

## Early Literacy Education in Preschool Curriculum Reforms: The Case of Post-Communist Slovakia

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### Abstract

This paper describes the development of preschool literacy education in Slovakia, beginning with the communist era, when the country was isolated from broader international academic discourse and early literacy research, then the period after the fall of the totalitarian regime up to the present day. It describes how the traditional approach to teaching literacy, relying on an obsolete model of reading and writing instruction taught at primary school, has resulted in preschools having limited capacity to develop children's literacy. It also explains attempts to reform the preschool literacy curriculum after the fall of the totalitarian regime. The first of these followed Slovakia's most comprehensive education reform act in 2008, but it underestimated the specific role of written language in children's language and cognitive development and in subsequent academic performance. Consequently, the reforms merely reproduced the traditional approach to literacy development within the new format of a decentralized curriculum.

The consequences of the 2008 education reform act, and the pressure exerted by the results of international student assessments, resulted in a strong initiative from the academic field to reform the preschool curriculum on an evidentiary basis. The authors of this paper describe how they developed the thinking behind the new preschool literacy curriculum. The paper looks at how this became part of Slovakia's national preschool curriculum which was implemented in 2016, including the process in which the curriculum was reviewed by the institutions of the Ministry of Education and by professional organizations involved in early childhood education in Slovakia.

### Keywords

Early literacy development, literacy curriculum, preschool education, Slovakia

### Introduction

Student literacy has become a much-discussed quality indicator of national education systems since many countries now take part in international student assessment surveys, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in

International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Literacy is another key issue in education policy and education reforms, affecting student

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participation in society and the labor market (Baird, et al., 2016; Zápotočná, 2010). This is reflected in the European Union (EU) education policies which recommend, based on the data collected by PISA, that the proportion of 15-year-olds achieving low scores in reading should be reduced to below 15% by 2020 in all EU countries (Education and Training, 2013). In Slovakia, the proportion of young people who lack basic reading skills required for further learning is growing, with the most recent data indicating it is 32.1% (OECD, 2016). Slovakia, therefore, has good reason to re-evaluate its school-based literacy practices.

Literacy is being widely promoted at the education policy level, as is seen in the recommendations of the Slovak Ministry of Education. Position statements on the results of international reading literacy skill assessments such as PISA and PIRLS often indicate high levels of concern. The 2016/2017 academic year was the Year of Reading Literacy, and the State School Inspectorate focused on reading literacy practices in its annual assessments. Nonetheless, reading literacy practices are poorly implemented in schools, and teachers repeatedly complain of insufficient support from the Ministry of Education and other school policy institutions. Shortcomings in this area include the fact that the education ministry has yet to deliver systematic reform of the national curriculum for Slovak language and literature. Additionally, many teachers still think teaching reading literacy is the sole responsibility of Slovak language and literature teachers.

In this paper we explore preschool education and the complicated path to introducing and implementing the new preschool literacy curriculum. The literature shows that effective literacy practices start before the child enters primary school and even preschool, and that insufficient attention to literacy may result in low achievement levels (Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Dickinson, 2003; VanKleeck, 1990). However, the initiative to implement a literacy curriculum has not been well received.

As we will explain in the first part of this paper, this may be because preschool teachers strongly believe that literacy falls purely within the remit of primary education, and that this belief is deeply embedded in the thinking and attitudes of teachers. In the second part of this paper we will describe the theoretical background of the new early literacy preschool curriculum and the responses to the curriculum from teachers and from the organizations and institutions representing teachers. Finally, we will analyze the most frequent comments and recommendations reflecting the traditional approach to literacy that is based on reading and writing instruction.

### **Traditional Approach to Preschool “Literacy” Education**

The success of even the best-prepared school reform depends on how it is received by schools and teachers, and on whether schools and teachers are able to incorporate the main ideas of the reform into their everyday classroom practices (Fullen, & Quinn, 2015). Therefore, we may gain a better understanding of the convoluted path of the adoption of the preschool literacy curriculum in Slovakia if we explore teachers’ knowledge and beliefs as to what should the focal point of literacy teaching be and the circumstances under which these developed.

Historically, teachers’ knowledge and beliefs have been shaped by two factors. The first is the fact that pre-primary education is a non-compulsory system consisting of preschools (*materská škola* in Slovak) that provide care for children aged 3 to 6. This system existed outside the national education system until it was incorporated into it in 2008 (Pupala, Petrová, & Mbugua, 2013). In this system the preschools were not considered educational institutions, so preschool teachers needed only an upper secondary school teaching certificate. The main purpose of preschool education was to prepare children for primary school. As far as language skills were concerned, the main task was to ensure children were prepared for the reading

and writing instruction that started in first grade.

The second factor is that the first preschool curriculum was published in 1965 and, notwithstanding minor changes, remained in use for over 40 years (Uváčková, 2011) until 2008 when a new curricular policy was introduced in Slovakia as part of the new education act. Over the years many preschool teachers developed strong beliefs about the role of the teacher in preparing children for reading and writing instruction and on the type of suitable activities. They also had firm thoughts as to which age language skills could be most effectively developed. The centralized education policies and curriculum also shaped teachers' beliefs (Brooks, 1991), and under the communist system there was little room for schools and teachers to be creative and reflective in their teaching practices. The preschool curriculum set out detailed *tasks* (corresponding to educational targets) for the three age groups (3-4 year olds, 4-5 year olds, and 5-6 year olds) in all content areas. These tasks were ready to be used in daily lesson planning. Preschool teachers were not required to have any specific pedagogical knowledge to follow the preschool curriculum, so teaching guidelines were published for each preschool-education content area. Preschool teachers generally used a whole-class approach, and their role was to ensure that children achieved *tasks* selected from the curriculum; there was no approved individualized teaching approach. To ensure that the preschool curriculum was strictly followed by teachers and schools, the State School Inspectorate was charged with checking that preschool teaching corresponded to the *tasks* and content set out in the national curriculum.

### **“Literacy” Curriculum and Beliefs of Teachers**

The last traditional preschool curriculum was issued in 1999 (*Preschool education program*, hereinafter referred to as PEP). Three content areas dealt with preparing children for formal reading and writing instruction in primary

school. The first content area, Language Arts, focused on four aspects of speech development: accuracy in pronunciation and in grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. The second content area, the Arts was a specific unit designed to refine fine motor skills, especially the fine motor skills required for handwriting. Finally, the third content area, Teaching Literature, highlighted the esthetical function of literature and taught children to appreciate and learn through literature.

Overall, the conception of literacy practice resulted in a “hollow curriculum” (Reed, Webster, & Beveridge, 1995), lacking in explicit literacy practices. Children's access to written culture was limited, both in terms of enjoyment and in experiencing the formal aspects of the printed word and the meaning and functions of writing. It was assumed that preschool children did not have the capacity, motivation, or need to understand reading and writing to any degree, and that they preferred play. It was considered rare for children to have any early literacy skills (Guziová, 2010/2011). Additionally, to maintain the differences between preschool and primary-school responsibilities, it was claimed that preschool teachers lacked the necessary professional skills to teach reading and writing. In contrast, primary school teachers had developed these skills, and so were the only teachers who could teach reading and writing. Preschool teachers and parents were advised not to interfere (Šupšáková, 1991) because interventions by the unqualified could cause harm.

Because literacy education was not formally part of the preschool curriculum, children who were taught Language Arts, Teaching Literature and acquired experience of the oral and written culture, did so as an unintended consequence of the curriculum. As our research has shown (Petrová, 2005), teachers did not explicitly include activities to develop children's literacy and did not think about whether their teaching supported the development of literacy. The centralized preschool curriculum, with its focus on

developing skills required for reading and writing instruction in primary schools, shaped teacher's information and beliefs about their role in early literacy education and on the most effective strategies for preparing children for primary school.

In 2004, we conducted research to investigate knowledge and beliefs about preschool literacy education as a way of ascertaining which aspects of literacy education were considered central to preschool education, how consistent and influential this knowledge and these beliefs are, and how they tap into the professional identity of preschool teachers. The sample consisted of 60 preschool teachers who were asked to respond to stimulus words (free association) representing the key areas of literacy education. By analyzing these free associations, we were able to construct a semantic map of teachers' knowledge and beliefs, including non-reflected implicit knowledge and beliefs. Subsequently, six preschool teachers with differing amounts of teaching experience and different qualification levels (upper secondary school education certificate or graduate degree) were selected from the sample to take part in an in-depth interview about their teaching practices in "literacy" education (Petrová, 2005; 2007). After analyzing the data, we were able to identify four core topics representing the teachers' knowledge and beliefs on literacy education:

1. The preschool teachers described having official leeway to *support speech development* in reading and writing instruction. They referred specifically to the way speech development is set out in the preschool curriculum section on Language Arts which mainly focuses on accuracy in pronunciation and in grammar (use of standard language). The free association analysis revealed the lack of a direct link between the written language and everyday language development activities. The written language appeared in associations referring to books, textual forms, and

genres, as a means of expressing ideas and thoughts in writing, and as requiring a knowledge of grammar for mastering the written language. This is part of the primary school curriculum and so is excluded from preschool education.

2. The main method teachers used to support speech development (but also other areas) was accurate use of the standard spoken language, which children were expected to *imitate*. This was also used to tackle speech problems in children raised in home environments with poor communication.

3. The other method for supporting speech development was **repetition**-based activities (for practicing oral-motor skills and reciting nursery rhymes, which were seen as important for achieving accurate pronunciation in learning the names of objects as a vocabulary-enhancement method, etc.). Even where innovative teaching methods were used (e.g., drama), the role of the teacher was to correct spoken errors.

4. The teachers also explicitly stated that language teaching had a specific position in all content areas of preschool curriculum because communication is the general teaching medium and is used to develop knowledge and thinking. But analysis of the implicit knowledge captured in the free associations indicated that this was mainly declarative-level knowledge as the stimulus word "knowledge" did not generate links to "literacy" education or to teaching practices.

The data showed that preschool teachers strongly saw the purpose of preschool education as fostering speech development in children from homes where this received little attention. However, it is worth noting that the research was conducted at a time when the role played by preschool in literacy development was being discussed in preschool education forums

(Baďuríková, 2000; Kikušová 1997/98; Zápotočná 2001; Zápotočná & Hošková, 2000), and teachers already had access to the literacy development methods disseminated by the Orava Association, which specialized in the work of Meredith and Steel (1995) and Wide Open School, a foundation promoting the Step By Step preschool program (1999). Teachers were also familiar with alternative approaches to early childhood education such as the Montessori and Waldorf programs (Zelina, 2000).

However, the research also showed that teachers are strongly influenced by the preschool curriculum, and that familiarity with the preschool curriculum is central to teachers' professional identity regardless of their education level. The ability to refer to curricular content and to recommend classroom practices involves demonstrating how the activity contributes to fulfilling the tasks listed in the preschool curriculum.

### **National Preschool Curriculum: First Attempt**

When new national preschool curriculum, *State preschool education program – ISCED 0* (2008, hereinafter referred to as SPEP) was implemented in 2008, teachers and schools faced the new challenge of having to produce their own school curricula for the first time. This decentralized curricular policy gave preschools the freedom to choose how they would achieve the common core standards set out in the national curriculum.

The new national curriculum also included reading literacy (along with mathematical and scientific literacy) as one of the general aims of preschool education, stipulated as the ability to “demonstrate pre-literacy skills” (p. 9) forming part of children's communicative competencies. Yet, the great potential that written language and written culture has for learning and cultural development was overlooked once again. The concept of literacy was included in the national curriculum, but it was presented in such a way that it lacked the detail on which competencies

should be developed in preschool-age children and how this could be achieved in the classroom. Additionally, the national curriculum failed to clearly convey how developing literacy skills could help improve preschooler's readiness for primary school generally. The common core standards in literacy were selected from the previous preschool curriculum and were simple re-organized in four thematic units of the preschool curriculum (*I am, People, Nature and Culture*) in an attempt to update the old-fashioned academic model used in the curriculum. Again, the common core standards focused on accuracy in pronunciation and in grammar, the development of vocabulary and communication skills (previously part of Language Arts), the development of graphomotor skills (previously part of Arts) and Teaching Literature. In moving toward a literacy curriculum, new educational standards, such as “showing an interest in books, letters and numbers, and exploring books,” “‘reading’ a picture story and picture series; and “‘writing’ a picture letter” (SPEP, p. 26), were included as a platform for discovering reading and writing and exploring the written culture. A statement by the national curriculum editor explaining that “reading” and “writing” are only used as means to express oneself via pictures and to infer meaning from a picture indicated that introducing literacy in to preschool education was just a formal, empty gesture, not part of explicit national strategy of literacy education (Guziová, 2010/2011). She stressed that it was developmentally inappropriate for preschoolers to be taught reading and writing; and that even intellectually gifted children rarely explore reading and writing.

The implementation of the national curriculum was also challenging because schools and teachers had not been prepared to handle the pressures of the new responsibilities. Consequently, teachers simply learnt to live with the increased paperwork, and classroom practices remained unchanged. As teachers had become accustomed to displaying their expertise in preschool education by referring to the

national curriculum, classroom practices included the continued use of traditional speech development activities, but these were now conceptualized as early literacy practices by the teachers.

### **New Conception of Early Literacy Curriculum**

The first substantial revision of the preschool curriculum undertaken in the post-totalitarian era did not survive more than five years. Teachers found the new conceptualization confusing, and the statements and phrases about early literacy development were devoid of meaning. The curriculum failed to provide guidelines for consistent early literacy education. Most preschools rediscovered the old curriculum (PEP) using it in everyday classroom practice, retaining the new one (SPEP) as evidence that school and classroom documentation complied with the legal requirements.

Between the years of 2012 and 2013 the international education assessment results led to increasing pressure on the education policy makers to revise the majority of national educational programs, including preschool curriculum. The favorable political circumstances meant that a team of academics, consisting of researchers with substantial expertise in the preschool education content areas, was able to meet and propose a revision. The preschool curriculum they drafted, following a one-year pilot study, became the new national curriculum *Pre-primary state education program for preschools*, which has been in use in all Slovak preschools since September 2016 (hereinafter referred to as NC).

The authors of this paper were responsible for developing Language and Communication, one of the content areas in the new curriculum, and they were careful to ensure that it reflected contemporary theoretical and empirical approaches to language development associated with early literacy education.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Background**

The theoretical and empirical underpinning of the preschool literacy curriculum was derived from established theories of language development (Petrová, 2001), major theoretical models of reading and literacy developed in cognitive psychology (cognitive processing and text-comprehension-based reading models developed in the 1970s), and contemporary approaches to literacy associated with the sociocultural turn (the British school of New Literacy Studies, Street, 1984; and Gee, 2004), as well as the Vygotskian approach to education (Petrová, 2008). The main contribution to literacy theory of these approaches is that instead of understanding literacy as distinct cognitive activity being unique to the individual, represented by traditional approaches to reading, they recognized the significance of the social, cultural, and situational context (Zápotočná, 2004). As a result, there was a notable shift away from the established approaches to literacy education in sense of reading and writing instruction to literacy education emphasizing literacy practices and literacy events (Street, 1997).

These and other changes to the theoretical approach to literacy led to a reassessment of how literacy is perceived in relation to preschool age children and how literacy is developed in early literacy curricula for early childhood education.

Some other sources that influenced our conception of early literacy education were the Piagetian (cognitive-constructivist) perspective represented by E. Ferreiro's (2003) psychogenetic theory of literacy development. Ferreiro's research on conceptualizing literacy, particularly writing and the written language is based on an analysis of pre-conventional writing in children. It was especially instructive because Slovak orthography is much closer to Spanish orthography than it is to English, which is the reference language of most of the recent literacy research.

Another concept that informed our literacy curriculum is emerging literacy, which is

the idea that a literacy-rich environment provides children with opportunities and reasons to explore print and writing through spontaneous cognitive activity, leading to the gradual acquisition of literacy (Black & Ammon, 1992). The ideas inherent in this approach are therefore quite different to those that underpin the knowledge and beliefs of Slovak preschool teachers (see above) acquired in an era when the main preschool teaching method was one of training and repetition. We also took account of the notion of the hidden or seamless curriculum (Reed, Webster, & Beveridge, 1995) in our literacy curriculum.

The last key theory informing our literacy curriculum is social-constructivism, a Vygotskian perspective, a learning approach based on the socially mediated construction of knowledge through interaction with adults in dialogue and discussion that goes beyond the child's existing capabilities (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). In early literacy development, dialogue and discussion, as well as the acts of asking questions and seeking answers, constituted the most beneficial aspects of shared book-reading and helped improve text comprehension as part of listening comprehension. While the hidden curriculum enables learning within the zone of actual development, in this spiral curriculum (Reed, Webster, & Beveridge, 1995) this zone is exceeded, fostering "critical literacy" (p. 172). The importance of social transactions in reading is also present in the multidimensional literacy model proposed by Kucer (2001). His definition of literacy contains five dimensions—linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, developmental and educational—which we considered useful to developing a literacy curriculum, especially for pre-primary education. The other model used in our early literacy education is the model of linguistic literacy outlined by Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002), mainly because it takes into account the importance of linguistic variety, the availability of multiple linguistic resources, as well as the role of metalanguage and linguistic knowledge in developing language and literacy. We also have good experiences of using Clay's

(1993) early literacy skills evaluation tools and so we adopted her Concepts About Print in our literacy curriculum.

The above mentioned theoretical approaches and models inspired some of the ideas and projects relating to early literacy development in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s (Dombey, 1995) and are included in our literacy curriculum to some extent. The content and the structure of our literacy curriculum was mainly influenced by van Kleeck's (1995; 1998) model of Pre-literacy Domains and Stages. Like Kucer's multidimensional model of literacy mentioned above, this model represents the wide spectrum of components (abilities, skills, knowledge and experiences) that are part of advanced reading, indicating they can be fostered long before children receive formal reading instruction. Van Kleeck's model is derived from the four-component model of the reading process outlined by Adams (1990). In this model, reading is cognitively controlled by four hypothetical processors. Two of them are connected to the meaning of print: the *context processor* and *meaning processor*; and two with the form: the *orthographic* and *phonological processors*. Van Kleeck identifies the pre-literacy competency domains associated with each of these processors, such as abilities, skills, knowledge and experiences, that could be targeted at the preschool age. The model also assumes there is a natural sequence in literacy development, beginning with understanding the contextual and meaning components of print (initial stage), progressing to the natural and spontaneous discovery of meaning-to-form relations and correspondence (next stage), and continuing with gradual improvement in processing the form (i.e. the orthography and phonology of the written language). In the last stage, the child—as an autonomous reader at primary school level—will be able to profit from the abilities, experience and knowledge developed in the previous stages of literacy development. The main advantage of this model over many others is its complexity, as it

systematically covers the wide spectrum of pre-literacy competencies.

When developing our new literacy curriculum, we also took account of empirical research findings. These provide evidence that the traditional view found in Slovak preschool teacher's beliefs, that primary education should focus on literacy while preschools should simply prepare children for formal learning (the reading readiness approach), has been discredited (Neuman & Dickinson, 2003).

One of the most significant findings is the effect on language development of attitudes to the written culture in the child's home environment. This is captured by the international literacy assessments (PIRLS, PISA) and other research such as that based on Bernstein's (1960) theory of language codes, which shows that the acquisition of a more elaborate language code during early childhood has wide-ranging societal consequences for the child. The restricted language code typically found in children from low social status families is associated with weaker school achievement, a lower level of education and reduced participation in society. A remarkable number of studies on early literacy development collected

by S.B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (2003; 2011; and Dickinson & Neuman, 2006) indicate that "children are doing critical cognitive work in literacy development from birth through 6 and that quality instruction makes a vital contribution in these years to children's success as readers and writers" (Neuman & Dickinson, 2003, p. 3). This is consistent with research we conducted on a sample of Slovak-speaking preschool children using the early literacy assessment tools developed by Clay (1993; see also Zápotočná, Pupala, & Hošková, 2003; Zápotočná, 2005).

## Language and Communication Content Area on Paper

In this part we describe the basic structure and the content of the Language and Literacy section as it appears in the new national curriculum. We explain the ideas behind the common core standards in greater detail, including the success criteria for key achievements in early literacy education, that are also part of national curriculum.

<b>I. Spoken Language</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication conventions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulation and pronunciation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grammar and standard language</li> </ul>
<b>II. Written Language</b>
1. Understanding the Meaning and Use of Written Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring the functions of the written language</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the explicit meaning of the text - vocabulary</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the implicit meaning of the text</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring literature genres, figurative language and narrative conventions</li> </ul>
2. Exploring and Understanding the Formal Features of Written Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts about print and exploring print conventions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phonological processes and phonemic awareness</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graphomotor skills required for writing</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Structure of the common core standards in the Language and Communication content area

The common core standards (Figure 1)<sup>1</sup> cover two main areas – the spoken and the written language. The common core standards for written language are more detailed because the nature of the traditional curriculum means teachers in Slovakia have limited experience providing a literacy-rich environment in the classroom and of encouraging preschoolers to explore the written language. Several of our teaching guidelines are therefore aimed at explaining the unique role written culture plays in developing language and speech, and knowledge and thinking. We recommend teachers use a wide variety of literature genres with the children, including factual texts when introducing classroom activities aimed at ensuring that children gain rich experiences of the written culture. It is recommended that the various functions of the written language be explored in the classroom as follows:

- as examples of the rich variety of language experiences, of standard, cultured, and highly developed forms of verbal expression (as opposed to relying on standard language use as modelled by teachers);
- as a means of developing spoken language and communication skills—vocabulary, standard language acquisition, grammatical accuracy, and socially appropriate communication;
- as contributing to the development of all significant precursors to the area of reading literacy, which can have an impact on school success;
- as an important source of positive reading experiences, helping stimulate motivation and interest in the written culture and education.
- providing children with experience of a variety of texts and content is an important means of developing cultural literacy, of exploring the role of written culture in education, and acquiring and

developing reading habits and positive attitudes towards education and learning.

The common core standards in the national curriculum are:

- *Performance standards* which set out the knowledge, skills, or examples of behavior that indicate the knowledge or skills to be achieved by the end of preschool.
- *Content standards* which are detailed descriptions giving teachers examples of classroom activities and methods for achieving the performance standards.
- *Evaluation questions* for teachers to obtain feedback on how the children respond to the classroom practices and to ascertain whether any adjustments are needed.

The following section looks at views within the profession on the process of implementing the curriculum, as expressed in the accompanying discussions.

## Reality of Early Literacy Education

It soon became clear that the new curriculum was not going to change teachers' thinking and that transforming everyday practice would require additional work if what was set out on paper was to be at least partially achieved.

### Documents Analyzed

To illustrate how the national curriculum was received we collected materials from dozens of lengthy written statements obtained once the two main preschool teacher associations became involved in the process of reviewing of the curriculum. The two associations are the Society for Preschool Education (hereinafter referred to as SPE) and the Slovak branch of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education and Care (OMEP). We also received recommendations and critical comments from individual teachers, groups of teachers, schools, and from institutions involved in education policy (State School Inspectorate, hereinafter

referred to as SSI; the institution for in-service teacher's education and training The Methodology and Pedagogy Centre, hereinafter referred to as MPC)<sup>2</sup>.

Our analysis of the professional discourse reveals the extent to which the traditional approach to literacy education remains deeply embedded in the thinking of the preschool education community and presents a barrier to new ideas. It also indicates that these beliefs and attitudes continue to influence everyday classroom practices.

### **Understanding and Misunderstanding Literacy**

The most significant challenge we face is getting teachers to understand what we mean by literacy in relation to preschool age. The perception is that the written culture is the domain of primary education. This can be seen in the suggestions on which parts to exclude from the curriculum and what should be put in their place.

The State School Inspectorate (SSI) objected to the main aim of the content area:

“The primary aim in the Language and Communication education area is to develop the child's communicative competences at all language levels, making use of the development potential of the written language.”

In their position statement they suggested “*this aim should be omitted. Written language is not part of preschool education!*” On the other hand, they recommended adding “... *spoken language is primary and most natural*”. Alongside other references to reading, they also recommended omitting “*comprehension of a read text*”. Similarly, the Society for Preschool Education (SPE) stated that: “*From the field we know that spoken language should be prioritized*”.

Comments like this were frequent. There were also frequent recommendations about omitting the performance standard relating to *text comprehension*: “Can answer questions that go beyond the literal meaning of the text and can predict events, think up (deduce) content,

transfer information from the text to other situations and so on.” It was thought that “To predict events” was an inappropriately challenging expectation. The idea that children “can explain the implied (idiomatic) meanings of simple word combinations” was rejected on the grounds that this requires “*knowledge of metaphors (!), taught in secondary schools!*” The idea that print-related vocabulary should be introduced (“author, book, book cover, page, text, pictures”) was repeatedly questioned.

It was thought *knowledge of literature genres* was unimportant and that performance standards requiring children to “distinguish between poetry and prose” (or between a “nursery rhyme and a story, or a fairytale” in child's language), or between “fiction and real-life stories”, and to explore “the narrative structure of fairytales” were inappropriate and pointless. “*Why should children be familiar with the narrative structure of a fairytale?*” (comment from the SPE).

We also received many comments recommending the removal of references to *exploring the functions of the written language*. There were frequent suggestions that the performance standard referring to the child's ability to “explain in simple terms why the written language is important and give basic examples” should be omitted. Teachers also thought incorporating writing into classroom activities was pointless (recommended in the content standards): “The teacher could write signs identifying play areas or activity centers in the classroom (library, hand-in, work shelf etc.) and short notices or instructions could be written in capital letters and pinned on classroom notice boards and information areas” (NC, 2016, p. 35).

The SPE responded to this by asking: “*What is the reason for asking teachers to pin short notices or instructions written in capital letters on classroom notice boards and information areas?*” Elsewhere, they recommended omitting the suggestion that written instructions should be used to help children become independent in their own

activity. The comment “*We see no good reason for children to be interested in reading instructions on how to play games*” is a good illustration of the failure to understand the idea that writing should be explored or that children can benefit from a *literacy-rich environment*.

It was recommended that *Concepts About Print*, and literate behavior generally, should be excluded from the suggested list of knowledge and experiences preschool-age children should gain. “*Why should a child be able to show where you start reading a text? Where you would find the information about the author or the contents of a book? To follow the (left-to-right) direction of print?*” (comment by SPE). “*Children have contact with books, but it is pointless expecting them to know where to find the contents in a book; that is content that should be learnt at primary school*”.

The reviewers’ comments were also consistent with the reproduction of traditional **attitudes to writing**, what writing is, and the rejection of the idea that writing should encourage even pre-conventional writing among preschools. “*Why should a teacher encourage pre-conventional writing? Discover how you write a short message, word, or story?*” (comment by SPE). The teachers also questioned why preschool-age children should be able to write their names and rejected the idea this should be promoted: “*Some children can write their name but only because they want to. It is not right to encourage that in preschool!*” The critical response to the suggestion of pinning up picture cards with letters on them to promote invented spelling was so overwhelming that we ultimately decided to omit this suggestion from the curriculum.

On the other hand, most reviewers thought the curriculum lacked detailed descriptions on the teaching of *graphomotor skills*. Frequently arguments were: “*Coordination of vision and hand is an important pre-writing stage*”, “*this is vision-motor training for writing*”. The curriculum does not contain a section on this. Reviewers requested “*more detailed specification of*

*graphomotor pre-writing stage*”, and requirements for “*sitting correctly, body posture, the angle of the paper, holding the pencil correctly...*”. The Methodology and Pedagogy Centre (MPC) provided the most comprehensive description of what should be included in this section of the curriculum. They requested that “*...correctly holding a pen, crayon, brush, scissors...*” should be added alongside previous requirements and that “*sand, snow and flour*” be added to paper as resources for teaching fine motor skills. They also thought the required distance between head and paper should be included in the part on teaching graphomotor skills and wanted many other details to be added to the curriculum. However, teachers have access to a huge amount of materials containing all the required information on this topic.

These critical comments and recommendations are a good illustration of how teachers’ knowledge and beliefs, and their negative attitudes to teaching the written language, have not changed much since the fall of the communist regime.

### Understanding Teaching and Learning

The reviewers’ recommendations are also a good example of how teachers perceive learning at the preschool age and how they define their own roles in teaching to support learning. They favored the teaching of graphomotor skills and thought there was a lack of activities for teaching speech development, such as “*oral motor skills, breathing, vocal exercises*” and the “*positioning of articulation organs*”.

The tendency to view teaching in terms of rote learning can also be seen in the teachers’ attitudes to cognition and *knowledge acquisition*. Learning is seen as the acquisition of knowledge that is then consolidated through repetition and memorizing. The teachers want a method or activities that generates an immediate, observable, and measurable effect. This was why they recommended omitting the standards relating to the experiences children gain<sup>3</sup>. The role of the State School Inspectorate

(SSI) reinforces these beliefs, since it inspects the process whereby the standards set out in the national curriculum are achieved. It made explicit reference to a “...*lack of measurable achievements*” in most areas of the national curriculum.

This attitude to teaching and learning is also reflected in the **comments on the evaluation questions**. There were explicit worries that the evaluation questions in the national curriculum could be misused in the SSI’s external assessments. However, the evaluation questions (NC, 2016) are designed to help teachers observe children’s responses to situations, for example:

How does the child react to unknown words? Does s/he ask if s/he doesn’t understand? Does the child like using words just learnt? How does the child respond to the questions asked? Does the child attempt to answer even when s/he does not know? What strategies does s/he use when doing so? Does s/he guess? Does s/he think up answers? Does s/he try to remember? (pp. 28-29)

These were considered pointless because “*The responses to these questions are the child reacting, showing his/her interest but they are useless for assessing which words the child has learnt. Teachers should ask which words the children use, what they mean, and at what level.*”

Comments were also made in relation to the evaluation questions (NC, 2016) on the children’s interests: “How does the child respond to educational texts? Which topics most interest the child? Is s/he interested in finding out about new ones? Does s/he like to ‘show off his/her knowledge?’” (p. 30). One teacher commented: “*Displaying interest in a particular topic and in educational texts is not a good indicator of reading comprehension, of how well he/she can re-tell the story... they are not related to reading comprehension*”.

In addition to these examples, there are others indicating that teachers consider evaluation to be a kind of examination, or

verification of how well children master the target knowledge or skill, despite this contradicting the main idea behind the national curriculum.

### Thinking Hurts

Teachers’ attitudes are the source of many misunderstandings, worries, and paradoxes. One paradox can be illustrated by one last comment made in relation to the national curriculum that suggested that its creators had forgotten that play is the most important preschool activity. The teachers were afraid that by following the national curriculum, they would be removing the play element from preschools and increasing the cognitive requirements placed on children. Some of the comments we received indicated that preschools should be an arena where children are not forced into thinking. “*They are children; they should be playing and not thinking, dealing with things! Is that what play should be about?*”

### Conclusion

The response to the national curriculum in Slovakia may initially appear disappointing. The many comments and recommendations selected for this paper came from the main preschool teacher associations and school policy institutions and they may not represent the knowledge and beliefs of all teachers. But these bodies have a strong voice in education policy in Slovakia and play an important role in sustaining the attitudes and beliefs discussed in this paper. The process of reviewing the new national curriculum was clearly framed as a political power game.

Successfully implementing this new conception of literacy education – from paper to practice – still requires a great deal of investment in training teachers and preparing teaching guidelines. However, the approaches to early literacy education that this curriculum is built around have been well received internationally, and research in the local language environment and education context should provide satisfactory evidence. We are

currently analyzing data collected during an assessment of the key literacy predictors and literacy of the last generation of children to have attended preschool education programs that followed the “old” national curriculum<sup>4</sup>, and these will be used for a comparative study assessing the effectiveness of the new conception of literacy education<sup>5</sup>.

## Notes

1. The common core standards for written language (II) have been designed to reflect Van Kleeck's (1998) model. The first section is about developing meaning in the written language, as represented by the context and meaning processors. Children explore the various functions of the written language and gain experience of different genres of children's literature. In developing their vocabulary and listening comprehension children learn to distinguish between different genres, the structure of the story, and other narrative conventions. By gaining rich experience of the meaning of texts, children also discover the formal aspects of print. The second section of the standards deals with two areas associated with investigating and explicitly learning about these formal aspects of print—the orthographic processor—as they relate to the visual features of the print described in Clay's (1993) Concepts About Print. The second—the phonological processor—deals with the phonological structure of spoken language and raises phonemic awareness. The final section of the standards was included because children in Slovakia are taught a specific form of continuous cursive handwriting which requires fine perceptual-motor coordination and is taught in a particular way. Elsewhere in schools that teach block letters, aspects relating to the script, writing and knowledge of letters are dealt with in Concepts About Print, or the orthographic processor (Van Kleeck, 1998).

2. We do not identify those who reviewed the national curriculum (the participants) unless the comment or recommendation was part of a position statement issued by one of the main

preschool teacher associations (SPE, OMEP) or education policy institutions (SSI, MPC).

3. A good example of this attitude is found in some of the critical comments relating to Concepts About Print. The reason Concepts About Print tends to be misunderstood stems from a failure to see that the performance standards relating to this area concern the rich experiences children have of print, not direct teaching. Consequently, we witnessed a preschool teacher trying to get the children to achieve this standard through demonstration and explanation, which was reminiscent of a lecture on Concepts About Print.

4. Project VEGA, No. 2/0140/15: Literacy as an enabling mechanism for the social inclusion of children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and marginalized communities.

5. Project VEGA, No. 2/0134/18: Pedagogical impacts and developmental achievements resulting from curricular changes in preschool education.

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