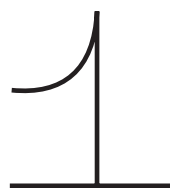




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# Úvodník

## *Editorial*

The first issue of *Historia scholastica* Journal presents 10 studies, most of them in some way thematizing the impact of the totalitarian regime on the field of education. A. Canales focuses on the change of educational policy of the Franco Regime in Spain in the 1960s, which was in contradiction with the still prevailing political and ideological principles of Franco's Dictatorship. E. Protner's study provides insight into the discontinuity of pre- and post-war Marxist pedagogy in Yugoslavia, using the example of slovenian pedagogue Jože Jurančič. How communist ideology was reflected in the functioning of education in Yugoslavia, specifically in Bosnia and Herzegovina, shows in her study S. Šušnjara.

Three other studies focus on education in the area of states in the territory of the former Soviet Union. I. Nelin examines the evolution of psychoanalytic pedagogical ideas in the Soviet Union, his study highlights the experiments in psychoanalytic education and their subsequent prohibition due to political shifts.

E. Bērziņš and I. Ķestere examines how Soviet narratives in the field of history of education were deconstructed in the Baltic States and how historians constructed a new view of the national history of these states.

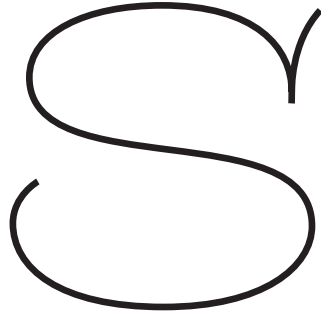
I. Ivanavičė and I. Stonkuvienė focuses on the mechanism of ideological assimilation of Lithuanian Roma through school and education in the Soviet Union; the study explores key dimensions of Roma education, including the construction of the New Soviet Man, the impact of forced sedentarisation, and the role of schooling in promoting linguistic assimilation, discipline, and social control. Belonging is an important phenomenon, the basis of which does not have to be only belonging to one ethnic group, as is the case in the study of Roma in Lithuania. F. Guerrini explores generational belonging in the generation of children born during the war. Her work focuses not only on specific research on belonging in the war generation, but also shows the theoretical perspectives of research on such a complex phenomenon as belonging.

Two studies in this issue relate to special education. J. Randák looks into the situation in special education in Czechoslovakia after the communists came to power in February 1948 and shows that the optimistic proclamations of the state representatives were often at odds with the real experience of teachers at special schools. K. Eliášková and M. Šmejkalová examine teaching of Czech language of visually impaired pupils at special schools from 1972 to 2010. The long period of research allowed the authors to examine not only the development of didactic approaches, but also the change in the ideological framework of education during this time.

While most studies deal with education in the second half of the 20th century, I. Garai investigates the issue of deprofessionalization of secondary school teachers in pre-war Hungary.

We believe that all of the submitted studies will contribute to the clarification of many unresolved research questions as well as stimulate interest in further research.

Jan Šimek



## Studie *Studies*

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# Native Language Instruction Reflected in Composition Writing by Visually Impaired Students in the Historical Context of Czechoslovakia/ Czech Republic in the Period of 1968–2000

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**Abstract** This study presents an overview of the development of composition writing at a specific Czech (Czechoslovak/Czech Republic) grammar school for students with visual impairments (historical term). The study focuses on the period from the reintroduction of grammar schools in 1968, or more precisely in 1972, until 2010, when a major reorganization of the structure of the Czech language and literature graduation exam. Grammar schools for students with visual impairments were selected because, during the studied period, special language instruction for these students took place exclusively within the system of special schools, which were organised outside the mainstream educational system designed for students without such a handicap. A historical analysis of written graduation compositions produced by visually impaired

students provides an opportunity to trace the evolution of didactic approaches, the ideological framework of education, and the ways in which writing was used as a tool for assessment, reflection, and social adaptation. The insights gained may enrich our understanding of current inclusive practices and inform the development of suitable didactic strategies for students with special educational needs. Moreover, the topic of the history of written graduation compositions by students with visual impairments has not been examined in academic research yet.

**Keywords** native language instruction, historical development, students with visual impairments, Czech language written graduation exam, grammar schools



## Introduction

There are not many scientific papers addressing the key subject of Czech language instruction in schools for visually impaired students. For example, it is discussed in the authoritative *Comprehensive History of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* (Čornejová et al., 2020, p. 245, 247, 248, 477, 480, and others). With the exception of the late 1960s, strict ideological indoctrination was commonplace, even for students with visual impairments.

Care for individuals with visual impairments was initially provided in welfare institutions, primarily established to offer humane care for the blind (a contemporary term). Their upbringing and, at first, very rudimentary education were predominantly organised by nuns. The first such institution in the Czech lands, the *Private Institute for the Education and Treatment of Poor Blind Children and the Ocularly Ill*, was founded in 1807 in Hradčany, Prague. Language instruction there developed only very gradually (described in detail in Eliášková, 2018). Initially, Czech language instruction of the visually impaired was unsystematic, limited to the elementary school level, and always conducted separately from non-disabled students. The first unified Czech language curriculum for visually impaired students at the elementary school level was not published until 1928. Even then, no civic school (*měšťanská škola*) was established for these students (discussed in more detail in Eliášková, 2020).

Secondary education for students with visual impairments began taking shape in the former Czechoslovakia in 1946, when the first-ever secondary (vocational, i.e. without the licence to conduct graduation exams) school for students with visual impairments was established in Levoča, Slovakia.

After the nationalisation of church-run education for the blind (more details in Eliášková, 2019) and the adoption of Act No. 95/1948 Coll. on the Unified School System, secondary education for visually impaired students made significant progress, although it remained separate from the mainstream educational system (Eliášková, 2020, p. 32). As part of the new organisation and restructuring of education for the blind, the first vocational schools for students with visual defects

(a contemporary term) were established. These included the Vocational School for the Blind in Levoča, the Vocational School for the Blind in Prague XIV-Krč, and the Deyl Institute for the Blind in Prague II (see also Čornejová et al., 2020, p. 248), which specialised in training music teachers, piano tuners, and accordion tuners. In the curricula and syllabi developed for these schools, native language instruction was reorganised and adapted to align as closely as possible with the educational programmes of mainstream secondary schools and vocational specialisations.

The establishment of the only and historically first grammar school for students with visual impairments began in 1955 with the creation of an eleven-year secondary school for the blind and partially sighted, serving students at the national level. Following amendments to the Education Act, it was restructured in 1961 into a three-year General Secondary School for Youth with Visual Impairments. When grammar schools, abolished in 1953, were reinstated in 1968, two humanities-oriented classes were introduced in the same building under the newly renamed Grammar School for Youth with Visual Impairments. Initially, the grammar school was intended for blind youth and youth with residual vision, but later, partially sighted students were also admitted.

While special primary schools were profiled according to the type of visual impairment – namely for the blind, for pupils with residual vision, for the partially sighted, and for those with binocular vision impairments – and modified methods of language instruction were developed within the framework of differentiated teaching, special secondary schools, by contrast, were designed to accommodate all pupils with VI, without further specialisation based on the type of visual impairment. In the 1988/89 academic year, there were 21 schools for students with visual impairments in Czechoslovakia (17 in Czechia and 4 in Slovakia), including five preschools, nine primary schools, five secondary schools offering graduation exams, and two secondary vocational schools (Ibid., p. 34). Since the 1990s, the number of special primary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic has been

declining and students are increasingly integrated into mainstream educational institutions.

This article examines the history of native language instruction in special secondary schools for students with visual impairments, both in the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the shared state of Czechs and Slovaks, and in the Czech Republic following the dissolution of this union. The primary focus of our article is the historical development of the written graduation exam, an exam format that has historically been used to conclude secondary education in the studied region. The written graduation examination has historically been an exceptionally important pedagogical phenomenon, fulfilling numerous functions. Primarily, it reflected the subject curriculum, but it also served an external didactic function by mirroring significant events in the outside world, and it also provided insight into the linguistic and stylistic proficiency of students.

### **Current State of Knowledge**

The topic of the historical development of the written graduation exam in the instructional language (in our case, Czech) for students with visual impairments at the upper secondary school level has not yet been comprehensively addressed in neither Czech nor international academic research on language didactics. It is also important to note that the issue of the written graduation exam in the native language should not be approached solely through the lens of language didactics, but must also be examined within the broader context of special education.

In the Czech context of language didactics, there are only a few key scholarly works in which the authors have thoroughly analysed the conceptual development of the written graduation exam in the native language (notably, Morkes examined the period from 1849 to 1990; Morkes, 2003) or have touched upon the topic in specific thematic or historical contexts (e.g. Váňová, 2000, pp. 101–114; Šmejkalová, 2010; Čechová, 1978; Čornejová et al., 2020). It is therefore evident that the availability of secondary literature on this particular topic is limited. Some university theses on the subject can also be found (e.g. Tvrzníková, 2013). However, it is essential to note that these investigations have

only addressed the historical development in relation to non-disabled students. To date, there is only one work in Czech academic literature on language didactics that at least partially reflects the implications of the historical development of the written graduation exam's content specifically for students with visual impairments in certain historical periods (Eliášková, 2020).

In the international literature, we can draw on a similar work (French, 2008) that discusses the political and, to some extent, educational practices related to the education of students with visual impairments in combination with learning difficulties between 1900 and 1970. Although it does not address the issue of the written graduation exam in the native language, based on the study of primary and secondary sources, it shows that, if visually impaired children received education at all (especially at the beginning of the 20th century), their needs were often unmet, and they were frequently subjected to oppressive and abusive institutional environments. Even these phenomena have been reflected in some of the conclusions of our research.

In both Czech and international literature, the issue of the written graduation exam or other qualification exams is typically addressed through the experiences of students with visual impairments and their teachers (e.g. Hewett, Keil & Douglas, 2015) or through practical-methodological studies that focus primarily on the formal adaptations to exam documentation or the procedures for conducting the written graduation exam (e.g. Cobb & Webb, 2010). However, the substantive aspects directly related to critical areas of language instruction are rarely addressed. On the other hand, we must note that in international literature, the research on foreign language acquisition by students with visual impairments has been gaining increasing attention in many countries for some time (e.g. González, 2011; Susanto & Nanda, 2018; Tran & Pho, 2020; Aamir, 2020; Maharjan, 2022). However, from our perspective, a shortcoming lies in the fact that the research focus of these studies diverges from ours, which is unfortunate, as it concerns an extremely important and relatively large group of students present in every country.

Information about the written graduation exam in the instructional language for students with visual impairments is therefore rather scarce (Eliášková, 2020) and is preserved in primary sources (such as class registers, teachers' thematic plans, curricula, textbooks, legislative regulations, and academic journals from the relevant periods), as well as in secondary sources (subject didactics and methodological guides, etc.), all of which we have analysed from a historical perspective in our research.

### **Methodology and Objective**

This study adopts a theoretical and research-oriented approach. The historical research was conducted through content analysis of both primary and secondary sources. The methodology was further enriched by interviews with eight teachers and twenty-four graduates of the special grammar school for students with visual impairments. These individuals were selected based on their direct involvement with the school during the period under review and on their availability, given the advanced age of some respondents. Their testimonies are included in the article as illustrative quotations.

A total of 405 students graduated from the analysed grammar school during the studied period. All available graduation compositions, together with accompanying documentation, were subjected to primary source analysis. One of the article's authors has been teaching Czech at such a school since 2000, which allows for an insider perspective on the development and implementation of the written graduation exam in recent years.

To trace historical developments, we analysed the process of assigning written graduation compositions in Czech language and literature at this special grammar school from 1968, or more precisely 1972 (the year of the first graduation exams after the full four-year study cycle), until 2010.

The time frame of the study is defined by two major legislative milestones. The first is the adoption of Act No. 168/68 Coll.<sup>1</sup>, which reinstated four-year grammar schools in 1968 and introduced a mandatory written graduation exam in the instructional language (Czech). The second is the reform of the graduation exam system in 2010/2011 under Act No. 561/2004 Coll., which replaced the school-based model with a centrally administered exam consisting of a didactic test, a written essay, and an oral examination. The implementation and evaluation of the exam were overseen by the national authority CERMAT.

Our research follows the subsequent central question: *How did the form and function of Czech graduation compositions for visually impaired students evolve between 1968 and 2010, and what does this development reveal about the ideological and didactic framework of native language instruction in special education?*

To address this question, we formulated two specific research objectives:

- (a) to identify the topics and writing forms offered to students for their graduation compositions, and to analyse how educational policy was reflected in these topics;
- (b) to explore the process of taking the Czech language graduation exam as experienced by students with visual impairments.

These two sub-questions were selected to capture both the content and the structure of the written graduation exam as well as the experience of taking it. The first question focuses on the topics and writing forms, which serve as a direct reflection of the didactic goals, curricular priorities, and ideological influences of each era. Analysing the assigned topics allows us to trace how political and educational discourses were translated into concrete writing tasks for students. The second question explores the actual implementation of the exam, including its organisation, format, and impact on students with visual impairments. This perspective highlights the practical and emotional

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1 Act No. 168/1968 Coll., the Act on Grammar Schools, dated 19 December, 1968, effective from 22 December, 1968, until 1 September, 1978. Available at: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1968-168>.

dimensions of the exam process, including issues of accessibility, support, and adaptation to students' specific needs.

### **On the Historical Development of the Graduation Composition**

As already mentioned (Eliášková, 2020), the graduation exam has been a traditional and common method of concluding secondary education in the Czech lands for nearly 200 years. Graduation exams were legally established in 1849 (*Ibid.*, p. 9) and became a necessary requirement for university admission, which is why they were exceptionally demanding (*Ibid.*, p. 10). Although the format of the exam has been subject to discussion over the years, the core principle of a multi-hour written composition has largely remained unchanged (initially offering a selection of six topics, later reduced to four), alongside an oral part of the exam (which we will not address here). Thematically, the compositions can be categorized (as detailed further) into topics related to the student's personal life (such as autobiographies), subjects covered in the curriculum, student interests, literary analysis, as well as topics outside the curriculum, including political issues. It can be observed that every shift in domestic or international circumstances was immediately reflected in the topics of written graduation compositions – as we will illustrate later, one of the composition topics from the late 1940s to early 1950s was based on a quote from the Czechoslovak totalitarian communist leader Klement Gottwald, under whose regime numerous show trials leading to executions took place.

The difficulty of the graduation exam gradually decreased from its original exclusivity (as the sole requirement for university admission) to the socialist-democratic effort to make the graduation exam accessible to all “workers”<sup>2</sup>. Naturally, this led to a lowering of the exam's standards.

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2 In communist ‘newspeak’, the noun ‘workers’ became one of the fundamental cornerstones of totalitarian vocabulary (see Fidelius, 1998, *Řeč komunistické moci* [The Language of Communist Power]), for a detailed analysis of such ideological language structures.

### **A Brief Historical Overview of Teaching Practices for Students with Visual Impairments<sup>3</sup>**

Teachers systematically prepared their students to master composition writing in the Czech language. It is therefore important to briefly outline how composition writing was taught, in order to later comment on the scope of topics offered for the exam compositions.

The instruction of composition writing at the grammar school for visually impaired students was significantly narrowed during the observed period, in contrast to the broader curriculum requirements, which also included grammar and literature as part of the Czech language subject. The teaching of composition writing focused primarily on practical applications, with theoretical explanations introduced only occasionally<sup>4</sup>. These theoretical elements provided basic guidance for specific composition tasks, and students were required to complete two assessed compositions per year. Through these assignments, the teachers evaluated not only the students' composition skills but also their knowledge of grammar and spelling, which they regarded as an integrated aspect of both components of the subject. "Written compositions, where students were required to produce coherent pieces of text, were the best way to assess how well they managed grammar, structured their thoughts, styled their writing, and showcased their skills and knowledge. That is no longer the case with the new unified graduation exams."<sup>5</sup> We complement the teacher's perspective with that of a student: "At grammar school, great emphasis was placed on mastering the language in all its aspects. I remember writing many dictations with L. Š.<sup>6</sup>, covering the basic writing forms, and at the end of each term, we would write a composition. With H. K., we also practised rhetorical exercises, which proved very useful later in life. R. K. prepared us very rigorously, yet also systematically and carefully, for

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3 This topic is explored in detail in Klára Eliášková's monograph (Eliášková, 2020); here, we present selected excerpts.

4 Entries from class registers at the Grammar School for the Visually Impaired.

5 From an interview with R. K., a teacher at the Grammar school.

6 Teachers' names have been anonymised by using their initials.



the written graduation exam, which back then consisted solely of composition writing, as no didactic test existed at the time. The student was expected to demonstrate their mastery of the language in this written exam. I remember writing areflection on the environment. At that time, thinking was allowed only along certain lines and my teacher, knowing about my Christian beliefs, personally warned me before the exam not to try to think beyond the permitted boundaries. She was being cautious and meant well.”<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on the practical aspect of language education was consistently reinforced through rhetorical and stylistic exercises, which formed an indispensable component of Czech language lessons for students with visual impairments throughout the entire historical development of special language education (cf. Eliášková, 2018).

The teaching of composition writing was structured around specific types of written forms rather than a functional approach<sup>8</sup>, which might have been expected for visually impaired students. In schools for the visually impaired, significant consideration was given to the individual needs of the students when selecting composition topics. Topics were chosen that allowed students to draw on their own life experiences or personal knowledge, as well as topics that did not rely on visual information. This primarily applied (and still applies) to descriptive compositions, which aim to provide an accurate portrayal of a specific object. Despite the obvious challenges of the didactic approach, descriptive writing was not excluded from the curriculum, and specific didactic methods were developed to overcome the objective limitations in teaching (Eliášková, 2020, p. 142).

We can illustrate the didactic method with a specific exercise for fourth-grade primary school students, where the task was to describe

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7 From written recollections of PhDr. Zbyněk Galvas (grad. 1973); Eliášková, 2020, pp. 141–142.

8 The functional approach to linguistics means that the primary criterion for evaluating language is its function. The Prague Linguistic Circle introduced the functional-structural approach into both Czech and international linguistics in the 1920s and 1930s.

a jug or another object. The starting point for this composition exercise was the real comparison of two jugs that differed in tactile properties and had distinct visual features. Based on tactile comparison (or visual comparison in the case of students with low or residual vision), students assigned various adjectives, nouns, or verbs that corresponded to their sensory experiences. The students were then divided into groups according to their visual impairments (with at least one student in each group being able to perceive colour contours to some extent) and, using the language material they had developed, they produced descriptions of the object.<sup>9</sup>

Given the complexity and breadth of topics typical for secondary school education (e.g., the description of Kipp's apparatus (Svoboda, 1964, p. 175) or the National Memorial on Žižkov Hill [Vítkov<sup>10</sup>]), teachers could not adopt the same approach. Therefore, during descriptive writing activities, the focus was primarily on practising characterisation, which could be drawn from the students' own reading or from read-aloud texts, with an emphasis on internal character traits. Today, we can incorporate modern, specially designed didactic tools into teaching (for details, see e.g. Eliášková, 2017). Unlike at lower educational levels, composition writing instruction at the secondary school level was methodologically based on imitating both literary and non-literary text examples (e.g., characterising the grandmother in Božena

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9 Collective of authors, *Metodický průvodce k učebnicím Český jazyk pro 2.–5. ročník ZDŠ pro nevidomé a ZDŠ pro děti se zbytky zraku* [Methodological Guide to the Czech Language Textbooks for Grades 2–5 of Special Elementary Schools for the Blind and Elementary Schools for Children with Residual Vision]. Prague: SPN, 1969, p. 54; Eliášková, 2020, p. 142.

10 *Podněty pro výchovné využití slohových prací v roce 60. výročí KSČ na gymnáziích a středních odborných školách* [Suggestions for the Educational Use of Composition Essays in the Year of the 60th Anniversary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia at Grammar Schools and Secondary Vocational Schools]. Prague: Pedagogical Institute of the Capital City of Prague – Department of Czech Language and Literature, p. 3. Žižkov Hill (Vítkov) is an iconic Prague hill where important historical battles took place (1420).

Němcová's<sup>11</sup> *Babička* [The Grandmother] led students to produce a characterisation of their own grandmother).<sup>12</sup> Significant attention was also given to narrative, exposition, and especially reflection. In these forms, students were not limited in any way.

“The aim of writing instruction aligns with the aim of language; writing instruction prepares young people for life and work in a socialist and communist society by teaching them the conscious mastery of standard language. It teaches them to use standard language both consciously and practically as a tool for thought and communication, enabling them to participate in our political and cultural life.”<sup>13</sup>

As previously noted by Eliášková (2020), the teaching was directed by a highly ideologically driven methodological material titled *Podněty pro výchovná využití slohových prací v roce 60. výročí KSČ na gymnáziích a středních odborných školách* [Suggestions for the Educational Use of Written Compositions in Grammar Schools and Secondary Vocational Schools in the Year of the 60th Anniversary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia], which was frequently used by secondary school teachers in their preparations in the CSSR. However, a detailed analysis of the preserved documentation reveals that teachers generally sought to mitigate the influence of contemporary state politics within composition writing instruction. For example, in the recommended methodological guidelines discussed during a subject committee meeting, the teachers rejected (crossed out) the methodological suggestion that “students may characterise a single person or group of people (with the possibility of comparison) from a work environment (workshop), a youth organisation, or their surroundings,” and instead referred to another methodological guideline, where they underlined the passage

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11 *Babička* [The Grandmother] is a significant literary work by the renowned Czech author Božena Němcová (1820–1862), focusing on the rural life of her grandmother and her family. It is traditionally part of the school literary canon.

12 From an interview with R. K., a teacher at the Grammar School.

13 From the minutes of the subject committee meeting at the Grammar School for Visually Impaired in Prague 2, Kopernikova 12, August 1980, undated, personal archive of teacher M. K.

stating, “it is generally easier for a student to characterise a person from their immediate environment, i.e., a person they know well and can assess, with the help of the teacher if necessary (productive characterisation)” (Eliášková, 2020, p. 226). Thus, by emphasizing the special individual needs of visually impaired students, whose needs were better met by this particular framework, the teachers used it as a means to reject the added ideological overtones recommended in the methodological directive issued on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. We support this claim with an authentic recollection from a graduate of the grammar school in the early 1970s. “At the time of my arrival at the grammar school, the policy of *normalisation*<sup>14</sup> was firmly in place, but our teachers (not only in Czech language) did not pay much attention to it and did not succumb to fear (which is to their lasting credit). [...] All our teachers loved poetry. H. K. also introduced us more thoroughly to Russian authors (L. Andreyev, F. M. Dostoevsky, I. Bunin), and read us stories by Franz Kafka<sup>15</sup> (abridged by the authors). In our final year, R. K. boldly read to us from Catholic literature (edited and abridged by the authors) and other sources.”<sup>16</sup>

### Data Interpretation

As mentioned above (see Methodology), our research aimed to determine:

- (a) to identify the topics and writing forms offered to students for their graduation compositions, and to analyse how educational policy was reflected in these topics;
- (b) to explore the process of taking the Czech language graduation exam as experienced by students with visual impairments.

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14 The term *normalisation* primarily refers to the period of the 1970s, following the suppression of the reform efforts known as the Prague Spring (see above). Many people were persecuted as a result of *normalisation*.

15 World-renowned German-speaking writer from Prague (1883–1924).

16 A written recollection by one of the grammar school graduates, PhDr. Zbyněk Galvas (clinical psychologist).

**(A) To identify the Topics and Writing Forms Offered to Students for Their Graduation Compositions, and to Analyse How Educational Policy was Reflected in These Topics**

As noted earlier, the school practice during the observed period implemented stylistic instruction through specific writing forms derived from functional styles: colloquial (e.g., notices), scientific (e.g., exposition, report, reflection), journalistic (e.g., articles, feuilletons), and artistic (e.g., narrative, characterisation). The administrative style was partially subsumed under the scientific style.

From the 1970s onward, compositions based on the scientific style predominated, particularly exposition, report, and reflection. These forms allowed students to demonstrate logical argumentation and subject knowledge, while also offering space for ideologically aligned interpretations. For example, a topic from 1974/75 read: “Isn’t it indeed a fascinating question why a passionate admirer and the best interpreter of our historical and cultural traditions becomes a close ally of the workers’ movement...?” (Exposition on Zdeněk Nejedlý).<sup>17</sup>

Although ideological and aesthetic analysis as an independent genre disappeared after the mid-1970s, ideological content continued to appear in many graduation composition topics. For example, a topic from the 1979/80 academic year prompted students to reflect on the statement: “Europe has lived 35 years without war. Such a prolonged period of peace is a rare phenomenon in its history” (from a lecture on Czechoslovak Radio – Reflection on the peace efforts of socialist countries). The topic clearly encouraged students to celebrate the peace-promoting policies of socialist states.

Narrative writing, although common in contemporary classrooms, was rare in the observed period. It was offered briefly in 1984/85 (“The joys and challenges of my sporting life”), and then not again until 2002/03. Similarly, genres like feuilletons, letters, and press surveys were introduced experimentally but only sporadically selected. For

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17 For the detrimental influence of Communist President Klement Gottwald, see above.

example, in 1996/97, a letter titled “Dear Mr President...” prompted students to write to Václav Havel<sup>18</sup> – four of the ten graduates did so.

In the 2000s, new forms such as depiction (“Places I like to return to”) or literary review (“Reading a good book is like a dialogue”) appeared. However, most students continued to favour reflection and exposition. Artistic or imaginative tasks – like “We wandered the streets of an abandoned metropolis...” – were rarely chosen, often due to students’ discomfort with visual description.

A content analysis of all graduation topics revealed several thematic categories. Ideological themes clearly dominated (37%), especially in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, in 1978/79, a typical assignment read: “Young people are aware of the need to fight for world peace” (Article for a Socialist Youth Union<sup>19</sup> magazine).

Other categories included: literary themes without ideology (3%), World War II (4%), reading experience (12%), personal development (19%), and topics on ecology, science, and media (21%). The remaining 4% were miscellaneous.

This thematic imbalance is reflected in the topics assigned in the 1980/81 school year:

- “Klement Gottwald on Zdeněk Nejedlý” (Exposition)
- “Let us fight against indifference” (Article for a youth magazine)
- “Even my city – my town – my region is changing” (Report on the economic and social development of the city, town, or region where I live)
- “We want the lives of young people to be rich and happy. While there should be plenty of room for entertainment, their lives must also be filled with actions that serve the cause of socialism.” – from a speech by G. Husák (Reflection)
- “When striving for peace, we do not only have in mind the people living today, our children and grandchildren. We also keep in mind

18 The first “dissident” president of Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution (1989).

19 Socialist Youth Union – a centrally organised youth organisation shaped by ideological influence.

dozens of future generations” – from a speech by L. I. Brezhnev<sup>20</sup> at the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Reflection).

The dominance of ideological content began to diminish after 1989. In the 1990s and 2000s, themes became more varied and personal, reflecting contemporary social concerns and allowing students greater freedom of expression. For example, the theme of generational relationships was presented in 1978/79 as “We should always make time for our children... for the needs of socialist society” and reappeared in 1999/2000 as “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” (Free-form composition).

### **(B) To explore the Process of Taking the Czech Language Graduation Exam as Experienced by Students with Visual Impairments**

A centralised approach was applied in assigning topics for composition writing. In the early 1970s, topics were delivered to schools in sealed envelopes and were assigned simultaneously to all schools, both for full-time students and those studying while employed, across the entire Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. This rather demanding procedure was simplified by announcing the topics via radio. Teachers were required to tune in to the radio at 7:50 a.m., write down the topics, and transcribe them into formats such as Braille or large print (i.e., standard print in an enlarged form). They then assigned the topics to students at the set time as in all other schools in the Czechoslovakia licensed to administer graduation exams. It is therefore clear that the topics were not modified in content for students with visual impairments; however, they still allowed for a wide range of suitable choices.

By the late 1980s, the centralised announcement of topics came to an end, and later, each school – or more specifically, the teachers of Czech language and literature at the respective school – announced their own topics. As a result, the selection of topics narrowed to three or four, often referring to topics covered in classes, which allowed for

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20 Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev – Leader of the Soviet Union.

better accommodation of the individual needs of students with visual impairments. For example, a popular topic was: “Characterisation of a literary figure or writer” (most often Karel Čapek<sup>21</sup> or Božena Němcová), and contemporary class records show that this topic was frequently discussed in lessons. The return of thematic content related to the life and work of Karel Čapek also reflects the political liberalisation of the time, as this world-renowned writer had been removed from the curriculum by the communist regime during the period of *normalisation*.

Based on interviews with respondents, we documented the direct influence of the political situation on the topics of graduation compositions. For instance, one teacher discouraged students from expressing religious ideas (as recalled by graduate Z. G.). At the grammar school under study, it is evident that topics based on works by authors not aligned with the regime (e.g., Karel Čapek, Catholic authors, etc.) were also assigned. Also, another teacher at the same school assigned politically engaged topics during preparation for the written component of the graduation exam. This demonstrates that, on the one hand, the selection of topics was closely influenced by the personality of the teacher. On the other hand, this example highlights a degree of autonomy and relative independence of the grammar school from the official educational doctrine.

When it comes to topics related to the personal reading of students with visual impairments, a brief explanation is necessary. Their personal reading choices were significantly influenced by the severity of their visual impairment. Blind students could read books in Braille; however, the selection of titles was limited. As a result, students often listened to books read on the radio or, if their visual impairment allowed, read certain titles with the help of optical aids. Otherwise, books were read aloud to visually impaired students, even during lessons. Therefore, when it came to graduation topics related to personal reading, students often referred to titles that had been read aloud to them, most often works of classic Czech literature (e.g., Božena Němcová’s

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21 Internationally renowned Czech writer and playwright (1890–1938).



*The Grandmother*). Today, of course, this limitation has been overcome, and students can read books on specially adapted computers with voice output or with the help of other technologies.

The written graduation exam lasted five hours and was always held in April. Students with visual impairments could write using a Picht machine, a typewriter, or special writing tools. By the early 2000s, they could also use computers, with the help of compensatory or optical aids. In this regard, the principles of specialised work were consistently adhered to. When evaluating and grading the graduation exam, the following factors were to be considered:

- 1) how well the student's work addressed the assigned topic (correct understanding of the topic, factual accuracy, independence and maturity of judgement, and richness of ideas);
- 2) the structuring of the composition, taking into account whether the individual parts were appropriately proportioned for the task;
- 3) how well the composition met the requirements of the assigned writing form;
- 4) the quality of the work in terms of stylistic skill, linguistic accuracy, and overall presentation.

Grammatical errors were assessed based on the overall grammatical quality of the written composition.<sup>22</sup> From this, it follows that there was no need for any additional specific adjustments to the examination process for students with visual impairments. Since teachers knew their students, as well as their specific visual impairments and how these manifested in written work, the same standards were applied to visually impaired students as to their non-disabled peers, though any issues related to their visual impairment were taken into account during the evaluation.

We can conclude that for students with visual impairments who were educated outside the mainstream system in separate specialised institutions, both their visual impairment and educational needs were

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22 Annex to Ref. No. 12 173/79-210 – Guidelines for the correction and evaluation of written assignments, Section a) Czech language.

taken into account, albeit unintentionally. Although it is unlikely that this was an intentional practice during the centralised topic assignments of the 1970s and 1980s, this conclusion is further supported by the fact that descriptive writing was absent from the list of available topics. From the perspective of special linguistic didactics, none of the offered topics can be considered entirely exclusionary for students with visual impairments. The aforementioned (omitted) descriptive writing is particularly challenging for students with visual impairments, as it relies on direct observation of an object's features – a skill that is significantly diminished in students with low vision or residual sight and entirely inaccessible to blind students. Once the responsibility for assigning graduation composition topics was fully transferred to schools, it became possible to fully accommodate the specific needs of students with visual impairments. It is paradoxical that after 2010, when the assignment of topics was once again centrally coordinated by CERMAT, topics such as the description of an image frequently appeared among the options. This practice was gradually abandoned following feedback from educators in the field.

An important aspect of teaching visually impaired students is that it takes place in smaller groups compared to schools for non-disabled students. Therefore, in Table 1, we present a breakdown of the number of students who graduated in each academic year, with their graduation compositions forming the primary research sample for our study.

Decade	Graduation years	Total graduates	Notes
1970s	1971/72–1979/80	100	Missing data for 1970/71
1980s	1980/81–1989/90	125	Peak in 1987/88 (25 graduates)
1990s	1990/91–1999/00	98	Missing data for 1999/00
2000s	2000/01–2009/10	82	Lowest yearly numbers overall
<b>Total</b>	1971/72–2009/10	405	As cited in methodology

Table 1. Number of graduates by academic year.

Between the academic years 1971/72 and 2009/10, a total of 405 students graduated from the grammar school. The number of graduates varied by decade, with the highest average in the 1980s (12.5 students per year), including a peak of 25 students in 1987/88. In contrast, the lowest annual numbers were recorded in the 2000s, averaging only about 8 students per year.

In the final research question, we examined the proportional representation of writing forms chosen by the students. In Table 2, we present the writing forms most frequently selected by the students.

Writing form	1972–80	1981–90	1991–2000	2001–10	Total selections
Reflection	26	42	29	18	115
Report	6	17	9	2	34
Free-form composition	–	26	37	27	90
Contemplation	–	28	10	1	39
Exposition	4	3	6	–	13
Characterisation	6	–	–	–	6
Magazine article	4	7	–	–	11
Speech	–	2	–	–	2
Feuilleton	–	–	5	3	8
Letter	–	–	4	–	4
Narrative	–	–	–	14	14
Depiction / Literary review / Description	–	–	–	4	4
Others / Unused (e.g., ideological analysis)	–	–	–	–	–

Table 2. Number of selections.

The most frequently selected forms across the entire period were reflection (115 selections), free-form composition (90), contemplation (39), and report (34). While scientific prose genres dominated in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., report, exposition, reflection), the 1990s and 2000s saw an increased preference for more subjective or open forms such as free-form writing and narrative. Less frequently chosen forms included feuilletons, letters, and artistic descriptions, often due to students' reservations or lack of preparation for those formats.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

The aim of this article was to contribute to the systematisation of the history of special didactics of the Czech language and to lay the groundwork for further linguistic-didactic research in this field. Our focus was on students with visual impairments attending specialised secondary schools. Specifically, we examined how the form and function of Czech graduation compositions evolved between 1968 and 2010, and what these changes reveal about the ideological and didactic framework of native language instruction in special education.

To answer this central research question, we pursued two key objectives:

- (a) to identify the topics and writing forms offered to students for their graduation compositions and to analyse how educational policy was reflected in these topics;
- (b) to explore the process of taking the Czech language graduation exam as experienced by students with visual impairments.

The analysis was carried out using both historical method (content analysis of 405 written graduation compositions and school documentation) and qualitative research (interviews with teachers and graduates). These data enabled us to assess both the thematic content of the graduation assignments and the structural and organisational aspects of the examination process.

We found that special language education was often tailored to the needs of visually impaired students, especially at the grammar school level, where adapted teaching methods and compensatory aids (e.g. Braille materials, large print, extended time) were regularly used.

Even though these students were educated in a segregated system, their instruction in Czech language and literature can be considered full-fledged and – in terms of structure and expectations – comparable to that of mainstream schools.

Our findings show that students most frequently chose written forms belonging to the functional style of scientific prose, especially reflective essays and later free-form writing, which allowed for a more conceptual and argumentative expression of ideas. These forms proved advantageous in mitigating some of the constraints posed by visual impairment – especially in contrast to narrative or descriptive forms, which require greater visual-spatial orientation.

Moreover, an analysis of the topics assigned over time reveals how political ideology – particularly socialist and communist propaganda – shaped the educational experience of these students. Graduation compositions often reflected ideological expectations, especially during the period of normalization. As late as eight years before the Velvet Revolution, students were offered a distinctly tendentious topic for their composition: “We want the lives of young people to be rich and happy. While there should be plenty of room for entertainment, their lives must also be filled with actions that serve the cause of socialism” (From a speech by Gustáv Husák at the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia – *Reflections on the life of youth in socialist Czechoslovakia, with consideration of one’s own life*). Fortunately, this forced ideologization gradually disappeared from the curriculum in response to political changes.

Although the centrally administered graduation exam introduced in 2010 did not fully account for the individual needs of students with disabilities, the earlier school-based system allowed for more flexible adaptation, which was often handled sensitively and competently by experienced teachers.

In conclusion, the historical development of Czech language graduation exams for visually impaired students reflects broader ideological, curricular, and pedagogical shifts, and offers valuable lessons for today’s inclusive education efforts – not only in the Czech Republic (e.g. Zulch Knouwds, 2010) but internationally. Historical experience

shows that even under ideologically burdened conditions, meaningful and adaptive teaching was possible – especially when handled by committed educators who understood the needs of their students.

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