

Thematic Article

Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in the Context of Regional Culture-Oriented Schools in Slovakia

Martina Krušinská¹

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Abstract

In the study, we present the basic goals, content, strategies and organisational forms of education of the Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok. The basic information about the school is supplemented with the ideas of its founder and the school principal, as well as the photo documentation of this school environment. We analyse this school model in the broader context of elementary regional culture-oriented schools, which began to develop in Slovakia after 1989. In connection with the school reform in 2008, the educational content of such schools was transformed and defined in the State Education Programme in the subject of Regional Education and cross-cutting topic Regional Education and Folk Culture. In addition to other alternative and innovative educational programmes in Slovakia, the regional culture-oriented school represents a domestic model of education, which is based on the historical and cultural peculiarities of individual regions of Slovakia. Despite the uniform name, each school with this orientation can have a unique character expressed in its school curriculum.

Keywords: elementary school; regional culture-oriented school; music education; folk culture; Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok

Introduction

After 1989, in Slovakia the diversification of education began. The original concept of a unified school has been weakened by the penetration of alternative or innovative educational programmes into Slovak schools. The activities carried out mainly by individual teachers and teaching teams fulfilled the idea of uniqueness and specialisation of each school before the official school reform started. Undoubtedly, the regional culture-oriented school is one of the innovative models of schools, which is fundamentally based on the specific culture of a respective region.

Terminological excursion

The term *regional culture-oriented school* (Cabanová, 2005) defines schools with the school educational programme developing the genius loci of the nearest environment (region, subregion, locality) and are therefore specific and unique in their content of education compared to other schools in Slovakia. The main goal of regional culture-oriented schools is the fundamental development of the following topic areas in the content of education (Cabanová, 2005; Krušinská, 2016):

- Supporting the specifics of individual regions by maintaining traditions, deepening students' interest in regional history

¹ Catholic University in Ružomberok, Faculty of Education, Institute of Music (Slovakia); martina.krusinska@ku.sk

- Revival of folk customs and crafts and their various techniques by offering new optional subjects and hobby groups
- Creation of an information and documentation centre mapping the traditional and contemporary culture of the region: archives, video recordings, audio recordings, school chronicles, etc.
- Popularisation of important personalities of the region
- Updating folk culture, innovating it in the form of students 'and teachers' own creations.

Based on our concept, the term regional culture-oriented school includes other terms (occurring further in the text), namely:

- The educational programme Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture, which developed in elementary schools in Slovakia especially after 1989
- Elementary school with the optional subject of Regional Education and the cross-sectional topic of Regional Education and Folk Culture defined in the State Educational Programme of 2008 and the innovated State Educational Programme of 2015
- Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok.

Figure 1., 2. Meeting of regional culture-oriented elementary schools in Malatiná, 2017



Photo: M. Krušinská

Research Design and Methods

In our research, we focus on the innovation of music education in elementary schools in Slovakia after 1989. We examine the goals, content, strategies and organisational forms of music education with an emphasis on music education in regional culture-oriented schools (Krušinská, 2009, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Since 2005, we have been continuously developing our professional interest in innovations in music education in Slovakia, with an emphasis on regional culture-oriented schools. During this period, we conducted field research (2005, 2011, 2017, 2019), the results are summarised below. In educational research, we used the method of a questionnaire addressed to teachers, a survey for students, content analysis of pedagogical documents (state, school), observation in the natural environment of the school and interviews with teachers. In this period, we contacted a total of 474 elementary schools, received 402 responses from teachers from 276 schools.² Among regional culture-oriented schools in Slovakia, the Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok stands out. Its basic objectives, content, strategies and organisational forms of education are analysed in the text below.

Results

Historical excursion of music education in regional culture-oriented schools

Development after 1989

² For comparison: in the school year 2020/2021 there are 1886 elementary schools in Slovakia. *Centre of Scientific and Technical Information of the Slovak Republic*. 2021. Available at www.cvtisr.sk In some cases, several teachers from particular schools answered the questions.

Among various educational innovations, the programme of Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture developed after 1989. The programme was experimentally verified by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic in elementary schools in the 1990s. The first elementary schools verified included: the elementary school in Liptovské Sliache (Liptov Region), the elementary school in Malatiná (Orava Region), the elementary school in Očová (Podpoľanie Region). The programme was covered by the Association of Teachers to support schools with regional education.³

In 2005, we conducted research focused on the innovation of music education in elementary schools in Slovakia in 2000 – 2005 (Krušinská, 2009). The main method was a questionnaire survey supplemented by a content analysis of documents of state and school institutions. The research sample consisted of elementary schools in all regions of the Slovak Republic. We distributed a total of 344 questionnaires (43 questionnaires in each region). 352 music teachers responded (in several schools more than one teacher answered at the same time). Completed questionnaires were sent from 226 Slovak schools (66%). The survey was preceded by a research probe in 2004 with the return of 20 answered questionnaires from music teachers. The probe served as a basis for the creation of a broadly conceived and structured anonymous questionnaire in the main research.

The research sample comprised schools that declared alternative or innovative approaches in Slovakia after 1989. Information on the existence of such models of schools was obtained from documents of the State Pedagogical Institute, former Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, regional school authorities, methodological centres and websites of individual schools.

In the research, we posed the following primary questions:

1. Which alternative and innovative educational programmes in elementary schools in Slovakia is music education connected to?
2. What are the specifics of music education in such programmes?
3. What is the time allowance for the subject of Music Education in these schools?
4. What is the form of evaluation?
5. What is the length of practice and the level of education of music teachers in these schools?

The research on the innovation of the subject Music Education in elementary schools in Slovakia in 2000-2005 showed that the content of the subject is specific and interconnected to the following educational programmes: Infovek Project, Health Promoting School, Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture Programme, M. Montessori School, R. Steiner School, the programme Extended Teaching of Music Education or Foreign Languages. In the research, we recorded 17 elementary schools with the Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture programme. Schools reported an allowance for the music education of 1 hour per week; in the case of one school, the teacher stated 2 hours per week, as the programme was combined with the Extended Teaching of Music Education programme. The form of evaluation implemented in most schools was marking.

The main activities of students in the subject of Music Education in this school model were:

- Learning folk songs of the region
- Collecting, sorting, selecting and archiving folk songs
- Creation of songbooks from songs of the region or village
- Playing folk instruments and their production
- Children's folklore ensembles in schools
- Organising folklore festivals in the region
- Other active involvement in the music and cultural life of the region.

In the programme, teachers most frequently criticised the content of the original textbooks of Music Education, which did not meet their ideas about the representation of folk songs of various regions of Slovakia.⁴ Most teachers belonged to the middle generation, aged 31-50, with a length of practice of 11-25 years.

³ The association began its activities in 1997, in 2000 the association comprised 42 schools (Cabanová, 2005). It currently unites 31 schools. *Association of teachers to support schools with regional education* 2021. Available at <http://www.regioskoly.sk>

⁴ As part of the school reform in Slovakia in 2008, innovated textbooks of Music Education were created.

We believe that the programme significantly affected the introduction of the subject *Regional Education* and the cross-cutting topic *Regional Education and Folk Culture* as defined in the State Educational Programme of 2008, partly 2015.

Figure 3., 4. Meeting of regional culture-oriented elementary schools in Malatiná, 2017

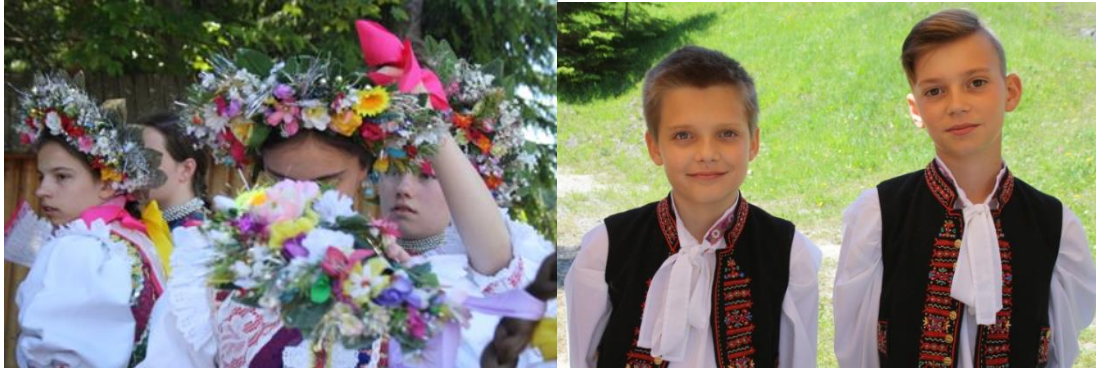


Photo: M. Krušinská

Development after 2008

Since the school year 2008/2009, school reform has been implemented in Slovakia. A two-level education system is established, defined by the State Educational Programme and the educational programme of each school (School Educational Programme). In the State Educational Programme from 2008, the implementation of the optional subject *Regional Education* as well as the cross-sectional topic of *Regional Education and Folk Culture* is supported in the curricula of elementary schools (elementary and lower secondary education). This vision is partially reduced in the innovated State Educational Programme from 2015.⁵ However, schools have begun to implement the subject, as can be seen from the following information.

In 2011, we conducted research in elementary schools in the Liptov and Orava regions focused on the implementation of the subject of *Regional Education* and the cross-sectional topic of *Regional Education and Folk Culture* (Krušinská, 2012). The main method used was the method of a questionnaire supplemented by a content analysis of pedagogical documents of schools, observations in the natural school environment and interviews with teachers. We contacted all elementary schools (a total of 113 schools) and elementary art schools (a total of 17 schools) in Liptov and Orava. We received 48 (42%) completed questionnaires from elementary schools, equally represented by both regions, 2 completed questionnaires (12%) from the elementary art schools, namely from the Liptov region. We obtained a set of all schools in the Liptov and Orava regions from the former Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education.

In that year, we visited 8 selected schools with the most interesting responses to the questionnaire. We observed the content of *Music Education*, the work of students in the class, and documented the students' artwork. Moreover, we conducted unstructured interviews with teachers or school principals focused on the possibilities and limits of such education.

In the research, we posed the following main questions:

1. In which study years is the subject of *Regional Education* implemented?
2. In which subjects are the cross-cutting topics of *Regional Education* and *Folk Culture* most frequently implemented?
3. Does the school build on the previous innovative programme *Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture*?
4. What are the specifics of regional culture-oriented schools?
5. What are the time allowance of the subject and the form of evaluation?

The research demonstrated that in the school year 2010/2011, the subject of *Regional Education* was implemented in approximately one third (35%) of elementary schools in Liptov and Orava. The subject was mostly taught in the lower secondary level of education. Most schools reported a time allowance for the subject

⁵ *State Educational programme*. 2021. Available at <http://www.statpedu.sk>

of one hour per week, there were two schools that reported a time allowance of 2–6 hours per week. The subject applied a marking evaluation system. The cross-sectional topic of *Regional Education and Folk Culture* was mostly implemented in the following subjects: *Art Education, Slovak Language and Literature, Music Education, History, Geography Basics, Geography, Natural Science, Biology*. The most frequently occurring activities at schools were:

- Activities of children's folklore ensembles
- Playing the folk instruments of the region
- Participation of students in workshops of various crafts
- Building folk culture centres on school grounds
- Organising excursions with a regional topic

The responses also showed that the *Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture* programme was implemented in only four schools in the respective school year, a decrease of approx. 50% compared to the 2005 survey in these regions. However, the statistically non-optimistic outcome can be relativised by the fact that the optional subject *Regional Education* was relatively popular in schools and saturated the undoubtedly interesting programme *Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture*.

Out of the elementary art schools in Liptov and Orava, only two schools responded. We assume that the low return of questionnaires from the artistic environment is a manifestation of peripheral education in folk art in this system of schools, the emphasis is on classical art. One of the schools that responded was the *Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok*.

Figure 5., 6. Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok



Photo: D. Böhmerová

Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok

As a guarantor of experimental verification of the School's innovative educational programme (completed in 2015) and as a university teacher who regularly visits the school with students of teacher training programmes, we are in constant contact with the school management.

In 2017, we conducted a structured interview with Igor Littva - ethnologist, school principal and founder, leader of the Liptov folklore ensemble and the Liptáčik children's folklore ensemble. In it, we discussed the school condition, current possibilities and limits of its activities, as well as other school challenges (Krušinská, 2017). In 2019, we conducted a research probe among 12 - 14-year-old school students, focusing on their preferences in music education at school. It was carried out in the form of a questionnaire answered by 20 students at the indicated age. The selected answers from the interview and the questionnaire are discussed in the text below.

Basic information about the school

The school was established in 2008. The activities of the school followed on from the long-term activities of the Liptov folklore ensemble and the Liptáčik children's folklore ensemble.⁶ The school is attended by approximately 200 students at all levels of education, from preparatory to adult education.

In this context, Igor Littva mentions: *“When I started taking over the management of the folklore ensemble Liptov in 1999, I came across the fact that the members of the ensemble did not know the songs of their own village. It was in sharp contrast to what I knew about the folk culture of my native village of Liptovské Sliache. At that time, I said to myself that this had to change, so I started to process the folk material of individual Liptov municipalities for the ensemble.*

Later, however, I realized that preserving the folk culture of the municipalities through the activities of the ensemble was not enough. People perceived it only as a performance of an ensemble. I wanted more. I wanted the children to begin to perceive this culture, to get to know it in its original form and to return it to Liptov families. And so in 2003 I founded the children's folklore ensemble Liptáčik and in 2008 the Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music.”

In 2010 - 2015, the school programme successfully passed the experimental verification of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, the so-called Dance and Music Department of Regional Folk Culture. Today, the school follows a specific and unique educational programme focused on the Liptov region, especially the Lower Liptov Subregion. Both in terms of the organisational form of teaching and the content of education, the school represents a unique model in the system of elementary art schools in Slovakia and worldwide.

On the objectives and content of education

Lower Liptov has 24 municipalities which, according to the ethnologist and school principal Igor Littva, are rich and diverse in terms of their folk culture. The aim is to capture the folk traditions of individual municipalities, collect ethnographic artefacts, select what is the heritage of municipalities and what is the influence of another culture, and through the revival of folk culture in the elementary art school to return this heritage to municipalities. The content of education at the school is thus created "from below" by collecting material from the folk culture of individual communities with an emphasis on dance and music.

Igor Littva talks about the specific dance and music style of individual villages in Lower Liptov: *“Each village had its own music band, some even more music bands. We can also talk here about the characteristic style of the individual - the personality of the music band leader or the leading dancer. Our musicians in the ensemble play Sliache-style music according to the band leader Ignác Antol. Similarly, there were Komouci in Černová, Kuracinovci in Komjatná, and we could go on like this. There were four bands in Revúce at the same time - in middle, lower, upper Revúce and, in addition, one gipsy music band...”* His main educational goal is, therefore, *“that students can interpret the appropriate dance, singing or musician style of a particular village or a musical group. Pupils should be well acquainted with the specific cultural characteristics of municipalities and be able to return them to the municipality in the future...”*

Figure 7., 8. Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok



Photo: D. Böhmerová

⁶ In 2021, FS Liptov will celebrate 75 years and a children's folklore ensemble 18 years of its existence.

On the organisational form of education

Pupils can attend two art departments at the school:

Dance and Music Department of Regional Folk Culture

Folk dance is mainly taught here. In higher grades, historical and popular dances are added, and classical or jazz dances are also optional subjects. In addition, students have folk singing lessons and six-hole shepherd's whistle lessons. In the subject Regional Education, pupils receive information about Lower Liptov: about folk costumes, crafts, architecture, customs of individual municipalities and others. There is also a compulsory subject Music Theory. Pupils' practice in the children's folklore ensemble Liptáčik is obligatory.

Music Department of Regional Folk Culture

Priority is given to playing folk musical instruments, typical of the folk music groups of Liptov, and folk singing. An important subject is Folk Aerophones, where the students learn about several specific folk musical instruments in this group: the six-hole shepherd pipe, double shepherd pipe, overtone flute, fujara flute. In the mentioned questionnaire, the students stated that they liked to play folk musical instruments, but mostly wind instruments.

Other musical instruments include the violin (including octaves), viola, double bass, heligon, accordion, piano. The curriculum also includes the subjects of Music Theory and Regional Education. Pupils' practice in the children's folklore ensemble Liptáčik is also obligatory.

On basic educational strategies (Littva, 2010)

The specificity of the school's educational programme is that students at all levels of education are educated in folk dance as well as in folk singing and playing folk musical instruments. The starting point in every artistic component - dance, singing or music - is a folk song.

One of the outputs for monitoring the level of the school and individual students are concerts held twice a year, where students perform for the general public. It is a 90-minute programme in cooperation with the Liptov Folklore Ensemble presenting the folk customs, games, songs and dances in the folk costumes, usually of one village from Lower Liptov.

Figure 9. Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok



Photo: D. Böhmerová

The pupils assessed their performances at concerts and festivals with “great dancers and musicians” very positively. In the questionnaire, they demanded that such events be held as often as possible. Igor Littva also confirms: *“For me, to be part of the Liptov ensemble was my dream and my goal. And I perceive the same in our children. Children see the ensemble as their role model, they know what to go for, where to grow.”* He adds: *“If there was no school, we would not have the Liptov ensemble to the same extent as it is now. Most of the musicians and dancers in the ensemble were either the school graduates or former members of the children's folklore ensemble Liptáčik. The school is a centre that brings together musicians and dancers under one roof. New singers, musicians and dancers are growing up here. We have a children's music band composed of*

violinists, violists, double bass players, whistle players ... We have created whole programme blocks with customs, games, songs, dances of Lower Liptov villages. But it is far from a complete process, on the contrary, there is much that still needs to be done."

Every year, teachers and students carry out research and collection of folk material from the villages of Lower Liptov. The obtained materials are then used in practice, as teaching aids or study materials. Folk costumes are made according to the originals or pictorial records (the school has its own tailoring workshop). In the beginning, students explore only the immediate family environment, addressing parents and grandparents. Later they enter the wider environment of the village - they record customs, songs and dances. The acquired material will be processed under the guidance of teachers and presented at the end of the fourth and eighth year. Such meetings with the witnesses of the local folk culture are very enriching for the students, as they stated in the survey.

An interesting moment was the students' demand to have more freedom in learning regional songs and dances. When asked if students were heading for their own creative expression, Igor Littva replied: *"If I now enter the hall and say to the ten or eleven-year-old children, "show me some folk dance figures", they will show them without me having to demonstrate them first. They would dance, improvise the figures. Children have no problem creating them. On the contrary, they find it more difficult to adopt the style of original folk dances, as they tend to add various learned steps. For example, in the typical Sliače-style dance "Myself", girls struggle to maintain the original old style. Here, they cannot show off but must dance in repeated, simple single steps. The form must not lose character. When you look at it, you must recognize that this is the "About You" dance and not another dance. It's hard to find the right proportion, but it is possible..."*

Discussion

In the article, we pointed out the important fact that the artistic education of young people - the acquisition of folk traditions with artistic expressions, which in the past naturally took place in families and village communities, is now to some extent saturated by institutionalised education. In 1989, as long-term research has shown, systematic education in the field of regional education and folk culture began to be implemented in elementary schools in Slovakia.

Of particular interest in this context is the existence of an innovative educational programme called *Extended Regional Education and Folk Culture*. In the 1990s, the first Slovak elementary schools with the said programme underwent experimental verification by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic. The initiative of Slovak schools, which was based mainly "from below", i.e. from teachers as individuals and teaching teams, has been working under the auspices of the *Association of Teachers to support schools with regional education*.

Although we saw the decline of this programme after 2008, to a large extent it is currently saturated by the optional subject *Regional Education* and the cross-cutting topic of *Regional Education and Folk Culture*, which are defined in the State Pedagogical Document of 2008.

As our research revealed, in elementary schools in the Orava and Liptov Regions, schools began to systematically implement this subject.

Concerning the content of education in regional culture-oriented schools, the emphasis is on the singing of songs typical of the region, or a locality, collecting songs, sorting and archiving songs, creating songbooks, playing folk instruments typical of the region, production of folk instruments, developing students' skills in various crafts, children's folklore ensembles, building folk culture centres in schools, active participation and organizing cultural life in a given location.

Figure 9. Základná umelecká škola ľudového tanca a hudby v Ružomberku: Meeting with the witnesses of the local folk culture after the performance



Photo: D. Böhmerová

A unique school model in Slovakia, but also outside its borders, is the Elementary Art School of Folk Dance and Music in Ružomberok. The school has successfully passed the experimental verification of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and is currently implementing two study programmes: *Dance and Music of Regional Folk Culture* and *Music of Regional Folk Culture*. The study is focused on the Liptov Region, especially the Lower Liptov Subregion. The school forms an educational centre of the region where the folk culture of 24 municipalities of Lower Liptov is gathered and revived through school and extracurricular activities, for example, the activity of 75 years old Liptov Folklore Ensemble. The ethnologist, ensemble leader and school principal Igor Littva states that the basic objective of art education in this school is therefore for “students to be able to interpret the appropriate dance, singing or music style of a given community or musical group during their studies in these fields. Pupils should be well acquainted with the individual specific cultural characteristics of municipalities and be able to re-introduce them to the municipality in the future.”

The educational content is formed “from below”, the teachers and students study the folk culture of Lower Liptov with a focus on dance and music performances of individual communities through field research. Subsequently, the acquired material forms the educational content of the school and is studied and interpreted artistically. One of the criteria for the quality of artistic and authentic interpretation are at least two large performances during the school year, where students of the school together with the Folklore Ensemble Liptov, perform songs, games and dances usually of one village of Lower Liptov. The performances usually involve witnesses of folk culture of the village.

The whole organisation of subjects in the above-mentioned art disciplines of the school adapts to the educational goal and content: students in both disciplines are educated in singing, dancing and playing musical instruments - the six-hole shepherd pipe, double shepherd pipe, overtone flute, and the fujara flute. Other instruments taught include the violin, viola, double bass, heligon, accordion, and the piano. In both disciplines, Regional Education is also taught. Pupils' practice in the children's folklore ensemble Liptáčik is obligatory. The starting point in every artistic component - dance, singing or music, in every methodical process, is a folk song.

The school graduates are prepared mainly for work in folklore ensembles, and studies at dance conservatories and universities in the field of ethnology and ethnomusicology.

Conclusions

We introduced a regional culture-oriented school, which is, in addition to foreign alternative and innovative educational programmes in Slovakia, a “domestic” innovative school model. It is the result of long-term, intensive and creative work of enthusiasts - teachers and folklorists. In this context, there is an urgent need in Slovakia to create study programmes integrating the field of ethnology and pedagogy that will prepare competent teachers at the tertiary level of education or within the framework of continuous education.

We believe that one of the challenges of contemporary education is to respect the principle of continuity of the historical development of society and to creatively develop the identity of young people rooted in the culture they were born in. The tension between the acquisition of original forms so that they do not lose their character, and their creative development - updating, is a challenge for contemporary ethnologists, educators

and artists. The irreplaceable manifestations of any traditional culture can be an important source for the creation of an authentic theory and practice of art education and subsequently contemporary art.

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