

INDIVIDUALIZATION IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING

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The study is a partial output of the Kega project no. 0026UK-4/2021 Preventive strategies of specific learning disabilities in terms of graphomotor skills in preschool age.

Abstract: The study shows research findings that focus on identifying the individualization in the teaching of writing in the first grade of primary school. The research team consists of primary school teachers. The indicators reveal strategies to support writing of learners who face writing difficulties.

Keywords: writing, primary education, individualization in teaching, primary school teacher.

1 Introduction

Graphic expression is a natural part of a child's development, which is not only a sought-after activity and an opportunity to create something, but also a way of expression. Graphomotorics, which manifests itself in drawing and initial writing already in preschool age, is preparation for mastering the skill of writing in school. In preschool and early school education, the level of graphomotor skills is considered one of the predictors of the success of writing (and the related complex learning of the student), or on the contrary, it indicates the possible risks and difficulties that writing can bring to the student. The basic goal of language teaching is the acquisition of writing, as a basic tool of literacy, a means of understanding and expression (Belešová & Szentesiová, 2017).

2 The sequence of individualization in the development of graphomotor skills

Pedagogical diagnosis is a necessary professional activity for the teacher, based on he identifies the level of the student's development. A prerequisite for the development of graphomotor skills and support for writing is taking into account the regularities of psychological and physical development in the pre-school period and the beginning of younger school age, in view of the findings of the student's diagnosis (Fasnerová, 2018). Diagnosing handwriting and the writing process by the teacher focuses on identifying and evaluating the level of graphomotor development, possible difficulties in writing.

Subsequently, the teacher has the opportunity to plan and organize the educational process in such a way that the progress of each learning individual is ensured. The sequence of implementation of individualized graphomotor support can be based on a three-level approach (Berninger et al., 2006). A three-level approach not only to support writing, but also as part of the intervention for the student's difficulties in graphomotor expression begins with diagnosis and subsequent intervention. The first level of support focuses on performing a screening so that the teacher can determine the level of graphomotor skills of all students. In the second level of support, the teacher specifically develops deficit areas in children who, based on screening, have demonstrated a reduced level of graphomotor skills. The third level of support applies to children with significant problems, where the teacher's support is not enough, and a specific intervention provided by a professional employee, a special educator, or a psychologist is necessary. Chung & Patel (2015) recommend that in the case of diagnosing a student with learning difficulties (including writing difficulties) all information related to findings should be accepted, which include cumulative, normative, but also anecdotal and observed data from all persons who come to contact with the student. This means that the aspect of diagnosis in the form of an unofficial, non-standardized finding and assessment of the pupil's

difficulties, including in the field of graphomotor skills, which is processed by the teacher himself, is of particular importance in the process of supporting learning to write.

2.1 Writing support

Adequate assessment of the level of graphomotor skills plays an important role in the training of graphic shapes, but it also makes sense as a prevention of difficulties related to developmental learning disorders in the field of graphomotor expression. Grizzle & Simms (2009) emphasize that if support is provided as early as possible aimed at deficient areas of graphomotor skills, early intervention has significant significance for the student and is considered a valuable benefit. We consider the earliest possible diagnosis and subsequent individualized approach to be a fundamental factor in supporting a student with difficulties in graphomotor expression, which may not (but may) be related to a developmental learning disability. In addition to recognizing and identifying expressions with subsequent support, early support for students with difficulties in graphomotor skills is also linked to the acceptance of didactic principles, which the teacher should accept as a starting point when applying support techniques (Chung & Patel, 2015):

- individualize and differentiate the curriculum - start with an activity in which it is assumed that the student will be successful,
- make graphic recordings regularly and for a reasonable amount of time, do not overload the student,
- not to focus the curriculum on tasks that require only graphic recording, but also to create alternative recording options, such as covering patterns, recording in sand, modeling, cutting out, gluing graphic shapes,
- choose games using different materials, especially with a focus on developing areas that are weakened, for example visual and auditory perception, spatial orientation, right-left orientation, attention, fine motor skills, sensorimotor skills.

3 Methodology

The research intention linked to the issue of the solved grant was a natural outcome of the investigation, which in the presented study is related to the didactic aspects of individualization and differentiation applied within the subject Slovak language and literature, specifically in the teaching of elementary writing in the preparatory period, i.e., in the period when the students in the first year are preparing to write the written form of graphemes. The research objective was an effort to identify the aspects of teachers' actions in teaching writing and, in particular, the support of this process in the elementary year.

A qualitative research methodology with a corresponding design was preferred for processing the issue. The decision to carry out a qualitative study was related to the fact that we were investigating opinions and attitudes that could not be counted or expressed in percentage terms.

The subjects of the research were 14 primary education teachers who worked in the elementary year in a fully organized elementary school in the Bratislava, Trenčín and Košice regions. The collection of research data took place in the period September 2020 - February 2021.

The research method was an unstructured interview, where the goal of the research was important for us and the identified variables from the conducted research probes, which represented the supporting topics for the interview. For this reason, we asked the participants about the principles, procedures and techniques of developing graphomotor skills and supporting writing in the preparatory period. The area of interest was also directly related to identifying what the teacher emphasizes as important in targeted writing support, which is connected with the necessity of individual diagnosis, knowledge and application of specific

options for writing support, and possible intervention by the teacher. We asked the participants direct open questions regarding the prepared topics and then also regarding the specific situation that was created during the interview. To obtain the required answers in order to understand the aspects of teachers' actions, each interview had a different duration. Some participants freely followed up on the content of the topic in the interview and spontaneously talked about their own pedagogical and didactic experiences. We used an audio recorder to record the responses. Based on the digital recording, we then created a partial transcription. The transcript was the basis for further analysis. The research subjects were confronted with the transcripts of the interviews. We continuously analyzed the investigation of the issue and based on the induction of repeated didactic phenomena, after reaching saturation, we decided on the number of participants in the qualitative research.

We conceived the research objective in the form:

- Identify and interpret strategies for developing graphomotor skills and supporting the writing of students with different levels of graphomotor skills in the period of preparation for writing graphemes.

Considering the research objective, we defined the research question that formed the core of the research project:

- By which procedures and means does the teacher attribute didactic significance when developing graphomotor skills and supporting writing in the period of preparation for writing?

When processing the research material, in the first step, we analyzed the research data based on the transcript of all interviews through open coding, as an initial identification of structures that are directly related to the research questions. With open coding, we focused on searching, comparing, categorizing and conceptualizing the data by creating conceptual labels. Coding was the basic mechanism for transforming structured data into a professional context. Working with the text revealed several codes, which we gradually integrated into categories by dividing them into groups. The codes in the groups had to have identifiable relational ties and connections in the characteristics of the monitored issue.

When determining the names of the categories, we were based on the nature of the corresponding codes so that the name of the category was abstract and represented the essence of each assigned code. Induced categories (developing graphomotor skills, diagnosis, writing support, limits in writing support) and identified relationships between categories, which arose on the basis of a detailed and repeated analysis of the research data, made it possible to interpret the research findings.

4 Discussion

In the study, we do not present the interpretation of the individual induced categories and the relational links of the corresponding codes, but we approach concrete strategies for the individualization of writing support, which synthesize the research findings in the form of a research theory.

We present the research theory by linking subjective opinions in the confrontation of relevant professional sources and with examples of research data - specific actions and intentions in teaching writing of students based on the statements of research subjects. Based on the fact that it contains transparent samples of research data, the research theory declares the correctness of the processing of research data in case it was not described from a subjective point of view, but contains an interpretation of opinions, decisions, actions, but also certain intentions of the participants that were identified in the research material. Participants' statements are marked in the form: (P1, 100) so that it is possible to clearly identify the participant and his statement in specific parts of the processed transcript.

We have divided the induced strategies of individualization of writing support into two subcategories, while one group represents possibilities for the student's writing, in the sense of progress in writing, and the other group of strategies has the character of limiting factors of learning to write.

Strategy of individualization in material, time, organizational adjustment of teaching

Individualization should represent a progressive form of education, which is a way of differentiating teaching while maintaining class heterogeneity, but with realized internal, content and methodical differentiation that respects the individuality of each student (Průcha et al., 2013). We consider the aspect of time adjustment for students who need more time when writing graphic shapes, we also consider an extremely suitable way of respecting the individual characteristics of the student, which have an impact on the gradual elimination of the slow pace of writing. The modification of the learning task is not represented in the application of individualization in the writing of graphic shapes in a form that would clearly declare the principle of individualization.

Sample from research: *I approach students who have problems with writing individually. The smarter students, in order not to get bored and not disturb their classmates, have at their disposal the solution of various tasks, supplementary questions, and puzzles. In this way, I create space for myself when I can devote myself to weaker students. I do it in such a way that they finish what they missed and I don't have to modify their learning tasks. Many times it is enough if I give them more time to write down the graphic shapes. But sometimes I also meet students where extending the time to write down the correct form is not enough, in which case I make writing a little easier for them. It is not very possible, because everyone has to learn to write. (P9, 755)*

An important part of the teaching was the change of the activities and the position of the place where the individual activities were carried out, which we evaluate as extremely appropriate, because the concentration of attention is low in the student in the first year. The change in the organizational arrangement of students in the classroom is also related to the application of individualization in the teaching of writing. In addition to the most frequently implemented form of writing, which is sitting at a desk, we identified writing at the blackboard and on the floor, but also the implementation of group writing.

Sample from research: *I use various material means, especially trays with sand, modeling clay or ordinary laces. In this way, students learn to shape a graphic shape. They know that if they don't like the shape, they can repeat the activity several times and have no fear of failure. This procedure has worked well for me if the student has a problem with both writing down and memorizing the graphic shape. (P9, 765) Alternating between static and dynamic activities and creating space for relaxation is very important for pupils in the preparatory period. I do it in such a way that if the students write for a long time, I offer them plasticine or a construction kit. It is an excellent way to take care of mental hygiene and ensure subsequent concentration of attention. I also realize that both activities develop fine motor skills, but also other areas of graphomotor skills, which has a positive effect on writing. (P8, 750)*

Strategy of individualization of writing support implemented by a teaching assistant

Porozumenie individualizácie je participantom zrejme, no túto možnosť v základných školách nemajú zabezpečenú všetci žiaci, ktorí potrebujú podporu pri ťažkostiach v písaní. Prítomnosť asistenta učiteľa je chápaná v zmysle podpory začlenenia žiakov, ktorí potrebujú individuálny a individualizovaný prístup, ktorý im asistencia umožňuje (Kováčová, 2019).

Sample from research: *If the school is staffed, for each class it has a personal student assistant or teacher's assistant who is dedicated to such a student who has various problems, which is*

also the case with problematic writing. For example, the teacher's assistant in my class pays particular attention to the correct grip. She is therefore devoted to pupils who have a problem with holding a pencil. She does exercises and games with them, where the students mainly manipulate and shift small objects. (P2, 265)

Strategy of individualization in adjusting time, but with an increase in writing for the student

As a limiting strategy for the individualization of writing support, we evaluate the presence of procedures where the participant creates space for the student to finish writing the graphic form, but at the same time conditions it by giving the student more written tasks than those students who write graphic shapes faster. After entering the first year of elementary school, the continuous recording of graphic elements and then the first letters during the lesson should not exceed ten minutes (Babiaková, 2019). The form of writing support, which the participant considers to be the optimal way of individualized writing support based on the example presented, is not suitable for the student, because the mastery of recording the graphic shape by the student, who has a slower writing pace, will not be removed if he repeatedly writes the graphic shape in the notebook. The mentioned form of writing support can demotivate and overload the student. It is related to the unfinished ossification of the pupil's wrist bones during the period of entry into elementary school. Based on this, according to Doležalová (2010), the student should only carry out graphic activities that are not burdensome and do not last too long.

Sample from research: *I work individually with a student who has problems with writing. I have adapted learning materials and we use different worksheets and learning tasks. I leave him more time to practice graphic shapes and therefore he has more exercises to practice writing than pupils who have no problem with writing.* (P6, 615)

Strategy without individualization - support of writing with frontal activities

Uvedené vyjadrenia sme zaznamenali vo viacerých dátach subjektov výskumu, čo nás vedie k presvedčeniu, že učitelia dokážu identifikovať ťažkosti žiaka, no možnosť k individualizácii vo výučbe písania nedokážu realizovať. Na základe toho realizujú podporu písania frontálnymi činnosťami, ktoré individualizáciu úplne vylučujú.

Sample from research: *It is not in my power to devote myself to a pupil who is fast, but also to one who is slow. This is not possible in a class with many students. That's why I try to find a golden middle path so that every student can learn to write. I cannot approach students individually and differentiate activities, because I would not have time to do it. Therefore, I try to do such activities that contribute to the elimination of difficulties with all students.* (P7, 445)

Based on the approximation of the mentioned strategies, we tried to create an explanatory theory about how teachers implement individualization in the teaching of writing in the first year of elementary schools in Slovakia, which was created through a detailed and reverse content analysis of research data. The teacher's strategies with an emphasis on methodological procedures and didactic means, which are considered important in the support of writing, formed the basic framework of the conceptualization of induced teacher's strategies, which are carried out by teachers in the preparatory period of writing. Strategies as possibilities and limits in the teaching of writing, due to the application of an individualized approach to the student, have significant characteristic descriptions supplemented by samples of the participants' expressions.

At the end of the presented research theory, we would like to state that the established research goal: "Identify and interpret strategies for developing graphomotor skills and supporting the writing of pupils with different levels of

graphomotor skills in the period of preparation for writing graphemes" was achieved.

We will also support the fulfillment of the research goal by answering the research question:

- By which procedures and means does the teacher attribute didactic significance in the development of graphomotor skills and writing support in the period of preparation for writing?

When formulating the answer, we were based on the interpretation of research findings in the formulation of the identified phenomenon of developing graphomotor skills and writing support in the elementary grade, with the identification of frontally realized writing support, which has the character:

- repetitive rituals when practicing writing each graphic shape,
- repeated recording of learned graphic elements at the beginning of each lesson,
- motivated warm-ups of the fingers and the whole hand,
- compliance with the hygienic and technical requirements of writing.

The didactic significance of individualization and differentiation in the teaching of initial writing is applied by teachers less often than frontal support in the teaching of writing. An individualized approach in support of writing to a specific student was implemented by using one of the options for individualization, namely in the selection of different materials, aids, tools and the way of recording graphic shapes, the progress of the learning activity, adjusting the time of writing, or changing the organization of the environment.

5 Conclusion

The realized research and especially the research findings open up opportunity for us to further investigate the questioned issue. Even though the presented research findings are linked to a specific research set, they enable the creation of an image that reveals the possibilities, but also the limits of the teacher's professional activity in the individualization of student writing support.

Based on the statements of the research subjects and their professional involvement, it is clear that the research intention touches on a current topic, in which the awareness of the validity of developing graphomotor skills and writing support resonates in the targeted and as early as possible elimination of pupils' writing difficulties. Already in the preparatory period, when students record the elements of written letters in the form of various graphic shapes, we encounter the fact that some students have significant problems and the usual teaching strategies are not enough for them. Therefore, the teacher should not underestimate the problems in the student's preparation for writing and expect that the situation will improve without the support provided. The writing of graphic shapes is extremely important and specifically focused for the subsequent writing of graphemes. Wildová (2002) emphasizes that some teachers underestimate the importance of the preparation period, which is counterproductive for the student in terms of subsequent writing. If a student with difficulties in writing simple elements of letters represented by graphic shapes is not provided with adequate individualized support during preparation for writing graphemes, his chances for more challenging writing of graphemes, words, sentences and the associated overall learning are limited in advance.

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