numbers, it is important to know how many such second-generation educators have been trained and how the training is conducted. The ability to aggregate data for analysis will facilitate identifying and applying lessons learned.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen the Orava Association NGO

In order for the Orava Project to institutionalize its activity, the NGO will be a crucial vehicle during the next few years. In the longer term the NGO’s functions may be performed by other institutions (e.g., the Methods Centers, universities), but in the short term, the NGO is the catalyst and sustainer of these activities.

We recommend that the NGO employ various means to sustain its work. It should apply to the Ministry of Education to become an accredited institution, able to propose and offer accredited programs. It should continue its work through the Methods Centers and the universities simultaneously. The development of proposals for additional funding is also important.

The staff of the NGO should be increased, at least in the short term, while it continues to organize programs and attempts to secure accreditation. If the NGO undertakes the new functions of database development and support/quality control for alumni, additional qualified staff will be needed. Staff roles and the relationship of staff members to the University of Northern Iowa must be clearly defined.

We believe that implementation of these recommendations will assist in sustaining the quality and deepening the impact of this effective program. In addition to providing important training and programs, the Orava Project has successfully created a climate for change among those it has worked with and trained. The time is right for building systems to disseminate the content and methods of the program more widely in order to be a catalyst for education reform in Slovakia.