

EMERGENT LITERACY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF GRAPHOMOTOR SKILLS IN CHILDREN IN PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION THROUGHT EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING

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Abstract:

Background: In recent years, pedagogical practice has increasingly emphasized that children should acquire new knowledge, skills, and experiences through their own activities and experiences, and that they should have space for self-realization, self-expression, and self-actualization. **Methods:** In this paper, we highlight the importance of emergent literacy and the development of children's graphomotor skills through the application of innovative and activating methods in creative educational activities. **Results:** We present practical examples of working with children, where we develop graphomotor skills through the application of innovative activating methods, experiential learning, and their own activity as part of the daily activities of children in kindergarten, which are good preparation for writing. **Conclusion:** The findings suggest that the use of innovative and experiential teaching methods significantly contributes to the development of graphomotor skills and supports children's readiness for the process of learning to write in primary education.

Keywords: emergent literacy; graphomotor skills; written language; innovative and activating methods

Introduction

The pre-primary period is an important milestone in a child's life. It is considered an extremely important period because it shapes their future. Institutional pre-primary education in kindergartens is closely linked to family upbringing. School enters a child's life and prepares them with the necessary skills to be culturally literate. The development of communication skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) is important, and these skills are often combined in the planned educational process. According to V. Trubíniová (2011), pre-primary education is the gateway to lifelong learning, ensuring a smooth transition for children from the family world to the world of society, from a playful childhood to systematic education [13]. Through intentional pre-primary education, it supports children's personal development in the intellectual, physical, socio-emotional, moral, and aesthetic areas, develops knowledge, skills, and abilities, and shapes values and attitudes in accordance with their individual and age characteristics.

The literacy of the population is considered one of the basic indicators of a nation's education and economic development, which is why it is often referred to as a civilizational phenomenon. Literacy is one of society's greatest achievements and a sign of civilization; it helps us understand, connect, and acquire information [5]. Pre-primary education prepares children for entry into primary school. Great emphasis is placed on emergent literacy, as graphomotor skills are one of the criteria for assessing children's school readiness. Part of this preparation is to develop graphomotor skills, which are basic skills for early writing. It is up to the teacher to decide what motivating activities to propose and how to guide children's graphomotor skills so that they can successfully master graphic expression and be prepared for elementary writing.

Educational area Language and communication and written language

The Slovak school reform has brought changes to the school system and to pre-primary education and training. Since 2022, the State Education Program for Pre-primary Education in Kindergartens – Consolidated Version (hereinafter referred to as SEP, 2022) has been in force. The aim of pre-primary education is the holistic development of the child's personality and, in the concept of the educational area **Language and communication** are enriched areas that demonstrably contribute to the development of children's literacy, with great emphasis placed on developing children's communication skills using a wide range of texts from a variety of genres of children's literature [15]. The **Language**

and Communication educational area emphasizes the development of children's communication skills at all language levels. The educational standards are divided into two parts. The first part concerns *spoken language* and the second part concerns *written language* [7], which are *interrelated* when working with children in pre-primary education and form a natural part of their everyday life.

Spoken language

Spoken language is divided into three sub-areas within the framework of performance and content standards. In addition to the requirements for articulation and pronunciation, grammatical correctness, and standard spoken language, emphasis is placed on the social appropriateness of language use and adherence to communication conventions. As stated by Zápotočná and Petrová (2016), some areas of children's speech, which are normally classified as spoken language, are part of areas working with written language, as these provide more natural and stimulating conditions for speech development [15]. This is because they initiate a number of important stimuli that normal spoken communication does not provide.

Written language

Children in pre-primary education gain rich experience with written language, which has a positive impact not only on language and speech development, but also on cognitive and thinking development.

Emergent literacy is developed within the educational area of **Language and Communication**, specifically in the second part, **Written Language**, and primarily in the following sub-areas: **understanding the functions of written language, the concept of print, and knowledge of book conventions** (the performance standard identifies certain letters of the alphabet), **phonological processes and phonological awareness, and the graphomotor prerequisites for writing**. All sub-areas complement and interconnect with each other when working with children.

Table 1 Written language – subareas

Language and Communication		
2. Written language and subareas	2.1 Understanding the content, meaning, and functions of written language	2.1.1 Recognizing the functions of written language 2.1.2 Understanding the explicit meaning of a text – vocabulary 2.1.3 Understanding the implicit meaning of a text 2.1.4 Knowledge of genres and linguistic means of written language
	2.2 Understanding the formal characteristics of written language	2.2.1 Concept of printing and knowledge of book conventions 2.2.2 Phonological processes and phonological awareness 2.2.3 Graphomotor prerequisites for writing

Source State Education Program for Pre-primary Education in Kindergartens [4].

In the preschool period, literacy develops naturally (emerges) through children's spontaneous and active discovery of **written culture** as they acquire spoken and written language as a cultural tool for communication, reproduction, and production of new ideas and knowledge [6]. In pre-primary education, it is important for children to have the opportunity to learn about language in various forms through activities and to perceive that spoken and written language are interrelated. Emphasis is placed on the perception of texts and on bringing school closer to life.

Graphomotor prerequisites for writing – development of graphomotor skills

The sub-area of *graphomotor prerequisites for writing* is an important part of preparing children to master written language. In pre-primary education, it is important to create conditions for acquiring experiences and positive attitudes towards language and written language. Currently, we are facing a bleak situation in the area of graphomotor skills among children and students, which is a consequence of the influence of modern means of communication and the passive acquisition of new knowledge through the media, television, mobile phones, and computers. This makes it all the more necessary to specifically practice developing children's graphomotor skills in the pre-primary period. Today, there is a wide range of worksheets focused on developing graphomotor skills, but this is not enough for a child to master graphic expression correctly [8]. Graphomotor skills are a process that involves transforming heard, seen, or spoken words into

complex graphomotor activity, resulting in written words, written speech, and writing.

In kindergarten, children gradually prepare themselves to master writing techniques in an appropriate and creative way through discovery. Some children learn to read and write spontaneously, based on their own experiences, even before they start elementary school. Through play, they gradually learn to write their name, the names of their loved ones, their favourite animal, objects, and fairy tale characters in large block letters. Such children achieve graphomotor literacy, which is the basis for writing literacy. As stated by Zápotočná, Petrová (2016, p. 4), "children growing up in a literate environment, i.e., an environment that provides rich stimuli for learning about written culture, achieve incomparably better results in school education, and these results persist at all levels of education [15]. This fact is documented by the results of a number of studies, which show that written language has irreplaceable developmental potential in the preschool development of children, not only in relation to language and speech development, but also to the development of cognition and thinking, and that as such it is a decisive prerequisite for the successful development of functional reading literacy and, subsequently, the overall cultural development of the child."

When teaching graphomotor skills, teachers should respect:

- the child's age, individual and current disposition,
- the motivation that makes the child willing and interested in performing the activity,
- the goals and tasks of the activities,
- the hygienic and technical conditions necessary for practicing graphomotor skills in a kindergarten classroom [1].

The aim of developing graphomotor skills and supporting "writing" is to encourage children in the process of depicting graphic shapes and acquiring the prerequisites for developing writing skills. As stated by Uváčková et al. (2012), graphic expression is based on conscious movement—the coordination of the muscles of the hand, wrist, and fingers, i.e., fine motor skills in conjunction with sensory functions—sight, hearing, and touch [14].

When developing graphomotor skills, a certain sequence of graphomotor patterns is followed.

- **playing with a point**, the child's first acquaintance with the material and surface (first touches, playing with a point and surface);
- **vertical (upright) lines**, both broken and continuous, starting from a point; the child experiments and observes the line going from top to

bottom and bottom to top; with appropriate motivation, the child begins to tilt the line from right to left and left to right;

- **horizontal lines**, continuous and broken, drawn from left to right and right to left; the gradual lengthening of the line depends on the child's hand fatigue and eye coordination;
- **combined movements** by connecting horizontal and vertical lines using a variety of movement directions;
- **broken lines**, experimenting with horizontal and vertical lines – broken lines, breaks up/down, right/left; breaks (roofs) of varying width, height, in different groupings, numbers;
- **circular movements** motivated (by imitation) by grinding, winding, and swinging lead to the recording (drawing) of a circle in one stroke without correcting the line, up to elliptical graphic traces (ovals).
- **arcs, waves, loops, figure eights** (upper, lower, wide, narrow, high, shallow, with various groupings and numbers) based on circular movements; these are the most difficult.
- **combinations of movements** while maintaining the direction of movement from left to right (direction of writing); proceed from continuous movement when recording traces, e.g., geometric shapes square – window, triangle – roof, circle – sun, through the use of the child's interest in tracing lines, connecting and completing vertical, horizontal, broken, circular or wavy lines into a single whole, to attempts at writing printed and cursive letters [14].

The development of a child's graphomotor skills is a deliberate and gradual improvement of the cognitive and motor functions of the body and the child's abilities to perform appropriate writing and drawing activities. In preparation for learning to write in elementary school, this means the deliberate and gradual teaching of children to draw the elements of printed and written letters in a fun way, through play [3].

Activating and innovative methods of developing written language

Strong motivational and stimulating factors in working with children in pre-primary education to develop graphomotor skills include activating and innovative methods that bring something new to schools, which influences interest in learning. The advantage of innovative and activating methods, as emphasized by Knapíková et al. (2002), is that they greatly stimulate children's interest in participating in various activities and give them the opportunity for self-expression [2]. They enable children to acquire new knowledge and

experience in an appropriate manner through spontaneous expression, personal experience, and direct experience in the creative process. According to Zelina (2011), children's motivation and activation will increase if the teacher knows as many methods as possible to turn a passive child into an active one, so that they are not an object but a subject of the creative process, as an individual with their own needs, abilities, and skills, which can be achieved by studying professional literature and creative work [16]. It is the teacher who constantly tests various methods, procedures, forms, and means in practice and monitors the effectiveness of the application of new methods.

As Lipnická (2019) states, methods for developing children's written language in pre-primary education have been influenced by the concept of pedagogical constructivism [3]. These methods make it easier for children to understand the content, meaning, and functions of written language. Within these methods, children have the opportunity to become familiar with the products and creation of written culture through activities. The sequence in the development of graphomotor patterns begins with the development of gross motor skills, followed by the development of fine motor skills, which focuses on graphomotor skills and the development of mental functions. The progression is from simple movements to more complex ones that require coordination of movements and senses.

The preschool age is characterized by the development of functions focused on graphomotor skills according to the direction of movements:

- Cephalocaudal direction – gradual coordination of muscle groups from the head to the limbs (holding and turning the head, spinal mobility, fluidity of movement, tilting and turning movements);
- Proximodistal direction – movements from the shoulder joint to the fingers, enabling circular hand movements, vertical and horizontal movements, and combinations thereof;
- Ulnoradial direction – development of grip from the little finger side of the palm to the so-called pincer grip of the index finger and thumb. The child reaches for objects and manipulates them, grasping them with one hand [14].

In the kindergarten environment, children naturally seek out activities in which they are successful and, through reading and writing, they can construct their knowledge of the world and create their own subjective meanings. The emphasis is on experiential learning, in which the child's personal development is the result of personal experience and enjoyment [10].

Stimulating environment

The development of graphomotor skills is also positively influenced by a literate and stimulating environment in kindergarten. It is enriched so that children can actively encounter the written and read form of language, which motivates them to actively express themselves. Children take an interest in writing on their own initiative and perceive their surroundings, thus becoming active participants in their own development.



Fig. 1 Designation of the season in capital letters with a motivational literary text (author's archive – B. Šváblová).

Children in kindergarten notice play areas marked with letters, various teaching aids with rhymes, riddles, poems, and songs written on them, and use props and illustrated books with interesting stories and stimulating pictures. The teacher gives children the opportunity to present their own products, many of which focus on graphomotor skills, and places them in a visible place so that children can return to them.

The first step towards children experimenting with writing is hand-signed creations



Fig. 2 Child's handwritten signature – 5-year-old girls (author's archive – B. Švábová)

The more stimuli a child has, the more they perceive themselves and their surroundings with all their senses, the more conscious their graphomotor skills become, and the better they master graphomotor skills, the better prepared they are for writing. It is important to plan and implement various activities with children and to choose appropriate motivational methods and forms of work focused on successful graphic expression.

Working with the book

In the sub-area of *Learning the Functions of Written Language* in Preschool, teachers create a stimulating environment in which children encounter written and read forms of language through books, which is why the selection of books they come into contact with is so important. Children enjoy looking at books and are able to perceive pictures and texts. In kindergarten, children have free access to books. They are placed so that children can pick them up and look at them at any time. Pictures illustrating the story are a great help when reading the text. Children enjoy books that they create themselves with their teacher, drawing pictures, cutting them out, and sticking them in according to the story. This is related to another method called lap.

Lap method

In order to increase children's active interest in books and letters, we use the Lap method in the kindergarten environment. The essence of the Lap method is to create and read "big books" with pictures that represent a story, supplemented with texts invented by the children and written down by the teacher. The method also has an individual form. The children draw themselves and, depending on their level of literacy, also invent and write the text. Motivation is important, and older children are able to write words themselves under the pictures.

Word bank method

The word bank method involves the child playing with poems, riddles, and rhymes that they have already memorized and visually mastered. Using this method, the child learns the shapes of words as parts of texts and the sequence of their arrangement in sentences. The selected text, word, or letter is written in large block letters on two identical forms. The text on one piece of paper is then cut into individual parts—individual words, by line, or vertically. The children's task is to assemble the text according to the given pattern.

Method of creating class magazines, picture books, and own books

When creating their own books, picture books, and magazines, children have the opportunity to create their own book based on their knowledge and experience with written text. They can create books with fairy tale characters they have encountered while reading fairy tales and add them to the written text. The teacher motivates children to look for pictures, draw, paint, cut, glue, and write the names of magazines, picture books, and books. As Máčajová (2011) states, the method is used throughout the day according to the children's choice. It supports their own reading and writing processes [5].

Closely related to this method is the **creation of books with predictable text**, which are characterized by the fact that the same text is repeated regularly and is easy to remember. Fairy tales in which part of the text is repeated regularly are popular (O repe, Rukavička, Pampúšik, Ako šlo vajce na vandrovkú, Brémští muzikanti, Pod hříbom). The child simultaneously narrates part of the fairy tale through movement improvisation and role-play.

Concept mapping method – picture concept map

The concept mapping method is important when working with children in terms of developing knowledge and finding new relationships between concepts [5]. In kindergarten, instead of a standard concept map, we can create a picture concept map. We can gradually connect the pictures and add written words. The combination of pictures and words can be a gateway to the development of emergent literacy.



Fig. 3 Picture concept map (author's archive – B. Šváblová)

During the school year, children have the opportunity to work with various topics that are in line with the requirements of the school curriculum: animals, fruit, vegetables, flowers, geometric shapes, seasons, means of transport,

weather, days of the week, months of the year, the human body, fairy tale characters. Creating a picture concept map and gradually replacing pictures with written words, distinguishing between the concept and its hierarchical form requires a lot of patience and time.

Painted reading

The painted reading method is characterized by the fact that the written text is supplemented with pictures. In the preschool period, we use texts written in large block letters, which are easier for children in terms of visual-motor skills. This activity develops the understanding of concepts in the text. It is important that children see the text being read when the teacher points to the words and follow the direction of reading. The texts vary in theme, but in addition to the educational goal, the age of the group we are working with is always taken into account [11]. Gradually, as children's literacy levels increase, the picture can be replaced with text that the children write down.

Creative drama

Movement is a fundamental expression of children in the pre-primary period, permeating all activities and representing an important factor in children's perceptual-motor, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. The more stimuli a child has, the more they perceive themselves and their surroundings with all their receptors, the more conscious their graphomotor expression is, the better they control their graphomotor skills, and the better prepared they are for writing. Droppová emphasizes (2014) that teachers should integrate graphomotor activities into various areas so that they are natural and do not become forced exercises [1]. They know what the goal is, and they do everything in a playful way, patiently, according to the children's age, previous experience, and the conditions available to them.

Creative drama currently plays an irreplaceable role in working with children in kindergarten. Through creative drama methods, which include improvisation, interpretation, role-playing, dramatic play, narrative pantomime, and musical-movement etudes [9,12], we can create space for the development of graphomotor skills in a playful and experiential way. It is important to harmonize the movement of the body and hands, to playfully and experientially portray and imitate various situations through movement, to find one's own ways of expression that evoke positive emotions and have a favourable influence on personality development. The content of children's activities should ideally apply themes and situations that are familiar to them, inspiring, bring joy, openness,

meaning, have an emotional connection to them, and through which they perceive themselves and their surroundings.

Genre-diverse children's literature contributes significantly to the development of children's literacy, as reading and working with text helps them realize the relationship between the spoken and written forms of language [12]. Children enjoy reciting text and combining it with movement. They enjoy rhymes, poems, songs, singing games, physical games, short fairy tales, and children's folk games, the texts of which often develop into dramatic forms. Children imitate and experiment with physical representations of situations related to the text.

Practical demonstrations of work using creative drama methods – movement improvisation, interpretation, and role-playing

Activity: Storm in the Forest

The teacher tells a story and the children simultaneously take on the roles of "someone" and "something" else based on what they hear and express themselves spontaneously. Based on the situation created, in which the child has the opportunity to express themselves through movement, words, facial expressions, pantomime, and all means of expression, they seek their own way of expression, playfully imitating simple graphic shapes. It is important that the story is rich in enough actions suitable for acting out and physical representation.

Methodological procedure: We are in the forest and we move around to imitate all the animals. We can also add sounds. The sun (we form a circle) is shining and its golden rays (wavy line) knock-knock-knock on the window (knocking on one spot) where the wise Mrs. Owl lives. Now we are flying owls, greeting all the animals (we imitate the flight of an owl with a circular movement). A little hedgehog comes along (we sit on the ground on our heels and use our hands to imitate the shape of quills – broken line). We work with the music and movement activity "*Lezie ježko, lezie v lese.*" A spider has spun a web among the bushes (we imitate the spider's web with our movements – spreading out from the center in different directions). A little mouse is cooking porridge. We combine the movement with the rhyme "*Varila myšička kašičku v maľovanom hrnčičku*" (circular movements). The sound of sawing wood echoes in the forest. Two children hold hands and imitate sawing wood, combining the movement with the rhyme "*Rež, rež, drevo rež, len sa s pílkou neporež.*" We will depict the teeth of the saw in the air (broken line). A frog is jumping by the pond. We will combine the movement with the rhyme "*Skáče žaba po blate*" (playing with the upper arch).

The sun hid behind a cloud and a large cloud covered it. The animals hid. The forest fell silent. A storm is approaching. A light wind blows and the tree

branches bend to the right and left (we move our hands raised above our heads to the right and left – upper arc), the first raindrops began to fall (movement from top to bottom, light clapping), gradually the rain became heavier (gradually accelerating clapping) and finally a heavy downpour began (slapping thighs), the whole forest shook (stomping on the ground). After the heavy and violent rain, the storm calmed down and the forest returned to life, the last drops of rain fell, and the sun peeked out from behind the clouds (raise your hands and move your fingers). The animals were happy and danced with joy.

Children playing animals hold hands, form a small circle, spin around and sing: "Kolo, kolo mlynské..." [4].



Fig. 4 Movement depiction of animals in the forest (author's archive – B. Švábová)

Activity: This is how a butterfly fly

Methodological procedure: Children move freely around the space and, according to the lyrics of the song, act out dramatic situations and express emotions through role-play and movement improvisation.

Takto letí motýlik, takto letí vtáček, (imitate the flight of a butterfly and a bird with your hands).

takto letí lietadlo, cez biely obláčik. (spread your arms and imitate an airplane flying)

R: *!-Bác-bác, bum-bác, ha'a-pa'a, zumba*. (alternate clapping and slapping your thighs)

Bác-bác, bum-bác, ha'a-pa'a, bum.:/

Takto skáču opice, (gently tapping the head with your hands and circular movements on the tummy)

takto skáču žabky. (imitate a frog jumping)

Takto skáče zajačik, čo má biele labky. (imitate jumping, use your fingers above your head to imitate ears)

R: /:Bác-bác, bum-bác, ...:/ (alternate clapping and slapping your thighs)

The rhythm of movement combined with music creates a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. By discovering reality with all their senses, children acquire various motor skills and abilities without fear or tension, thereby building a positive relationship with written language.

Reflection: At the end of the activities, we talk to the children. The teacher has the opportunity to find out how the activities affected the children and what changes in their actions and behaviour occurred. They ask open-ended questions that lead to spontaneous answers and reactions. For example: What was difficult to portray and imitate? Which situation was easy for you to express and portray through movement? Which animals did you like to portray? What did you enjoy the most? Which activity would you like to repeat?

In addition to verbal reflection, it also uses nonverbal reflection. Children have the opportunity to express themselves through movement, artistic expression, and the creation of various props and teaching aids. Here, there is an opportunity to work with various worksheets. Graphomotor activity is more interesting for children when it is the result of the coordination of auditory-visual-motor functions, which they actively experienced while working with rhymes, songs, fairy tales, and movement, using creative drama methods.

Conclusion

The aim of developing emergent literacy and graphomotor skills, and supporting "writing," is to encourage children in the process of depicting graphic shapes and acquiring the prerequisites for developing writing skills. Children's graphomotor skills develop individually. According to Uváčková et al. (2012, pp. 51–52), the gradual development of gross motor skills, fine motor skills of the hand and fingers, and body awareness in various activities and practical tasks is important for the successful mastery of graphic expression [14]. If a child's motor skills are not sufficiently developed, they may gradually become withdrawn and less active.

Frequent graphomotor activities enrich children with new graphomotor skills, experiences, and writing experiences. Teachers play an important role here, creating a stimulating environment and using activating and innovative methods and forms of work to uncover new possibilities for working with children, bringing interesting and meaningful learning. It is important for children to discover, experiment, and perceive themselves and their surroundings with all

their senses through their own activities and personal experiences, and to successfully develop the graphomotor skills they need when they start school.

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