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Vplyv učiteľa na podporu písania začínajúceho školáka

The Teacher's Influence on the Writing Support of Beginning Schoolchildren

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Abstract

The research study is related to the period of initial writing in elementary school, which in the teaching of writing focuses on mastering the writing of graphic shapes, not written letters. This period is extremely important for the subsequent writing of complete graphemes, and thus also for the overall learning of the pupil. The research focuses on identifying the writing support of pupils after entering the first year of primary school, which is implemented by primary school teachers in Slovakia. In the study, we present selected research findings of quantitative research using a questionnaire in which 275 primary education teachers participated. The research findings present teachers' statements about supporting the student's writing based on knowledge of the current level of graphomotor development, which may or may not eliminate the student's writing difficulties. Based on this, the research findings initiated the need for a deeper investigation focusing on knowing and interpreting the relationships between the variables. Specific indicators on pedagogical decisions to support student writing identified by quantitative research create a range of topics for subsequent qualitative research.

Keywords: Teaching writing. The teacher. Student of the first year of elementary school. Writing support. Support techniques.

Introduction

Graphomotorics is co-created by a complex of psychomotor activities performed while drawing and writing, which are influenced by the level of physiological and psychological functions, specifically the components of motor skills in accordance with psychological development. Methodical preparation for writing in primary school begins with graphomotor training in kindergartens of children from the age of three (Šmelová et al., 2012; Hudecová et al., 2021). Developing graphomotor skills in the preschool period creates a starting point for fulfilling one of the basic goals of primary education, which is to teach students to write and read.

Support in teaching writing

Writing is a skill that requires not only technical and mechanical mastery of the activity, but especially the psychomotor prerequisites of a particular student. The starting point in the support of initial writing is to prepare such learning tasks that take into account the abilities of each student. If the student should be motivated and have confidence in learning to write (as well as learning in general), it will not help him if he is only encouraged while writing by the teacher. The student needs to experience success based on his own experience in learning (Saunders, 2012). If the student convinces himself that he can handle the learning task assigned by the teacher, he realizes what he has learned and is motivated to learn. Therefore, the teacher should differentiate the learning tasks based on the knowledge of the individual students and accordingly choose the learning tasks with regard to the development level of the student's graphomotor skills.

In the support of writing, it is necessary to take into account the regularities of psychological and physical development of the preschool and early school years, due to the findings of the performed diagnostics. Pedagogical diagnosis is a necessary professional activity for the teacher, on the basis of which he identifies the level of the student's development, which enables him to plan and organize teaching accordingly. Individualized diagnosis is the starting point for choosing suitable procedures and activities with an emphasis on the internal motivation and progress of each student. Grizzle & Simms (2009) emphasize that if the earliest possible support focused on deficient areas of graphomotor skills is ensured, the support implemented in the early phase has fundamental importance for the student. In the period of preparation for writing complete graphemes, it is therefore desirable to carefully assess the level of graphomotor development of each student, so that the teacher's interventions are effective and the student is successful in the subsequent phase of learning to write.

Quantitative research

The starting point for the investigation of the issue in question are the research findings from the research that we carried out in 2018 and 2021 with kindergarten teachers. Research findings indicate that "traditional" understandings of developing graphomotor skills persist in the Slovak educational practice of pre-primary education. This is connected with frontally implemented activities of a predetermined sequence in the selection of graphic shapes and uniform way of representing them, usually on the basis of pre-marked graphic shapes in worksheets. We did not identify an individualized approach in the sense of a differentiated curriculum in the conducted research. Based on this, we were

interested in how initial writing support is implemented for pupils after entering the first year of primary school.

The methodology of quantitative research with the corresponding design was preferred for processing the issue. The used research tool was a non-standardized questionnaire. Its final form was preceded by a survey and preliminary research. Several answers obtained from the survey were transformed into alternatives to the menu of answers to the items of the designed questionnaire. Subsequently, a pre-research verification of the questionnaire took place in the form of an interview, so that we could directly argue the wording of the items together with the respondents of the pre-research.

The questionnaire contained 12 items, which were designed in such a way to find out the orientation of the respondents in the issue of developing graphomotor skills and supporting students' writing, but also certain preferences related to the teaching of writing, especially the form of writing support. In order to clearly establish the preferred opinions, we limited the number of possible answers in some selected items. All items were formulated in such way that we accept the cognitive level of difficulty in relation to the issue in question. The content concept of the questionnaire items represented an entry to uncovering the facts and preferences of the issue at the level of pedagogical thinking and pedagogical-didactic action in supporting the writing of beginning schoolchildren.

Based on the above, the research goal focused on identifying and interpreting the writing support of a student with different levels of graphomotor skills in the period of preparation for writing graphemes. Research questions related to the goal were focused on selected didactic processes and had the following form: What does the teacher consider important in the development of the student's graphomotor skills during the period of preparation for writing graphemes? What support options does the teacher prefer in case of writing difficulties?

The subjects of the research were teachers who worked in the elementary year of elementary school in various elementary schools in Slovakia. Specifically, these were elementary schools in the Bratislava and Trenčín regions. A total of 275 primary education teachers with different lengths of teaching experience in the first year of primary school participated in the research.

Analysis and interpretation of research findings

When interpreting the research findings, we evaluated each item separately by accepting the methodological procedure of evaluating the questionnaire. In the presented study, we present selected items and their interpretation, which are linked to specific pedagogical-diagnostic and

subsequent pedagogical-didactic decisions of the teacher in teaching and supporting writing.

Chart 1: Reason for postponing the start of compulsory school attendance

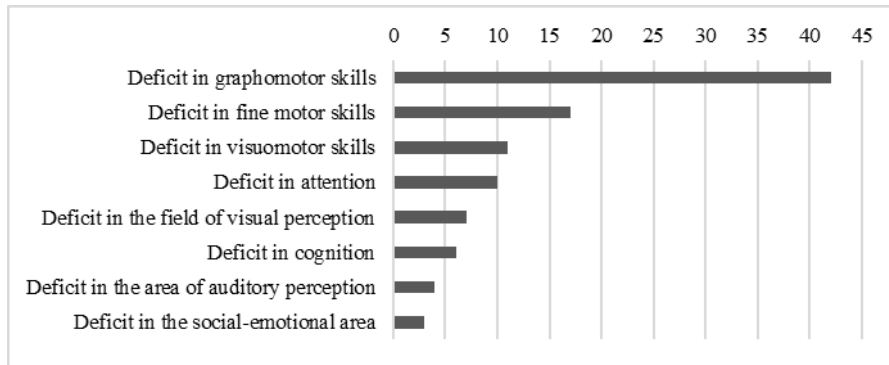
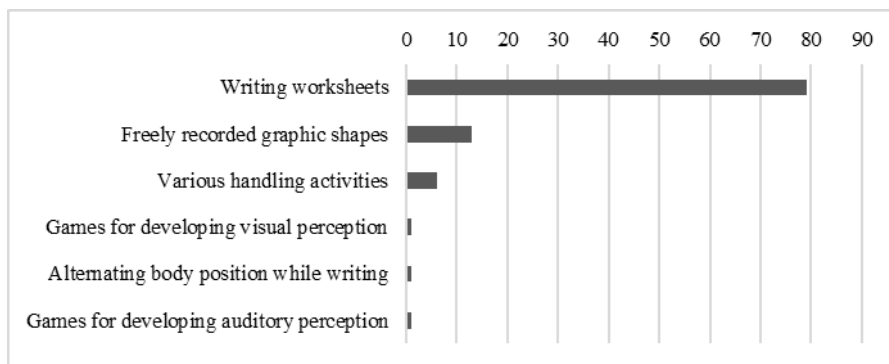


Chart 1 presents the findings about the reasons for the delayed start of compulsory school attendance, which result from the conclusions of the experts of counseling facilities. Based on their recommendations, the child's entry into primary school is delayed by one year. The most common reason for the postponement of compulsory school attendance is the unpreparedness of pupils in the field of graphomotor skills, as stated by up to 88 respondents. The insufficient level in the field of fine motor skills, visuomotor skills, attention, visual and auditory perception follows with a significant distance, which represent those areas of psychomotor skills that have a direct impact on the level of graphomotor skills. Based on this, the complexity of graphomotor skills, in terms of its individual indicators, represents the most fundamental deficit of school readiness and the reason for delaying the start of compulsory school attendance. Defined deficit areas for the teacher represent an opportunity to focus on immediate support, because the diagnosis by experts has a specific area that the teacher can develop in a targeted manner. We assume that in educational practice, the development of graphomotor skills and the support of writing does not concern only the kindergarten teacher. Diagnosed weaknesses can also be present in a pupil after entering primary school, when targeted support is already implemented by the primary school teacher.

Chart 2: Preferred learning tasks and activities in support of initial writing



In chart 2, we present an overview of the most preferred teaching aids and writing support situations used by teachers in the preparatory period. A surprising finding is the statement of 198 respondents who declare that they consider workbooks to be an adequate way of developing graphomotor skills and supporting pupils' writing in the preparatory period. This answer may (or may not) be related to the fact that the workbooks are immediately available to teachers, as they are part of the didactic means of individual writing concepts used in elementary schools. If the teacher implements writing support by using assignments in workbooks, he should accept several points of view that are related to the learning tasks in the workbooks. The choice of topic and learning task, the interest of the students, the level of graphomotor skills and the frequency of using worksheets must be respected. The teacher should always consider the difficulty of the learning task and create a learning offer by choosing a task in the worksheet that corresponds to the student's developmental level (Lipnická, 2019, Magová, 2023). Another way to develop graphomotor skills and support writing in the preparatory period is to record graphic shapes on a free surface. This method is suitable for the support of initial writing because the students are gradually prepared for writing in template notebooks and have the opportunity to automate their movement when writing graphic shapes by repeatedly recording them on a free surface. The free recording of the graphic shape also contributes to freeing the hand and confidence in creating lines. We also consider the implementation of various manipulative activities, including games, which significantly contribute to the development of fine motor skills, which has a positive effect on the level of the student's graphomotor skills, as a suitable way to support writing. Visual and auditory games, including alternation of body position while writing, are represented in the minimum amount of implemented activities supporting writing.

Chart 3: Deficient areas, functions, habits diagnosed in graphomotor skills

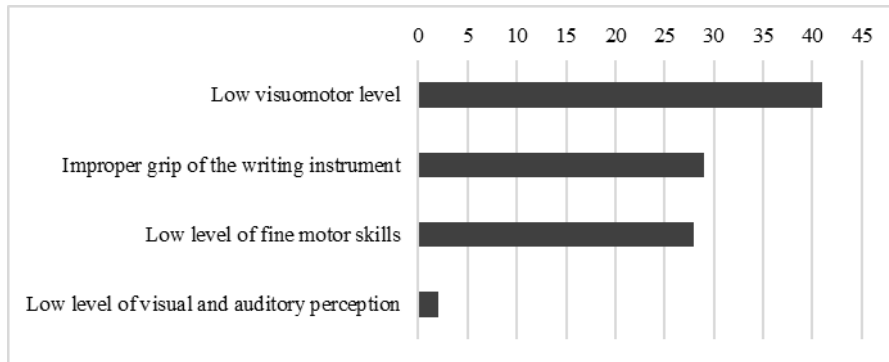


Chart 3 presents the respondents' opinions on which areas, functions or writing habits the teacher diagnoses as deficient in the preparatory period. The respondents consider the low level of visuomotor skills to be the most deficient area. Undersized abilities in the area of visuomotor coordination can be manifested in the fact that movements during writing are imprecise. The problem can also be identified in the fact that the distance and direction are insufficiently estimated, for example, the student has a problem with guiding his hand when recording a graphic shape or later also letters. The level of visuomotor skills is influenced by developmental factors, but its development is possible through activities that can have the character of games without a graphic tool in a limited space, movement in space along a marked line, motivated hand movements (Kováčová, 2018). Improper grip of a writing instrument is also considered a significant deficiency in the field of graphomotor skills. The correct grasp of the graphic tool is a prerequisite for fluent writing. The shape of the graphic material, namely triangular pencils, crayons or various triangular-shaped attachments can help to eliminate the wrong grip. However, it happens that, despite the appropriate selection of a graphic tool, not every student may have mastered the correct grip of the graphic tool. In such a case, we recommend practicing the grip of the graphic tool on an individual basis and distinguishing whether the student has a fixed, incorrect grip, or the incorrect grip is related to an insufficient level of fine motor skills. Subsequently, the teacher implements support or correction. One of the possibilities of supporting the correct grip of a graphic tool is the development of fine motor skills and targeted stimulation of the three fingers necessary for holding a graphic tool, which focuses on practicing the palms, fingers and pinch using commonly available materials and aids (Mlčáková, 2009). However, the technical and hygienic requirements of writing require, in addition to a relaxed grip of the graphic tool, other, no less important requirements, which are the correct sitting positions when writing and the position of the notebook on a table. It is true that all the mentioned

requirements have a significant impact on the writing process and the quality of the writing itself (Fasnerová, 2018, Magová, 2023). The student learns the position of the paper or notebook in the desired rotation or orientation based on a demonstration and subsequent immediate feedback from the teacher, because the student does not master this habit. Technical-hygienic habits are gradually fixed and automated among students, and the preparatory period is usually very intensively focused on creating the right habits that should be followed when writing. When writing, approximately five hundred muscles are activated, which is related to the overall level of gross and fine motor skills. Insufficiently developed fine motor skills are the reason for the low level of graphomotor skills, but it is also a frequent reason for delaying the start of compulsory schooling. Its development is possible through manipulative, creative and self-service activities. Identifying the deficit area, which is associated with difficulties in writing, is the starting point for the implementation of subsequent intervention, in the sense of targeted support. We are aware that deficits in graphomotor skills can be influenced by several interrelated factors. However, our intention was to find out the area or function that is most often identified by the respondents in diagnosing the level of graphomotor skills. Based on this, the respondents had to indicate only one, from their point of view, primarily deficient area in the students' graphomotor skills.

Chart 4: Writing support technique

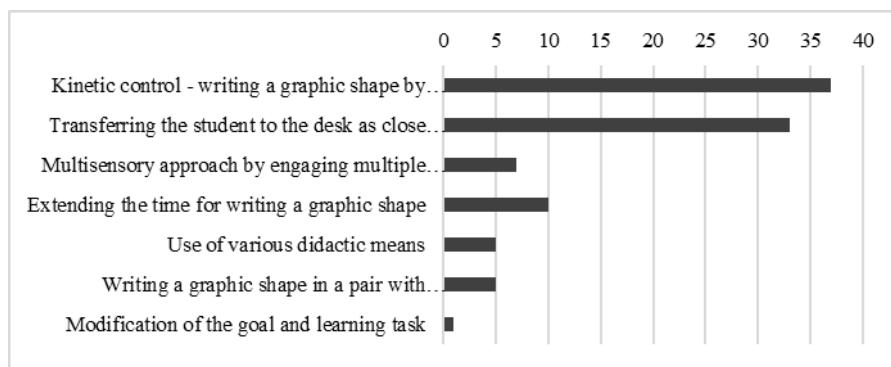


Chart 4 approximates an effective technique of supporting writing for a student with writing difficulties, which the teacher applies in practice. The most frequently used way of supporting writing, when the student is unable to write down the graphic form, is kinetic control, i.e. guiding the student's hand by the teacher. A non-standard way of support is the possibility of immediate control of writing, which makes it possible to choose a place in the desk that is as close as possible to the teacher in the classroom. We consider immediate control, possibly also feedback of the student's writing, but especially a possible correction, which the teacher can immediately make in this case, as appropriate.

An acceptable method of individualized support in writing is also a multisensory approach, but also an extension of the writing time for a student who cannot write at the same pace as other students. Less frequent methods of individualized support are the use of various didactic means, the possibility of writing in a group or in pairs and in adjusting the target and content requirements, adapting the difficulty of writing graphic form. If we should evaluate all the approaches offered in the mentioned item, each of them is an opportunity to accept the heterogeneity of the class in the sense of an individualized approach in supporting the student's writing.

Discussion

Based on the research findings from the questionnaire, we identified attributes presenting pedagogical-didactic decisions aimed at determining the student's current development and the subsequently implemented writing support. The aim of the research was to find out the current state of the issue in question, not the relationships between the identified variables (Ondrejko, 2007). Based on the research findings, we conclude that the research goal was achieved. Identified form of writing support in the preparatory period, when students record graphic elements and not complete graphemes, based on several indicators we identified the preferred procedures and pedagogical-didactic decisions of the teachers of the research group. The generalizability of the approximated research results is tied to the available and deliberate selection of the research set, therefore we do not allow ourselves to generalize the findings.

Conclusion

The researched issue related to the pedagogical and didactic erudition of the teacher is current, but it requires even more attention in the form of follow-up research. This is related to the fact that the period of preparation for actual writing is an important stage for the pupil at the beginning of compulsory schooling. If a pupil with difficulties in writing simple letter elements represented by graphic shapes is not provided with adequate individualized support, his chances for more challenging writing and the associated overall learning are limited in advance. The individualized approach of the teacher and the differentiation of learning tasks in learning to write have certain benefits even for a student with a low level of graphomotor skills to optimally master the preparatory period of writing.

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