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Literacy in Hungary – a Short Report Based on the Results of Literacy Projects[1]

Umiejętność czytania i pisania na Węgrzech – krótki raport na podstawie wyników przeprowadzonych projektów

Summary: The PISA 2015 results in Hungary reflected two crucial problems: low literacy skills among adolescents and the unsatisfying level of pre- and in-service teacher training. Both of the above-mentioned factors were in the focus of international projects in the field and national discussions and research. Finding a long-term solution to the problem needs fundamental changes not only in primary and secondary education, but also in teacher education in order to make all teachers literacy experts as well.

Keywords: literacy performance; policy areas; literacy instruction; teacher training

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INTRODUCTION

This article reports on the work and results of international projects in which Kecskemét College Teacher Training Faculty, the forerunner of John von Neumann University Faculty of Pedagogy, has been taking part. The first international project in the field was in 2006 (ADORE), and aimed at finding good school practices all over Europe. It was followed by designing and implementing an in-service teacher training course (BaCuLit). In the ADORE project, good practice examples in Hungary were identified that were subsequently included in the ADORE book. In the BaCuLit project, the curriculum was implemented from October 2011 until June 2012 among 20 teachers, and this team contributed to developing the module on metacognition. Meanwhile, they conducted in-service teacher training and incorporated the research results into pre-service teacher training courses at Kecskemét College.

Based on this experience and satisfactory results, Kecskemét College entered the ISIT project and was looking forward to the implementation of a blended learning course in the area of literacy. The goals of ISIT project were to address the problem of low literacy skills all over Europe and improve the content and structure of teacher training to meet this challenge (Szabó & Szinger, 2015a). Only three countries from the ADORE group (Germany, Hungary, and Romania) entered the ISIT project. These were the countries where the literacy results were the lowest. It turned out that only common horizontal (age-groups) and vertical (geographical) guidance all over the EU can be of help to improve literacy skills in the member countries (Szabó & Szinger, 2015b). Based on this insight a large international project was initiated in 2014.

> […] the European Literacy Policy Network ELINET was founded in February 2014 and had 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries. ELINET aimes to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. (*Literacy in Slovenia…*)

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LITERACY PERFORMANCE DATA IN HUNGARY

As regards the 2015 PISA results in Hungary, they were unsatisfactory. 15-year-old students achieved the third lowest result among the OECD states, much lower than the average. In the years 2000–2006, the performance results were more or less at the same level, and in 2006, they were the most satisfactory. In 2012, however, the decreased performance could be noticed, and in 2015, a dramatic decline in student performance can be observed. In OECD countries, the percentage of students with excellent results was 8.3%, while in Hungary, it was only 4.3%. It means that less than one-fifth of the Hungarian students achieved excellent results, which is about half of the OECD average. The average of students with scores under the basic level is expected to be between 18% and 20%. In 2012, this number of students was already 19.7%; in 2015, it increased to 27.5%. What makes the situation even worse is the low achievement in digital literacy. These results show that the 15-year-old Hungarian students' achievement in PISA 2015 is not only very low, but is decreasing and has reached its lowest point. Another shocking element is that the number of students with outstanding achievement is just the half of the OECD average. On the other hand, the number of students with the lowest results has increased by the half of the OECD average; their level equals to that of functional illiterates. Their ratio in their age group is one-fourth (25%).

This situation was a contribution to the conference organized by HunRA in May 2017 at which professionals coming from several fields were analyzing the data and giving their insights into the problems and their potential improvement. One of the messages is the relevant difference between the achievement of different school types. There is a decrease in every type of secondary schools. Although the results in the secondary grammar schools (selected students, the ones with highest grades in primary schools) are still above the OECD average, a dramatic decrease in the results of vocational schools can be noticed. It correlates with the following aspect, too. The gap according to the pupils' socioeconomic background was higher than the EU average in PISA (118 vs 89 on average) (Steklács, 2018). This gap of 118 score points is equivalent to almost three years of schooling. Hungary is less equitable than European countries on average (Ostorics, 2018).

Researchers comparing PISA 2015 results in Hungary with 5 neighbouring countries have found that besides family background it is motivation that influenced the results to the same extent (20%). Students have low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. They lack learning strategies, many of them collect the information. They complained about the lack of time to think while learning

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as they are overwhelmed with the content the curricula expected from them. When students were asked why they learn, they rarely answered that they do so because of their interests; they rather learn because of external motivation (Lannert, 2018, pp. 20–22).

Additionally, there is a lack of professional support at schools. It is especially a school or a local librarian who could do a lot to support teachers at school by offering library lessons, reading circles or just a place where students can learn (Baráthné Hajdú, 2018, pp. 33–35). School librarians could also promote reading for pleasure which supports literacy skills. Unfortunately, school libraries reflect the situation of Hungarian schools very well. Their collection is mainly that of textbooks, schoolbooks; they have no financial support to upgrade or enlarge their collections (Dömsödy & Simon, 2018, pp. 36–38). Pre- and in-service teacher trainings also play a crucial role. Motivated students with high academic achievement should choose the teaching profession; sharing good practices, observing each other's lessons. A supportive professional advisory system would be needed to improve the present results. As for the terminology applied, educational *policy* and not educational *politics* should be the goal (Kádárné Fülöp, 2018, p. 43).

KEY LITERACY POLICY AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Apart from school support, there is also a need for more family literacy programs with a focus on supporting parents and carers. A large-scale national project titled "My library" (see www.azenkonyvtaram.hu) partly aims at improving the efficiency and efficacy of Hungarian education by offering competence-based, skill developing library services that also promote learning skills. Moreover, the project has a national advisory board which is a network of 40 professionals closely working together with schools all over the country. The project is run by the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library, and it involves all the 19 county libraries, the Library Institute of National Széchényi Library, National Educational Library and Museum, and other professional bodies. The objectives of the project are to improve reading culture, digital literacy, reading literacy, individual and collaborative learning. The programme also gives an opportunity to do researches. New methodology and sample programme sets need to be promoted. By collecting and sharing 90 good practices, they are planned to be integrated in libraries nationwide. An outstandingly important aspect of the project is to help to avoid early school leaving. Four accredited training courses are developed to help to meet the most recent expectations of the librarian profession. Eighty different multifunctional events – including a conference and a workshop – are in the

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project to promote professional communication. The opening of a national library and reading promotion campaign took place in the first quarter of 2019. By the end of the project period a methodology publication series is expected.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING

One reason for these literacy deficits of adolescents is seen in the lack of a systematic reading instruction in mother tongue and content area education in secondary schools. International research found that understanding content area texts (or disciplinary texts) should be taught in all subjects and all grades systematically. Unfortunately, in most European countries, secondary school teachers mainly study their subjects and subject-related didactics during pre-service education but do not get trained in content area literacy. The term "content area literacy" (CAL) refers to teachers' competence to deal with reading/writing and learning instruction not only on the elementary level in the language arts classes, but in all subjects and all school levels. In most European countries, however, content area teachers are not trained to fulfill this task.

The curriculum pays more attention to functional literacy, literacy in everyday life in primary, elementary and middle schools. National Curriculum is concerned with children learning functional, digital literacy skills (National Core Curriculum, 2019). This appears on cross curricular level, for instance, in the field of teaching methods and strategies.

The goal of such a course is to make participants familiar with those teaching tools and new methodological approaches that promote teaching content area literacy in secondary education. To achieve this aim, all secondary school teachers have to see themselves both as teachers of their content area and literacy, as well. Moreover, through training of the teachers, the ultimate goal is to improve literacy skills and learning effectiveness of teenage students (in the upper primary and secondary education). The course addresses two needs in teachers' continuous professional development (CPD):

1. A general (structural) problem: The unsatisfying structures of teachers' CPD in the EU. In Hungary, the time devoted to face-to-face learning in teachers' CPD is limited, and most of the time, is not available during the working hours of teachers. Courses are often held in the afternoons or even at weekends. Although CPD is required from teachers, it is not systematically included in their official workload. Therefore, CPD courses are restricted to a few days, and thus privilege "one-shot approaches" which are not effective in changing classroom practice (as research has proven). To address this problem, a blended learning course (BLC) for

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secondary teachers and teacher trainers which combines face-to-face with e-learning, was developed in the BleTeach project (Szabó, 2018).

2. A specific (content-related) problem: The lack of expertise of secondary school teachers, i.e. content area teachers are required to address the problem of low literacy skills of children and adolescents in Hungary. The PISA 2015 study contributed to a series of professional debates and conferences regarding the deficits in basic literacy skills among adolescents (15-year-olds) in Hungary. What is more, secondary teachers mainly study their subjects and subject-related didactics during pre-service education in a very limited time-frame, but do not get trained in content area literacy. Although certain reading strategies are mentioned as an expectation in the curricula or the learning outcomes of teacher training BA or MA courses, there is a lack of their systematic and structured teaching in initial teacher training.

The content of such a course should include both the theoretical foundation and effective practical application of those literacy skills that make students in the upper primary and secondary education successful learners. Changing the participants' self-concept as teachers is in the focus of the course. After completion of the course, they should perceive themselves not only as content area teachers, but as literacy teachers as well. Additionally, the participants will be able to change the self-concept of their students, whose self-efficacy both as learners and readers will improve.

At the end of the course, participants will be aware of the critical period that exists between the transition of lower primary to upper primary/secondary education. This fact makes teaching literacy a highly important challenge for teachers of all disciplines. They will have started to reflect on and probably change their professional self-concept from being "only" a subject teacher to being a learning and literacy expert (facilitator?) in a specific subject area.

In terms of knowledge, participants are expected to know the elements of a CAL lesson planning framework, be aware of reading strategies and effective ways of teaching them. They are expected to know how to give literacy instructions that promote both learning of content area and methods of learning. They are expected to know the effect of reading, writing and listening on content area teaching and learning. In terms of competences and skills, teachers should be competent enough to make their students successful content area learners by making their students effective literacy experts. Participants should be competent users of reading strategies in a creative way in their everyday practice as well as during lesson planning and assessment procedures. Finally, self-reflection and reflection together with colleagues is an important competence which should be fostered within a CAL course (Szabó & Szinger, 2016).

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CONCLUSIONS

Concluding the findings of the projects it can be stated that two essential factors are important to improve literacy skills:

a) providing pre- and in-service teachers training to apply best practices. Teaching literacy requires a very well-planned conscious teaching approach which all primary and secondary teachers should be trained for,
b) introducing reforms in teaching literature in Hungary. Reading for pleasure is in the focus of this content area. This way, children/students of all ages could be more motivated to read more.

In Hungary, a new national curriculum is planned to be introduced in the upcoming years. All professionals, experts, researchers of the field try to involve all the above-mentioned recommendations to improve the present status of literacy in Hungary.

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Streszczenie: Wyniki badania PISA przeprowadzonego w 2015 r. na Węgrzech odzwierciedlają dwa kluczowe problemy: niskie umiejętności czytania i pisania wśród nastolatków oraz niezadowalający poziom przygotowania zawodowego, zarówno wśród czynnych, jak i przyszłych nauczycieli biorących udział w szkoleniach. Oba czynniki były przedmiotem międzynarodowych projektów oraz krajowych dyskusji i badań. Znalezienie długoterminowego rozwiązania problemu wymaga istotnych zmian nie tylko w szkolnictwie podstawowym i średnim, lecz także w kształceniu nauczycieli tak, aby byli również ekspertami w zakresie umiejętności czytania i pisania.

Słowa kluczowe: umiejętność czytania i pisania; obszary polityki; nauka czytania; szkolenie nauczycieli

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