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**PEDAGOGICAL DIAGNOSTICS OF EARLY CHILDREN LITERACY AND
THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM OF PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS**

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ABSTRACT: *This paper describes the current national curriculum of pre-primary education in Slovakia. An area of education focused on the development of literary and linguistic literacy in pre-school children is defined here. Diagnostic competence allows teachers to evaluate children's level, even regarding initial signs of reading and writing skills, as well as early signs of literacy that manifest themselves before the child starts attending elementary school. The contribution presents the views of teachers pre-primary education on linguistic and literary literacy of children.*

KEY WORDS: *teachers diagnostic competence, literary and linguistic literacy, views of pre-primary teachers, preschool age*

Introduction

In Slovakia, we're currently witnessing a confrontational dialogue going on in the field of pre-primary education; a dialogue between the paradigm of traditional marginal education and the paradigm of marginal humanistic education. Government educational programmes – or national curricula – are in the centre of attention. Related to the qualitative progress of nursery schools is the question of what good and bad can result from these curricula documents' being put into practice (Lynch, 2016, p. 3). The curricular reform was based on the application of a two-level curriculum model which includes two types of educational programmes – a national level, and a school level. The effective national curriculum of pre-primary education was passed on July 6, 2016. After a pilot stage of the verification to introduce the educational programme into practice was conducted, the programme was established in nursery schools as an innovated form of the national curriculum in September of the 2016/2017 school year.

Curriculum for preschool children, and their literacy

Compared to the previous curriculum, there are changes in parts of the structure, as well as in content. The changes were preceded by a more precise content analysis, a pilot verification, and comments on the curriculum made by nursery teachers. At the curriculum's school level, the obligatory content of education is reflected. Teachers are responsible for selecting the content of education, and by means of their professional activity influence the development of literary and linguistic literacy of preschool children. By this we mean the teacher's competence to work with this document.

“The chief goal of pre-primary education is to reach an optimum cognitive, sensory-motor, and social-emotional level which serves as a basis for elementary school education and for living within the confines of society” (Government Educational Programme of Pre-school Education, 2016, p. 6). The curriculum for preschool education defines 7 areas of education:

1. Language and communication;
2. Mathematics and working with information;
3. Humans and nature;

4. Humans and society;
5. Humans and the job world;
6. Arts and culture;
7. Health and exercise.

Individual areas of education constitute a basic content of human culture, and cover all aspects of cultural literacy that will be continuously developed at higher levels of education. Educational standards are defined by performance and content standards; they're the goal requirement placed on the child during observable performances that can be evaluated. The "Language and Communication" area is to the utmost degree related to the literacy of preschool children. The area is divided into two sections, and they into subsections:

1. Spoken language:
 - Conventions of communication;
 - Articulation and pronunciation;
 - Grammatical correctness and the standard form of spoken language.
2. Written language:
 - Understanding the content, meaning, and function of written language (recognizing the function of written language; understanding text's explicit meaning; vocabulary; understanding text's implicit meaning; knowledge of genres and the linguistic means of written language);
 - Understanding the formal characteristics of written language (the concept of press; knowledge of literary conventions; phonological processes and awareness; graphomotor prerequisites for writing) (Government Educational Programme of Pre-school Education, 2016, p. 11).

The development of child's ability to communicate occurs at first in the family, and then in the environment of nursery school. Once children start attending nursery school, their speech becomes more intentional because the teacher pursues the goals of the educational programme by: increasing the child's ability to perceive language rules; practicing these rules through various didactic games and exercises; developing the child's focused listening; often encouraging dialogue and discussion in the communication circle; practicing

discussions on a given subject and oral reproduction; experimenting with words; clarifying the meaning of words and discussing it; talking with children about their experiences, emotions etc. (Babiaková, 2016, p.55). Reaching educational standards in the “Language and Communication” area creates a prerequisite for children’s full development, as well as for a gradual development of literacy in their future.

Diagnostic competence of pre-primary teachers

Pedeutology, i.e. a study of the teaching profession, strives to answer the question of who the ideal teacher should be. Teaching is a profession that requires assuming responsibility for others. Teachers help children and pupils to experience a personal growth, and at the same time personally grow themselves by means of continuous self-education, of adapting to the modernizing education system, and taking new approaches to education. According to Podhájecká, diagnostics require teachers to:

- be able to identify the child’s individual education possibilities and needs in all spheres of development: the social-emotional, cognitive, and perceptual-motor sphere;
- be able to create their own diagnostic tools;
- make and evaluate records, observation sheets, children’s case history;
- be able to evaluate the history and result of children’s activity, and to create a stimulating environment as well as a positive climate (Podhájecká, 2011, p. 45).

Current trends work on the basis of monitoring and evaluating knowledge, skills, and competence. Children are exposed to the demands of a society that puts a great emphasis on rating. At a theoretical level, diagnostic competence of teachers is a summary of all knowledge that the teacher gained during his/her training in educational-psychological fields (Gavora, 1999, p.171).It is based on:

- theoretical and practical knowledge of pedagogical diagnosis,
- the ability to choose appropriate diagnostic method and technique,
- the ability to choose the diagnostic tool,
- the ability to design and implement a diagnostic process,
- the ability to retrieve and interpret the data obtained,

- the ability to establish a diagnosis and subsequently to evaluate their diagnosis,
- the ability to use the results of the diagnosis in educational process, or properly adjust the intervention.

As have shown results of research of several authors (Cabanová, 2010, p. 54; Duchovičová, Tóthová, 2005, p.71-75) teachers have mastered the knowledge of teaching the diagnosis, showing the attitudes to accept the individual traits of children, but lack the simple methods and diagnostic tools. Yourself you do not know to create. It relies on theoretical and practical knowledge from the area of educational diagnostics, and assumes the teacher's ability to select an appropriate diagnostic method, or a particular diagnostic tool. Nursery teachers choose tests and exams from authorised and modified methods of educational diagnostics; they create their own diagnostic tools and observation sheets, or put together comprehensive diagnostic materials under the umbrella of the nursery school's in-house documentation. Tools that are used most often include observation, interviews, games, tests and exams, or analysing the process and results of children's activities. Observation is a method that allows teachers to intuitively recognize signs of literacy in preschool children. It's also expected that teachers be able to correctly manage the diagnostic process, get data and interpret it, make diagnoses, and subsequently evaluate them.

A research focused on the diagnostic competence of teachers ¹came to an important conclusion: teachers don't know how to evaluate the extent of their own competence, or their ability to diagnose. The research was conducted in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland in the course of the 2006/2007 school year. The authors set out to discover how teachers perceived their own diagnostic competence and whether they considered themselves qualified to make diagnoses. The examined set consisted of teachers who worked at the 1st stage of elementary schools (Cabanová, 2009, p.119-122). Findings:

- 9.3% of teachers viewed themselves as fully able to diagnose pupils;
- 28.86% of teachers had a limited competence to diagnose pupils;
- 13.18% of teachers were unable to diagnose pupils at all;

¹ Research Vega 1/0593/08, chief researcher Prof. PhDr. Bronislava Kasáčová, CSc. published as „The Profession of Primary Teachers.“

- 44.96% of teachers didn't know how to judge their own diagnostic competence.

In the practice of education, being well-versed in diagnostic theories has a direct influence on the teacher's opinion about his/her ability to make qualified diagnoses. In nursery schools, diagnostics is a part of every-day life. Furthermore, the long-term process of diagnostics in nursery schools makes it possible to evaluate, with respect to a child's educational possibilities and life situation, whether or not he/she gained the minimum competence necessary for advancing to elementary school (Kasáčová, 2013, p. 64).

Pedagogical diagnostics of early children literacy

Literacy is a sphere of knowledge applicable to everyday life, and therefore related to many fields. The point of literary and linguistic literacy of preschool children is explain across the general definition of literacy "in the view of literary and linguistic literacy, to be linguistically literate means to have a linguistic repertoire which consists of a wide range of levels and genres. As soon as literacy becomes a part of an individual's cognitive system, it starts to interact with other components of linguistic knowledge to form its key elements: rhetoric flexibility and adaptability"(Pupala, Zápotočná, 2003, p.14).These processes are characterized by qualitative changes in perception and thinking, and a shift from holistic to analytical perception which allows the child to differentiate between visual and acoustic stimuli. This is a prerequisite for reading and writing. Diagnosing the cognitive aspect of the child's personality and literacy requires the teacher to master the expert-subject matter, as well as psychological and educational-didactic-psychological competences (Helus, 1999, p. 13-22).We diagnose the child's speech, communication sphere, level of vocabulary, overall communication level, and relationship between speech and thought, i.e. the overall formal and content aspect of speech (Varcholová, Maliňáková, Miňová, 2003, p. 20).

Teachers can use prepared evaluation methods and tests to diagnose literacy. The tests available in Slovakia that of preschool children are used as follows:

Tab.1 Diagnosing literacy

Author	Title
Mc Clay (1993)	Methodology of Observing and Evaluating Early Signs of Children's Literacy at the Time of Their Learning Written Speech during the 1 st Stage of Elementary Education
Lipnická (2009)	Child's Readiness for Writing
Mikulajová et al. (2012)	Literacy Predictors Test
Švancarová, Kucharská (2012)	Risks of Reading and Writing Disabilities in New Pupils

Mikulajová et al. as a research tool to determine the level of preschool children's literacy. The test focuses on evaluating the developmental level of linguistic-cognitive pre-literacy competences. It can be used in the January – June period before the nursery school training begins, and in the September – December period in case of 1st grade pupils who are starting their compulsory education. The goal is to identify children who face the risk of experiencing difficulties with learning the written form of language (Mikulajová, 2012, p.79). The test consists of eight subtests:

- Reading letters – provides preliminary information about the number of letters the child recognizes, and shows whether he/she can read easy words. (The results show that $\frac{1}{4}$ of children is able to recognize all letters, but can't read any words.)
- Remembering numbers – assesses the extent of short-term verbal-acoustic memory, i.e. whether the child can remember and immediately reproduce a sequence of numbers in the correct order. The sequence gradually becomes longer until the child exhausts his/her memory capacity. (Approximately one half of pre-schoolers is able to remember 4 numbers, while $\frac{1}{3}$ correctly repeated only three numbers).
- Sense of grammar – morphological-syntactical awareness is a reliable indicator of linguistic development. This subtest focuses on key aspects of the grammatical structure of a child's expressive speech. The goal is for the child to immediately reproduce what he/she's heard. (children repeat

6 sentences and form 9 more; younger children are able to correctly manipulate approximately 5 sentences.)

- Symbols – the goal is to assess the speed of psychological processes associated with intermodal coding (i.e. visual perception + graphomotorics), as well as the ability to perceive the shape of letters. The test involves assigning stimuli – filling in letters according to a key.
- Phonemic awareness – in alphabetical languages, awareness of words' phonic structure and the ability to recognize letters form a basic decoding mechanism. This concerns accuracy-associated predictors of reading technique. The subtest consists of 3 types of exercises with various levels of difficulty: dividing words into syllables, identifying the first phoneme of words, and synthesizing words out of phonemes (In case of pre-schoolers, the most common result was correct 10 exercises out of 15).
- Assigning names quickly and automatically – this concerns the level of accuracy with which the child is able to update known words from memory and phonologically process them while assigning them – a predictor of reading fluency. This exercise involves quickly naming five colours, randomly arranged into a sequence of 40 stimuli (in terms of time, pre-schoolers have 40–60 seconds; the critical time exceeds 80 seconds).
- Understanding speech – using chips, the child carries out orders that tax his/her long-term memory and are characterized by their grammatical complexity.
- Oral and verbal exercise – repeating pseudo words indicates the functionality of phonological memory and verbal-motor planning. The subtest consists of 5 types of exercises: a sequence of two oral movements; a sequence of three consonants; repeating pseudo words; specific assimilation; and lengthening words (Mikulajová, 2012, p.79).

In the last couple of decades, the issue of literacy gained a permanent foothold in pre-primary education and became one of its key topics.

Views of pre-primary teachers on children's literacy in relation to the innovated national curriculum

Pre-primary literacy has its particularities and methods for getting children acquainted with the world of elementary school. "Early childhood education encourages children to initiate their own learning activities through play, while

learning is more structured in the primary school with the teacher determining what the children do and learn” (Yeboah, 2002, p. 56). Of December 2016 we surveyed the views of pre-primary teachers on preschool children’s literacy, using the focus groups method². The survey was preceded by a content analysis of the national curriculum. The research sample consisted of 13 teachers from three nursery schools from the Eastern, Central, and Western Slovakia which took part in the pilot verification of the national curriculum. The teachers had been practicing their profession for anywhere from 3 months to 38 years, the average length of practice being 19 years. There were teachers among the participants who had no experience with the innovated national curriculum (having just graduated, worked outside the field, etc.), as well as teachers with many years of experience who were able to compare the current national programme with the original ones. All teachers were asked ten questions which dealt with teaching theory and practice and were split into five categories.

Results

In their testimonies, the pre-primary teachers perceived the innovated national curriculum mostly negatively. However, education provided to them by educational institutions gradually changed their negative opinion - combined with self-education and regular application of the curriculum in practice played a very important part. According to the participants, the advantages of the national curriculum lie in easier reference, logical structure, and educational fields that directly lead to the primary stage of education. Negatives include an introduction of new terminology which is considered a consequence of the increasing qualifications and expertise of Slovak teachers who work in the field of preschool education.

According to the surveyed teachers, children who complete the “Language and Communication” area of pre-primary education are able to express themselves well, know the rules of dialogue, have the right motor skills, understand read texts, and use standard language. One of the more general answers was that this area should help children gain a linguistic experience. Acquiring competences is tied to performance standards established by

²Partial research under the dissertation thesis “Linguistic and Literary Literacy at the Beginning of Primary School” (2015-2018).

the national curriculum. According to the teachers, these are set out in a way that makes them easy to work with. At the same time, the participants say that there are multiple performance standards in the “Language and Communication” area that are set rather high. This concerns performance standards related to pronunciation, grammar, the standard form of language, explaining meanings of words, phrases, answering questions, recognizing the difference between poetry and prose, and mainly the performance standards applied to graphomotorics.

Signs of early literacy are perceived by the teachers in everyday interactions with children. These signs are spontaneous displays which need to be supported, not neglected, the participants say. Preschool children must be introduced to communication conventions and written language, not be prevented from naturally choosing what they themselves wish to study. Their potential must be developed, not suppressed. Pre-primary teachers should be prepared for the fact that children who start attending elementary school will soon have been more literate due to the education provided to them in preschool age, and that the number of such children will be rising. The teachers say that it’s necessary to have diagnostic tools at one’s disposal when diagnosing the level of preschool children’s literacy.

The participants’ recommendations to pre-primary teachers who started their profession during the current school year are as follows:

1. Teachers should educate themselves by attending the trainings organized by the National Institute of Education and Methodical-Pedagogical Centre.
2. Students should attend practice-oriented pedagogical schools, and learn how to prepare plans.
3. Teachers should read and understand the educational programme, and read the evaluative questions (a new element introduced by the curriculum) with the goal of getting an idea about the content of the performance standard.
4. In school curriculums, the national curriculum performance standards should be divided into rolling, and regularly fulfilled ones.

Conclusions

We described the innovated form of the national curriculum, which has been in effect since September 2016. The decision to upgrade the pre-school curriculum was from our point of view definitely a good choice as a follow up to the next educational level. As one of the chief figures in the nursery school educational process, teachers should have necessary competences to diagnose preschool literacy. Diagnostic competence itself is a summary of multiple special methods which, when combined, provide the teacher with an ability to conduct diagnostic processes. The paper mentioned several tests which are used in Slovakia to diagnose literacy. Teachers are trying to yourself to create a variety of observation sheets and diagnostic tools, however, give the accuracy of best test. Literacy Predictors Test is indeed quite demanding, but comprehensively, dealing with linguistic and literary skills. Resulting results provide a picture of total language skills of the child. The conclusions listed partial results of a dissertation thesis survey that focused on the views of pre-primary teachers on children's literary and linguistic literacy, and on its content in the national curriculum. According to the teachers who took part in the pilot stage of introduction, the innovated national curriculum introduces positive perception and views literary and linguistic literacy of preschool children as spontaneously occurring and observable before the children start their elementary education.

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