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A Comparative Analysis of Hungarian and Slovakian Preschool Curricula

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ABSTRACT

The study compares preschool educational programmes in Hungary and Slovakia. Both countries have a national core curriculum for preschool education, which are curriculum frameworks. It means that both countries provide space for a diversity of preschool programmes. However, the Slovakian programme is considerably longer and more detailed than the Hungarian one. The expected learning outcomes and requirements are precisely and thoroughly defined in the Slovakian programme. A comparison of the curricula points out that there seem to be more differences than similarities between them. The two documents show a considerable difference, which may also have implications for the practice of educating and developing preschool children. There is a fundamental difference in thinking about children's activities (especially their play), the development of skills and abilities, and the transmission of literacy content. Further analysis may help to understand how these differences affect children's development.

Keywords: Hungary, Slovakia, Preschool Curricula, DIFER, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

The DIFER measurements comparing Hungarian preschool children who reside in Hungary and in Slovakia (Nagy et al., 2004), reveal an unexpected result. Surprisingly, the development of children's skills at the end of preschool presents a different scenario compared to the measurements taken at the age of 4 years. At the age of 4, there is no substantial difference between the two countries. By the end of preschool, the DIFER skills of children in Hungary are significantly more developed than those of their Hungarian counterparts in Slovakia (Hajduné Holló et al., 2022). In order to explain this phenomenon, first, the two countries' basic preschool curricula were examined. Through the comparative analysis, the study aims to highlight the similarities and differences between the state regulatory documents of the Hungarian and Slovakian bipolar models, the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education and the State Education Programme for Preschool Education.

First, it was determined that the compulsory document regulating the content of preschool education functions as a framework for regulation in both countries. Curricula of the basic programme type are not intended to enforce a compulsory and generalised preschool pedagogy but to provide space for a diversity of educational programmes and their coexistence. The basic characteristic of their regulatory role and their genre is that they provide a framework and general principles which serve as a basis for preschools to develop their own educational programmes. Since the curriculum is a dynamic and open model of objectives and processes based on social consensus, which is, in fact, a consistent system of several dimensions, it is characterised by the fact that it anticipates expectations for the optimal implementation of the educational process. The curriculum usually contains a complete, mainly vertical description of the teaching and learning process, from objectives to assessment (Perjés &Vass, 2022). Education systems where a local curriculum is used alongside the core curriculum are bipolar systems. The education systems in Hungary and Slovakia are bipolar.

In Hungary, the obligation to develop institutional pedagogical programmes appears alongside the national core curriculum for preschool education. The Hungarian core curriculum of preschool education is a document characterised by pluralism, child-centredness, methodological freedom and organisational diversity. Its unique features are the formulation of the image of the child and

the preschool, the focus on activities, including games, and the fact that the programme does not contain any requirements, the developmental characteristics of the end of preschool being the guiding principle for educational development.

Education policy in Slovakia is also characterised by the bipolar model, but here the criteria-based education system is more pronounced, where the state prescribes the fulfilment of a set of requirements set by the educational programmes, standardising the expected learning outcomes and the level of skills to be acquired in preschools within the school system. The backbone of the Slovakian core curriculum is a triad of requirements, curricular content and assessment questions. The Slovakian programme is therefore structured on the basis of the practice of criterion-oriented developmental support so that the performance can be defined and assessed in relation to the requirements, and in order to assess the level at which the child/student has reached the predefined, well-defined level of requirements. The criteria-based assessment also allows to characterise the cognitive skills that the individual is able to show at the level achieved. This provides an opportunity for comparison and, on this basis, for the development of the child/student in a given area.

The Origins of Content Regulation in Preschool Education in Hungary

In Hungary, the document that can be seen as the first attempt to regulate the content of preschool education as a whole was written in 1957. Instruction No. 851-17/1957 II/4 of the Minister of Education, issued in all preschool institutions of the country, entitled "Educational Work in Preschool - Guidelines for Preschool Teachers" became known as a handbook within the profession. The manual is a highly detailed, prescriptive curriculum-type document that regulates the content of the whole teaching and learning process and is structured into two major sections. The first part covers the conditions and tools of preschool education, and the second, more extensive part, details the activity plans. Overall, the structure is similar to that of school curricula: it specifies the content and structure of the activities and the requirements for each age group.

The document is a faithful reflection of its time, so it is not surprising that it is politicised. Thus, according to the do cument, the aim of preschool education "is to provide care and education for children aged 3-6 years in accordance with

the requirements of a society building socialism and socialist pedagogy" (Educational Work in Preschool, 1957, p. 3). Further, the task is the multifaceted education of children, which is to be provided through the development of their physical, intellectual and moral strength and their aesthetic sense. It should aim to develop the skills and abilities which will facilitate their integration into school life and the start of their school education. The structure, content and overall approach of the document reassure the reader that the first programme, which seeks to regulate the whole of Hungarian preschool education, is strongly education-centred and focuses on preparing children for school. Preparation for school will remain one of the functions of the preschool in the future, but the spirit of the programme launched in 1971 after some three years of professional debate and discussion, is different. It has been rightly regarded as a milestone in the profession.

The greatest merit of this programme was that it represented the most up-to-date psychological approach to the concept of children (the programme was strongly influenced by the spirit of the Budapest School and the proposals of Alice Hermann, a direct member of the Programme Committee), and incorporated available expertise in pedagogy, psychology, medicine and health sciences, and combined it with practical experience. The 1971 programme was, therefore, a curiosity for its time and gained an international reputation (Bakonyi, 2013). The individual approach, experience, the opportunities for self-expression and indirect learning through play, the emphasis on the informality of learning for the youngest children (The Preschool Education Programme, 1980/Az óvodai nevelés programja, 1980), the thinking about individual rates of child development and differentiation resulted in very modern approach to education, which was well supported by the proposed guidelines that appeared alongside the compulsory standards.

For preschool teachers, prescriptive formulations are more about the objectives ('what'), while suggestions are more about the methodological issues ('how'). The structure of the programme has been modified somewhat, but this has not brought about any significant change in the structure. The individual chapters have become more proportionate, while the levels of requirements to be attained by the end of the year have been retained for each age group, but these have been treated in a much more flexible way, taking into

account the natural differences in development between children (The Preschool Education Programme, 1980).

Work on the revision of this landmark programme started in the first half of the 1980s. There were a number of factors that justified this renewal, of which only the most important ones will be mentioned:

- Recent research findings on school readiness (Nagy, 1985)
- The 1985 Act on Public Education and the regulation of schooling according to development (The Education Act of 1985 = Hungarian Gazette/Magyar Közlöny, 1985/19. 461-49)
- Changes in society, and
- The profession's increasing aspiration for pedagogical autonomy.

The 1989 preschool education programme (Hungarian abbreviation: new ÓNP) retained many of the values of its predecessor but also introduced important changes. The most striking changes are in the openness and the loosening of the ties in preschool life. Instructions ('must') have been replaced by recommendations ('may'). Recommendations are made on what can be done, and the methods (e.g., 'how to do') are left to the preschool teachers, as well as the choice of the forms of experience. This has led to much greater methodological freedom. It is also a significant change that the programme no longer sets any standards but, instead, the guide for preschool teachers from this point onwards is the developmental characteristics.

In the definition of the objective, the 1971 programme retains "the promotion of the multifaceted, harmonious development of children" (The Preschool Education Programme, 1980), but no longer only for children aged 3-6, but for children aged 3-6-7. The clarification of the age limits reflects that some children do not start school at the age of 6 and those children reach the developmental stage necessary for starting school at different ages. 'Multifaceted' means that education must embrace the whole of the child's personality and ensure physical, intellectual and social development within a framework of emotional security. Therefore, preparing for school takes on a new meaning: preschool develops the whole person, part of which is achieving school readiness, which is ensured by carrying out the tasks assigned. The tasks of preschool education in the fields of physical development, mental and intellectual development, and social and community development are clearly and precisely defined in the programme. The areas identified are the same as

for school readiness. Still, the programme emphasises that the content of preschool education is broader than this. At the same time, it indicates that the development of learning skills in the process of overall personal development is meant to be the feedback on the effectiveness of preschool education.

The revised educational programme was published as a unified, centralised guide for all Hungarian preschools at the time of the regime change when the demand for professional diversity had already stimulated the reform of pedagogical concepts and alternative programmes. Bakonyi aptly points out the contradiction that, while the profession's aspirations suggested a new era, until 1996, a 'past-system' central programme functioned as the official content regulator (Bakonyi, 2013).

The Introduction of Framework Regulation

The National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education (1996)

The core curriculum is an entirely new type of content regulation since it not only aims to enforce a compulsory and generalised preschool pedagogy but also provides space for the diversity and coexistence of educational programmes. Its regulatory role and genre also differ significantly from previous programmes. It provides a framework and general principles that serve as a reference point for all local preschools to develop their own educational programmes. It preserves the good traditions of preschool education while reflecting the democratic and human values legitimised due to societal changes. It is a document characterised by pluralism, child-centredness, methodological freedom, and organisational diversity. It reflects the general demands that society makes of preschool education, taking into account the child's interests.

A completely new element in the core curriculum is the image of the preschool and the image of the child. The image of the preschool determines its place, functions, objectives, principles, and tasks. In the definition of the objectives, the familiar goal of promoting the multifaceted, harmonious development of children and the unfolding of their personality is supplemented by "taking into account age and individual characteristics and different developmental rates (including the care of children with special educational needs)" (Government Decree of 137/1996 (VIII/28) on the publication of the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education). The addition of age and

individual characteristics to this goal aligns with the human rights and freedoms declared in the current Public Education Act (Act LXXIX of 1993 on Public Education), as well as with the pedagogical principles and the child's vision of the core curriculum. The latter explicitly emphasises that children have specific physical and psychological needs, which vary from age to age and from one individual to another. For the first time, the aim of preschool education is formulated so that it can be extended to children with special educational needs. Behind this humanist approach, there is a social concern about integrating people with disabilities into society and reducing their exclusion. Overall, the goal also reflects the valorisation of the unique personality of the child, the individual.

The general task of preschool education in this basic programme is to meet the physical and psychological needs of the preschool child, including:

- The development of a healthy lifestyle,
- To provide emotional education and socialisation, and
- Intellectual development and education.

The tasks in the different areas are defined in more detail in the document but in such a way as to ensure flexibility for each institution.

Introduced in 1996, it is Hungary's first content regulator of the preschool curriculum type. The Public Education Act required preschools to prepare a local programme based on the national programme by the autumn of 1998. This was a fundamental change from previous practice, but overall, it fitted in well with the decentralising tendencies of the period. The revision of the core curriculum took place first in 2009 and then in 2011. The features of the current legislation are summarised below.

The National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education Today

Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education defines that preschool educational work is carried out according to a pedagogical programme. It also states that preschools prepare their local pedagogical programme based on the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education). The law makes the two-level regulation clear but does not provide for the structure of local programmes. The rules on the content, preparation and use of documents defining the operation of educational institutions, including preschools, are set out in EMMI Decree No. 20/2012

(VIII. 31.) on the Operation of Educational Institutions and the Naming of Public Educational Institutions. The National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education is included in Annex 1 of Government Decree No. 363/2012 (XII. 17.), and the guidelines for the preschool education of nationalities are contained in EMMI Decree No. 17/2013 (III. 1.).

The National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education is a framework regulatory document that serves as a content guide for all preschools in Hungary. In addition to defining the current (age-appropriate) image of children and preschools, it sets out the basic principles of pedagogical work in Hungarian preschools. It contains the general tasks of preschool education, including developing a healthy lifestyle, emotional, moral and value-oriented community education, and implementing mother tongue and intellectual development and education. The section on the principles of the organisation of preschool life covers not only the staff and material conditions but also the relations within the preschool. The programme specifies the types of activity and the tasks of the preschool teacher in each of these areas. The most important and developmental activity of early childhood, 'play' is mentioned first among the activities and is the most effective means of preschool education.

Activities in preschool life:

- Play
- Poetry, storytelling
- Singing, music, singing games, children's dance
- Drawing, painting, pattern-making, handwork
- Physical exercises
- Active learning about the outside world
- Work-related activities
- Learning through activities.

Given its child-centred approach, the intention to develop personal competence is embedded in the programme, and expectations and guidelines to support development are also documented throughout. The authors of the programme state in the introduction that "preschool education should be aimed at promoting the full development of the child's personality" (Government Decree No. 363/2012 (XII. 17.) on the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education). The child's personality cannot be fully developed without developing the components of personal competence. These needs are already

reflected in the child's image and the image of the preschool, the latter also including the preservation and strengthening of the self-identity of children of ethnic origin and migrants.

One of the objectives of the preschool education process during compulsory preschool education from the age of three is to promote the child's social development. The chapter of the programme that focuses on supporting the development of social competence is consistent with the section on moral and value-oriented community education, but because of the community character of preschool education, tasks related to the development of social competence are systematically reflected in other chapters of the programme.

The chapter containing the implementation of the mother tongue, intellectual development and education focuses on the development of cognitive competences. Among the tasks of cognitive education, the regulatory document mentions the systematisation, expansion and practice of the child's spontaneously and systematically acquired experience and knowledge, as well as the development of cognitive abilities (perception, sensation, memory, attention, imagination, and thinking). In addition to the predominance of free play, most guidance on the development of the components of cognitive competence is provided in the sections on active learning about the outside world and learning through activities. In addition to playful, action-based learning, practical problem-solving is also included among the possible forms of learning. Mathematics education was still a separate educational area in the 1989 Early Years Education Programme, but in the current programme, it is part of the activities of active learning about the outside world: "In the process of learning about the environment, the child acquires mathematical experiences and knowledge and applies them in his/her activities." (Government Decree No. 363/2012 (XII. 17.) on the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education).

The core curriculum is very vague about the evaluation of preschool education and only contains references to it. In formulating the aim of preschool education, the programme's authors clearly state that the multifaceted, harmonious development of preschool children, the development of the child's personality and the reduction of disadvantages should consider the age and individual characteristics and different developmental rates. However, no guidance has been given on what can be used as a source of information to understand children and how their development can be characterised in relation

to themselves and society. In the section on the organisation of preschool life, there is a mention of the need to know children and to monitor their development, but reference is made only to the obligation to keep the "various" documents for this purpose. Explicitly, Sections 63, 93/A, and 173 of EMMI Decree 20/2012 (VIII. 31.) lay down the rules on the obligation to monitor progress, its written form, frequency and the content of the documentation kept (EMMI Decree 20/2012 (VIII. 31.) on the Operation of Educational Institutions and the Naming of Public Educational Institutions). The most specific expectation for assessment is contained in the last point of the sub-chapter of the basic programme on learning in activities as follows: "The preschool teacher shall support the development of the child's personality through personalised, positive assessment in the management of learning." (Government Decree No. 363/2012 (XII. 17.) on the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education).

The final part of the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education summarises the physical, mental and social development (maturity) needed for school entry at the end of preschool but does not include requirements.

The Road to Framework Regulation in Slovakia: The History of Content Regulation in Preschool Education

The beginnings of institutional preschool education in Slovakia date back to the 1950s (when the country was still part of Czechoslovakia). Crèches (which catered for children up to the age of 3) and preschools (which took children from 3 to 6) were run under strict state regulations. The beginning of independent preschool education in Slovakia dates back to the foundation of Slovakia (which became an independent state on 1 January 1993).

Historical Review

From the foundation of Czechoslovakia until 2013, twelve programmes for preschool education were published (Uváčková, 2013). The current state programme is, therefore, the thirteenth. The first centralised curriculum was developed in 1948. The Education Programme for Crèches and Preschools– Program výchovnej práce v jasliach a materských školách (Kolektív autorov, 1978), published in 1978, was in force until 1999. This document is regarded as the first qualitative attempt to regulate the content of preschool education as

a whole, and even regulated preschool education in independent Slovakia for 6 years after the breakup of Czechoslovakia. Based on this document, strict rules prevailed in preschools. There were two sessions a day in the morning, with strict time limits (usually 2x20/25 minutes), and frontal activities predominated. It is regrettable that this was the first and last state programme that the state considered important to publish in Hungarian. It was published in 1986 in the language of the Hungarian minority under the title "The Educational Programme for Crèches and Preschools" (in Hungarian: A bölcsődék és az óvodák nevelési programja).

This was replaced in 1999 by the Programme for the Education and Teaching of Children Attending Preschool – Program výchovy a vzdelávania detí v materských školách (Guziová et al., 2021), the first programme of its kind in independent Slovakia, a milestone in Slovakian preschool education, which, although based on the national and pedagogical traditions of the time, represented the most modern psychological approach to children at the time. The programme distinguished the following educational areas: physical education, work education, prosocial education, intellectual education, and aesthetic education. Within each of these areas, the content of preschool education was differentiated according to age. The document is characterised by gradually moving away from frontal activities towards group organisation. Play, morning exercise sessions, spending time outdoors, and didactic activities were the main features of the programme. The latter emerged as a new and hitherto unknown concept. The work of the preschool was planned based on the programme. The objectives and tasks were set by the preschool teacher according to the age of the children and selected from the programme. This programme is considered one of the best by teachers who have experienced the introduction of several programmes.

2008 brought about radical change with the reform of the school system and the introduction of the new Public Education Act. With the entry into force of the Public Education Act No 245/2008 (Zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z. o výchove a vzdelávaní (školský zákon) a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov, 2008), a two-level/bipolar, participatory management- curricular model, previously unknown in Slovakia, was introduced.

The 2008 reform brought preschools into the school system (level 0: ISCED 0) and introduced new (mainly foreign) terms into the professional vocabulary,

such as education, pre-primary education, educational programme, evaluation, and educational standards. The National Educational Programme was named ISCED 0 – 'The Child and the World' (Štátny vzdelávací program ISCED 0- 'Dieťa a svet') (National Institute for Education, 2008/ Štátny pedagogický ústav, 2008). The educational standards were identified in three main areas: psycho-motor, cognitive and socio-emotional, and integrated into four thematic areas: I am, People, Nature and Culture. The literacy standards were further divided into requirements (performance standards) and content standards. The radically different structure from the previous programme, the incoherence of the thematic units – competences – content units – cross-cutting themes (between which a link should have been found when planning), the obligation to operationalise the objectives linked to the performance standards in an illogical way, led to dissatisfaction among educators. As a result, chaos began to reign in both the planning and the implementation of activities.

The futile search for correlations, the chaotic use of concepts and the lack of professional guidance negatively influenced the programme's fate. We now know that most teachers considered the programme inadequate (Kaščák, 2013), which has also affected the quality of programmes at the institutional level. They were difficult to develop and lacked methodological support and guidance. In response to this sudden change, teachers had to develop their institutional programmes over the summer in order to have them ready by September. The main problem was the development of the curricular framework (učebné osnovy), a compulsory part of the institutional programme. The publication of the methodological guide/manual was delayed, as the teacher training (which only started in the autumn of 2008). However, the local-level programmes had to be ready by 31 August and the work under the new programme had to start from 1 September.

However, the biggest problem with the Public Education Programme of Pre-Primary Education was the lack of continuity between the different levels of institutional education (preschool and primary school). Professional criticism also affected this area. Research has also confirmed that teachers in the profession described this document as a chaotic, ill-conceived document that did not meet expectations and only complicated their work (Miňová, 2013). It is, therefore, fair to say that the 2008 state programme was one of the significant failures in the history of preschool programmes in Slovakia. Kaščák (2013)

points to the problem that standardisation was part of the Anglo-American culture until then and that it was not a European tradition, so the transition was not easy. This was compounded by inadequate training for teachers and delays in training and methodological guides. As a result, the period was experienced by preschool teachers as chaotic.

For the reasons mentioned above, the programme's creators initiated a revision in 2011. First, a professional discourse at the societal level was developed, involving professional organisations and inspired by comparative analyses of other countries to renew the highest curricula. Then, under pressure from the profession, a new programme was developed. The result was the new state curriculum (inovovaný Štátny vzdelávací program) in 2015, which was structured in a way that was completely different from its predecessor, retaining only the idea of educational standards, broken down into performance and content standards. The experimental testing of the new programme lasted one year (in the 2015/2016 school year) and involved 306 preschools. Several changes were made to the original document by the authors. Finally, after the pilot phase, the state curriculum that is still in use today was implemented in 2016.

The State Educational Programme for Pre-Primary Education Today

The upper level of the two-level curricular model based on standardisation is currently the State Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education (Štátny vzdelávací program pre predprimárne vzdelávanie v materských školách), developed by the National Institute for Education (Slovakian abbreviation: ŠPÚ). The new regulator entered into force on 1 September 2016, following the approval by the Ministry of Education on 6 July 2016. The second level is represented by the institutional (local) pedagogical programmes, which all institutions are obliged to develop in accordance with the law in force and the state curriculum.

The programme is also available in Hungarian, translated in 2019 by the Comenius Pedagogical Institute in Komárno, Slovakia. The Institute is a non-profit NGO supporting the professional development and training of Hungarian teachers in Slovakia. The proofreading was carried out by lecturers from J. Selye University in Komárom, Slovakia. "Through this programme, the state guarantees the quality of institutional preschool education in all preschools in

the network of schools and educational institutions in the Slovakian Republic" (State Educational Programme for Pre-Primary Education, 2019, p. 6).

The state programme is a framework regulatory document which must be applied in accordance with the current law on public education. It defines the basic state requirements for institutional pre-primary education and provides the basis for further levels of institutional education. It sets out the objectives and content of public pre-primary education. It provides the basis for establishing institutional (establishment-based) education and training programmes while ensuring the conditions for independent planning and implementation. It emphasises the role of pedagogical evaluation and stresses the need for inclusive education.

In Slovakia, the main goal of preschool education and teaching, as set out in the state curriculum, is to achieve the optimal level of cognitive, sensorimotor and social-emotional development that is the basis of school and social life. By completing the programme, children usually reach school readiness by the end of their final year of preschool, having acquired the skills and competences they will need throughout their lives.

Key competences covered by the programme:

- Communicative competences
- Mathematical, scientific and technological competences
- Digital competences
- Learning to learn, competences of problem-solving, creative- and critical thinking,
- Social and personal competences
- Civic competences
- Work competences.

Preschool education is divided into cultural areas. The highly detailed curricular content of the interpenetrative areas covers the entire content of pre-primary education. The following literacy areas (which are coherent with the literacy areas of the primary school) are further subdivided into units, sub-areas:

- Main objective is to develop the child's communicative competences at all language levels, using the strong influence of written language.
- *Mathematics and information management*: aims to provide the mathematical and information technology knowledge and skills that

underpin the mathematical thinking and competences to be developed at higher levels of literacy.

- *Man and nature*: its main objective is the early development of scientific literacy.
- *Man and society*: the main aim is to enable the child to find his/her way in his/her social environment and relationships in time, space, and social and human relations. It focuses, in particular, on the social environment and aims at pro-social education.
- *Man and the world of work*: the main objective is to develop the child's basic skills to enable him/her to carry out daily activities and to use the tools of everyday life.
- *Art and culture*:
    - Music education: the main objective is to develop the child's general musical abilities, skills and habits, which lay the foundation for later musical understanding.
    - Visual arts education: the main objective is to develop the child's imagination through the expression of simple visual arts through playful, creative activities with materials and tools, as well as the development of imagination, creativity and basic visual arts habits, skills and abilities.
- *Health and physical activity*: the main objective is to provide the basic information about the health while developing and improving the child's motor skills through appropriate physical exercises (State Educational Programme for Pre-Primary Education, 2019).

The specificities of each cultural area are presented in a multi-level breakdown. The structure of the curricular requirements is illustrated in Table 1, using the most structured field of education – Language and Communication – as an example.

Table 1. Structure of the curriculum requirements (State Educational Programme for Pre-Primary Education, 2019).

Cultural area	Sub-area	Sub-area unit	Sub-area unit branch
Language and communication	Spoken language	Articulation and pronunciation	
		Grammatical correctness and literary (standard) language variants	
		The rules of communication	
	Written language	Understanding the content, meaning and role of written language	Learning about the functions of written language
			Understanding the direct meaning of the text – vocabulary
			Understanding the indirect meaning of the text
			Knowledge of genres and signs of written language
		Understanding the formal features of written language	Printed forms and the use of books
			Phonological processes and the development of phoneme perception
			Fine motor conditions for writing

The programme's backbone is a triple unit of requirements – curricular content – assessment questions. The requirements set out the level of skills to be achieved by the end of preschool (as an output of pre-primary education). The curricular content provides guidance or methodological recommendations for preschool teachers. Finally, assessment questions, which appear alongside the skills to be acquired and the literacy content (literacy standards), are used as an internal assessment tool for institutions to monitor progress, plan more effectively, and support individual learning.

It is important to note that monitoring progress and its implementation and recording using the tools of pedagogical diagnostics was not compulsory until

2020 and was not part of the pedagogical documentation. However, from 2022, according to Government Decree No. 21/2022 (Decree on Pedagogical Documentation and Other Documentation), the teacher must make records within the framework of pedagogical diagnostics. However, there are currently no other conditions or restrictions in this respect (Vyhláška č. 21/2022 Ministerstva školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky zo 17. januára 2022 o pedagogickej dokumentácii a ďalšej dokumentácii).

The programme emphasises that the language of education in the Slovakian Republic's preschool network is the state language. Communication in Slovakia is also part of the educational activity in preschools with national and bilingual education. The main guidelines for communication in the state language in minority preschools are set out in a methodological guide issued by the National Institute for Education (Metodický list na osvojovanie štátneho – slovenského jazyka v materských školách s vyučovacím jazykom národnostných menšín, 2016).

Forms of activities of the preschool life based on the Slovakian programme:

- Games and activities freely chosen by the children
- Health promotion exercises
- Cultural activities
- Outdoor activities
- Lifestyle activities (National Institute for Education, 2016).

The teacher adapts the forms of activities to the current situation and the needs and interests of the children at his/her discretion.

Local Pedagogical Programmes

Local Pedagogical Programmes in Hungary

Based on the core curriculum, preschool teachers prepare local educational programmes or adapt existing ones. Regardless of which version a preschool prefers, the national basic programme for pre-primary education and the local pedagogical programmes must be coherent. Local education programmes at the institutional level, generally based on situation analysis, contain the educational concept, objectives and tasks of the preschool concerned and the values defining its educational principles. They also include measures to alleviate social disadvantages and activities linked to child protection, measures to

promote equal opportunities for children, forms of parent-child-educator cooperation, the principles of a healthy lifestyle and environmental education, and related programmes and activities. In the case of children with special educational needs, special development activities to reduce the disadvantages resulting from special educational needs are also part of the local educational programmes. The pedagogical programmes of pre-primary schools with ethnic preschool education have to provide tasks related to the cultivation of the culture and language of the ethnic group. In addition to the above, the local pedagogical programme details the content of development and describes the process of its development. It sets out the organisational limits and timeframes and the monitoring and evaluation system. It takes account of the material and human resources needed to implement the programme and organise the life of the preschool.

Local Pedagogical Programmes in Slovakia

According to the Act of the National Council of the Slovakian Republic No 245/2008 on Public Education, education in schools (from 2008, preschool is included) and educational establishments is based on educational programmes. Therefore, the educational programme must be prepared in accordance with the principles and objectives of education laid down in the Public Education Act. The educational programme is developed by the educational establishments of schools (school children's club, dormitory, leisure centre) and the teaching programme, by preschools and schools.

The curriculum for preschool education – either the institutional pedagogical programme or the school/preschool educational programme –is the regulatory document of the preschool concerned, which is based on the state educational programme and takes into account local specificities. From 1 September 2009, all preschools must have an educational programme, prepared by the community of preschool teachers, discussed by the pedagogical council and school council, and issued and published by the director of the institution.

The law also allows preschools to have an international programme as long as it is in line with the principles and objectives of the national law on public education. In this case, a written declaration of consent from the Ministry of Education is required. The preschool programme may also be a programme that has been approved as a result of pedagogical experiments. In all cases, however,

in Slovakia, the state and local pedagogical programmes must be coherent. Regardless of which version is preferred by a particular preschool, local programmes should be developed/implemented at the institutional level based on a situation analysis.

According to Article 7 of the Public Education Act 245/2008, the preschool educational programmes, in addition to the mission statement, the profile of the preschool and its objectives, include the name of the programme, the forms of education and teaching, the duration and the language of education. A system of assessment of children is also a compulsory element. Furthermore, the document must define the specific objectives and mission of the education and training and indicate the level of education attainable by completing all or part of the institutional curriculum (Zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z. o výchove a vzdelávaní (školský zákon) a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov, 2008. §. 7). In preschools where children with special educational needs are also educated, the relevant chapter may also be part of the programme (but is not obligatory).

The framework curriculum of the institution is a compulsory part of the educational programmes. However, the framework curriculum of preschools can be the same as the literacy standards for each area of the current state curriculum (requirements + curriculum content). The requirements are specified in the performance standards within each literacy area. In this case, referring to this in the institutional programme is sufficient.

According to Article 12 of the State Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education, the institutional programme must also include the starting points for planning. In this section, the preschool specifies the form in which it will plan and the compulsory content elements of the planning. The plans are usually based on adaptations of the performance standards (requirements) of the current state curriculum, which, in fact, implies the delimitation of the levels of skills to be acquired. In Slovakian preschools, teachers usually prepare weekly thematic plans or project plans.

The thematic or project plans include, in addition to specific objectives based on the corresponding level requirements, strategies, methods, activities (actions or curricular content), learning resources and forms of the organisation according to the weekly theme or project topic. The form and content of the plan are the competence of the preschool, and thus the plans of each institution may be completely different (Szabóová, in Orsovics et al., 2018).

In Slovakia, under current legislation, children aged 2 years can be admitted to preschool next to children aged 3-6, provided that the conditions are right. If the child is not ready for school even after the age of 6, the director of the preschool decides to extend compulsory preschool attendance based on a request from the child's legal representative and the submission of the necessary documents (psychological report and recommendation from the general practitioner). (Until 2021, when preschool attendance was not compulsory, it was the school director who postponed the start of compulsory school attendance.) Children with a decision may continue to attend preschool.

On successful completion of the final year of the preschool education programme, the child obtains a preschool qualification. The certificate of qualification is issued in the official language, or bilingually in the case of national preschools, which is compulsory from the school year 2021/2022 (previously, it was only issued at the parent's request). It is also necessary to mention the amendment of Law 245/2008 on public education for 2021, which entered into force in September 2021 and impacted the establishment of institutional pedagogical programmes. Not only did it change their structure slightly, but it also introduced the concept of individualised education and made it compulsory for children to attend preschool for one year before starting school in September 2021.

A Comparative Analysis of Preschool Curricula

Besides emphasizing the fundamental differences between the content of the regulatory documents in Hungarian and Slovakian preschool education, the common features of the programmes will be mentioned too.

The current National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education in Hungary entered into force on 1 September 2013, while the State Educational Programme for Preschool Education in Slovakia entered into force on 1 September 2016. The two programmes are compared based on the following criteria:

- Designation
- Length
- Structure and content
- Daily schedule and forms of activity
- Key competences

- Provision for children with special educational needs
- The role of play
- Physical activity and a healthy lifestyle
- Ethnic aspects
- Methodological freedom
- The relationship between national (core) programmes and institutional/local programmes.

Designation

In the case of the Hungarian programme, the name itself (National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education/Óvodai nevelés országos alapprogramja) reflects an educational focus. On the other hand, in the Slovakian programme, the name (State Educational Programme for Preschool Education/Óvodai nevelés állami oktatási programja) focuses on teaching, which may be related to the fact that in Slovakia, preschools are part of the school system.

Length

The difference in size of the two documents is striking and significant. The State Educational Programme for Preschool Education is ten times the size of the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education. Two-thirds of the 112-page Slovakain document is a set of standards and assessment questions in tabular form, developed on three levels, in which the triple unit of requirements – curricular content – assessment questions are presented within each cultural field. The 11-page Hungarian core document does not contain any requirements.

Structure and content

The Hungarian document is structurally divided into 6 main chapters whereas the Slovakian one is divided into 12. The common feature of the two programmes is that they contain requirements on the provision of staff and material conditions in preschools and the organisation of preschool life. In the Slovakian document, the latter is summarised as operational conditions. Both regulatory documents of a framework nature contain guidelines for the preparation of institutional pedagogical programmes. Both documents set out the characteristics of the types of activities, but the Hungarian programme also

describes the tasks of preschool teachers in relation to each activity. In the Slovakian programme, this part of the curriculum is more specific and detailed within each cultural field, which can be interpreted as methodological guidance for teachers. The two basic programmes are more similar in terms of principles, objectives and tasks, but there are also differences in content. In addition to setting out the principles, the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education allows for innovative approaches and ensures methodological freedom for preschool teachers. In the case of the Slovakian programme, the more rigid structure suggests the opposite.

The differences between the two programmes are substantial. The school leaving certificate for children who have completed preschool education appears only in the Slovakian document. There is no such document in Hungary. A specific feature of the Hungarian programme is the mention of the image of the child and the preschool, which also sets out the aims and principles of pre-primary education. In the Slovakian programme, only the graduating child's profile is available. The Hungarian document includes the principles of the organisation of preschool life among its principles whereas the Slovakian programme does not contain any principles or expectations in this respect. The fundamental difference in content is that the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education pays particular attention to the role of free play. In contrast, the State Educational Programme for Preschool Education places less emphasis on this area.

The Hungarian programme emphasises the importance of developing a healthy lifestyle within the tasks of preschool education and highlights its main guidelines. It also describes the focus of the implementation of emotional, moral and value-oriented community education, as well as of mother tongue and intellectual development and education. In the Slovakian programme, these tasks are incorporated in detail into the requirements for each field of cultural areas.

The two programmes define the characteristics of development by the end of the preschool years in very different ways. The Hungarian document summarises this briefly but comprehensively in Chapter VI of the government decree. The Slovakian programme defines it in much more detail, in the form of requirements within each cultural area. There is an annex to the programme in the form of methodological material (Adaptácia výkonových štandardov,

2016), which summarises the characteristics of development in the form of requirements, broken down into levels based on the age specificities of preschool children (with a focus on the stages of development based on the characteristics between 3-6 years). The Hungarian document does not include the learning outcome requirements nor the curricular content and assessment questions. The development of skills and competences is emphasised in both programmes, even if the expectations are defined differently.

Scrutinising the content of the programmes, it can be concluded that the name of the Slovakian programme is reflected in the content: education is less prominent than teaching. It can also be stated that the Hungarian programme is more child-centred and gives greater space for methodological freedom.

Daily schedule and forms of activity

The names of the forms of activity are entirely different in the two countries. While the Slovakian naming emphasises the formal aspect of the implementation of the activity, the Hungarian one stresses the orientation and content of the activity itself. As for correspondences, these designations reflect the content components of the Slovakian programme's cultural areas (e.g., poetry, storytelling = Language and communication; singing, music, singing games, children's dance = Music education; drawing, painting, pattern-making, handwork = Art education; exercises = Health and physical activity; active knowledge of the outside world = Man and nature and Man and society; work-related activities = Man and the world of work). It is noteworthy that in the Hungarian core curriculum, learning through activities is given special attention, and a special place is given to play.

In both programmes, the daily schedule is adapted to the child's needs and the different activities, taking into account local customs, needs and interests. The Hungarian programme draws attention to the importance of creating a harmonious balance between activities, bearing in mind the prominent role of play. The schedule is developed by the preschool teachers of the children's group. The Slovakian programme does not use the term weekly schedule.

Both programmes refer to the various mandatory documents that are used to plan preschool education and children's development. These are specified in other legislation. While the Hungarian document focuses on getting to know the children, monitoring their development and the related documentation, the

Slovakian document emphasises this in a completely different way. The diagnostic function is supposed to be served by the evaluation questions, although this is not explicitly stated in the documentation.

Key competences

In Hungary, the terminology of preschool education is not rigidly aligned with the conceptual framework of the national curriculum, so the concept of key competences is not explicitly included in the core programme. In contrast, the Slovakian document puts more emphasis on this by presenting some of the essential elements of competences transformed into requirements as if they were educational outcomes.

Provision for children with special educational needs

The guidelines for (co-)education and equal opportunities for children with special educational needs are summarised in a separate chapter of the Slovakian programme. In Hungary, the guidelines are contained in a separate law. Still, the core programme's definition of the aim also takes into account children with different developmental stages: "*The aim of preschool education is to promote the multifaceted, harmonious development of preschool children, the development of the child's personality, the reduction of disadvantages, taking into account age and individual characteristics and different developmental stages (including the care of children requiring special attention)"* (Gov. Decree 363/2012 (XII. 17.) on the National Core Programme of Preschool Education, Hungarian Gazette, 2012/171).

It also stipulates that – if the preschool educates a child with special educational needs – when preparing the pedagogical programme of the preschool, in addition to the Core Programme, the Guidelines for the Preschool Education of Children with Special Educational Needs (EMMI Decree 32/2012 (X. 8.) on the Guidelines for the Preschool Education of Children with Special Educational Needs, and the Guidelines for the School Education of Students with Special Educational Needs, 2012) must also be taken into account. As for further differences, equal opportunity measures and special development activities to reduce disadvantages resulting from special educational needs are compulsory elements of local preschool programmes in Hungary, unlike Slovakia.

The role of play

In Hungarian preschools, the play has a prominent role. The core programme stipulates that the predominance of free play in preschools should be emphasised. The priority given to play must be reflected in the preschool's daily schedule and in the organisation of playful activities. It stresses that the preschool teacher's conscious presence in the play process ensures that children's play unfolds in an experiential and immersive way. The preschool teacher achieves this through his/her supportive, stimulating and encouraging behaviour and indirect reactions, in addition to his/her activity in creating conditions. The Slovakian document contains only a few lines of a general description of the play.

Physical activity and a healthy lifestyle

The Slovakian curriculum defines these two areas as a unit within the cultural area of Health and Physical Activity. It describes its requirements and curricular content as is the case of the other areas. The Hungarian programme defines the development of a healthy lifestyle as a priority task of preschool education, the content of which is multifaceted in accordance with a holistic understanding of health. Physical exercise is included in this but also as a separate activity because of its importance for children's development.

Ethnic aspects

There is a significant difference in the language of preschool education. The Slovakian programme stipulates that the language of education in the Republic's preschool network is the official language of the state and that it is also compulsory for mother tongue education. The Hungarian Core Programme concerning the preschool education of children belonging to national minorities states that "the preservation, cultivation, strengthening, transmission, language education and the possibility of integration based on multicultural education must be ensured" (Government Decree No. 363/2012 (XII. 17.) on the National Core Programme for Preschool Education). In Hungary, the national minority preschools lay down in their local pedagogical programmes the tasks related to the cultivation of the language of the nationality. There are no other provisions concerning the language of preschool education.

Methodological freedom

Of the two programmes, the Hungarian document gives preschool teachers greater methodological freedom. Developmental psychology, didactic-methodological knowledge, regular renewal, and lifelong learning are the main building blocks of methodological freedom. Therefore, the role of modern training is also crucial in terms of methodological freedom. An analysis of courses shows that many of them organised for preschool teachers in Hungary are professionally high-quality methodological courses. In Slovakia, most training courses focus on acquiring theoretical knowledge or presenting legislation, mostly in the form of innovation and updating training (Pataki Tóth, 2021).

Examining the training courses accredited by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovakian Republic for the period 2010-2018 for regional education staff, we can see that very few of them provide opportunities to expand the methodological repertoire (Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu SR, 2020), and most of them are in the Slovakian language. This is why in Slovakia, NGOs often invite Hungarian-speaking preschool teachers to training courses organised for their Hungarian-speaking colleagues, who highly appreciate these methodological events.

In the questionnaire survey, 92% of the Hungarian-speaking teachers in Slovakia who took part in the research emphasised that during the training in their mother tongue, they had gained a lot of useful methodological knowledge that is also important for the cultivation of the mother tongue (e.g., learning methods of developing the mother tongue, working with literary works, possibilities of adapting fairy tales, opportunities of developing children with special educational needs, etc.). In their view, this was mainly because NGOs often asked Hungarian professionals to conduct the training, who focused more on methodology (Borbélyová & Orsovics, 2021). Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine and compare the training content and its impact on the development of teacher/professional competences in the two countries in the future.

The relationship between National (Core) Programmes and Institutional/Local Programmes

The basic programmes of both countries stipulate that preschool education can only be carried out based on an approved institutional programme that is

coherent with the core programme and can only be organised in the framework of activities that encompass the whole life of the preschool, with the full presence and involvement of the preschool teacher. However, the Slovakian document is more rigid. The Hungarian version is less restrictive, giving teachers greater space and freedom to plan local programmes, assuming they have a thorough knowledge of methodology, know the children, monitor their development, and make informed pedagogical decisions. The way in which this knowledge is acquired, and more broadly, how professional preparation takes place in the two countries – whether there are qualitative differences and whether this can have an impact on teachers' professional performance (and thus on children's development) – is a question that should be addressed in the context of teachers' professional (secondary and tertiary) training.

CONCLUSION

The way a country thinks about pre-primary education and how it is put into practice is largely determined by the compulsory documents that regulate the content of education. We believe that the 'know-how' of education has an impact on children's development. With this in mind, we thought to begin our explanation of the differences in the development of Hungarian pre-schoolers in Hungary and Hungarian preschool children in Slovakia by analysing the basic programmes of the two countries in order to highlight the similarities and differences in the central regulatory documents.

Our analysis reflects the differences in the development of preschools in the two countries, and the regulatory documents faithfully reflect this. The educational orientation of the programmes, rooted in their history of development, is clearly visible. A comparative analysis of the existing content regulations for preschools in Slovakia and Hungary reveals far more differences than similarities. For instance, the two documents reveal a significant difference in terms of approach, which may also have implications for the practice of educating and developing preschool children. We also see fundamental differences in thinking about children's activities (especially play), skill and ability development, and the transmission of literacy content, which need further exploration.

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