

READING LITERACY ACQUISITION IN PRE-SCHOOL AND SCHOOL: SUCCESSION ASPECT

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of reading literacy has been an important issue from generation to generation, nonetheless it is especially relevant today, when the concept of reading literacy has expanded under the impact of various social and economic circumstances, requirements for a good reader and writer have changed.

The relevance of the problem originates from the results of recent scientific research in the world and in Latvia and surveys of preschool and primary school teachers.

The goal of the research is to analyse the teachers' understanding of reading literacy acquisition in preschool and primary school, and needs how to ensure targeted succession in reading literacy.

The methodology of the study is based on theories about reading and interaction, theories about integrated approach from the point of view of succession, task-based learning theories. The empirical data have been obtained by analysing 96 pre-school, 84 primary school teachers' surveys.

In order to ensure higher reliability of the data, the survey involved teachers with at least four years of teaching experience in pre-school and primary school, gained while working with 5–7 year old children in pre-school and first grade in different regions of Latvia. Descriptive statistical methods have been used in the analysis of the data obtained in the study.

The results of the research show that in the process of reading literacy acquisition, the results and recommendations of recent years of research have not been taken into account in order to promote the development of reading literacy, there are significant "gaps" from the point of view of succession: there is no exact coherence between the goal of reading literacy and the anticipated results to be achieved, in terms of the curriculum and its acquisition methodology between pre-school and primary school. A common understanding of the terminology of the research field, as well as the coherence of curricula, cooperation among teachers of both educational stages are also a topical problem.

The significance of the results is related to the fact that the real situation shows in which aspects it is necessary to improve the teaching content and methodology intended for the successive acquisition of reading literacy in preschool and primary school.

Keywords: *integrated language skills, process of preschool education, process of primary school education, reading literacy, succession.*

Introduction

The acquisition of reading literacy has been an important issue in different centuries, nevertheless it is especially relevant today as we live in a time when information and its acquisition resources change so rapidly that without the ability to read and write well, an individual is not only unable to navigate information, but also to solve everyday problem situations related to everyday life and be an active member of society. No less important is the fact that we live in a space of different languages and cultures, and some children have to learn the basics of reading literacy in a language that is not their mother tongue. Nowadays, in addition to printed texts, one must be able to read and write digital texts as well.

The relevance of the problem originates from the OECD (*Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation*) International Student Assessment Programme PISA (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) 2022 study, also the results of recent scientific research in the world and in Latvia (Gupta, 2023; Ozola et al., 2023; Kriekšis, 2022; Anspoka & Tūbele, 2015), surveys of preschool and primary school teachers.

The results of the OECD PISA 2022 study show that, compared to the achievements of pupils of Latvia in 2018, in 2022, pupils' reading skills and attitudes towards reading have decreased (PISA Results, 2022).

Studies related to reading literacy show that there are a number of psychological, cognitive and social problems to be solved in the educational process (Gupta, 2023; Ozola et al., 2023; Kriekšis, 2022). Groups of preschool children and primary school classes are becoming more and more ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous, because alongside the children whose language of instruction is also their mother tongue, the literacy is also acquired by the children who have very little or no knowledge of the language of instruction (Anspoka et al., 2023; Kriekšis & Anspoka, 2020; Anspoka & Tūbele, 2015). Taking into account the different environment in which the child grows and develops, the individual needs of each child become more and more pronounced. In the process of reading literacy acquisition, preschool and primary school teachers should increasingly think about the adaptation of the educational environment and resources depending on the child's abilities and previous experience (Gupta, 2023; Anspoka et al., 2023).

The goal of the research is to analyse the teachers' understanding of reading literacy acquisition in preschool and primary school, and needs how to ensure targeted succession in reading literacy.

Methodology

The methodology of the study is based on theories about reading and interaction, theories about integrated approach from the point of view of succession, task-based learning theories. The empirical data have been obtained by analysing surveys of pre-school and primary school teachers.

The empirical data has been obtained by analysing the results of the questionnaires of 96 preschool teachers and 84 primary school teachers. All questionnaires were distributed electronically – to pre-school teachers from February to May 2023, and to primary school teachers from September to October of the same year. The survey involved teachers with at least four years of teaching experience in pre-school and primary school, working with 5–7 year olds in pre-school and first grade pupils in school. The selected educational institutions are those with which the University of Latvia has cooperation agreements in all regions of Latvia to provide internships. The questionnaires included questions that allowed teachers to express their opinion not only on the pupils' learning of reading literacy, but also on how the process of continuity between preschool and primary school is ensured.

The data were collected and analysed using the Microsoft Excel software. Descriptive statistical methods have been used in the analysis of the data obtained in the study. The obtained data are ranked and expressed in percentages depending on the number of the obtained data and interpreted in relation to the purpose of the study.

Results

Understanding of reading literacy

Reading literacy is mostly the ability to read and write, i.e., the skill to read and write; also, the opposite of illiteracy (Skujina et al., 2011, 70). In a broader sense, the concept of *reading literacy* is understood not only as reading and writing skills, but also as listening and speaking skills (Moats, 2020), also numeracy (Education for All: Literacy for Life, 2006), since these basic skills are the most important ones in human life. A child who is not able to read and write, as well as listen, speak and perform arithmetic operations, has limited opportunities to acquire successfully education and later develop their career.

Reading literacy is not just about a specific skill. It is closely related to vocabulary, correct pronunciation of words, as well as attitude to reading and writing as interrelated processes.

Reading literacy, on the one hand, is an individual value, because it significantly affects the development of an individual's personality, their quality of life; on the other hand, it is also an important value for society, for only an educated society is able to promote sustainable development of itself and specific social environment (Kriekis, 2022; Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices, 2011; Education for All: Literacy for Life, 2006).

Taking into account the development trends of society and the corresponding needs, the concept of literacy has expanded in recent years. If in the 20th century, literacy was understood as the ability to replace sounds with appropriate letters, while reading or writing words, sentences or text and analyse it, then today literacy is also understood as the ability to assess critically and use the read or written textual, visual and audiovisual information in order to achieve their goals (Kriekis, 2022; Anspoka & Tūbele, 2015).

Literacy comprises in itself various activities: information perception by listening, reading or writing, working independently with this information, selection and application of the information acquisition resources according to the purpose, seeing connections between facts, generalization, creating new judgments, as well as feedback, discussion with others orally and in writing (Gupta, 2023; Kriekis, 2022; Language and Reading Research Consortium, 2015; Gee, 2014).

In order to be able to make judgments based on the data, it was important to find out how preschool and primary school teachers understand the concept of reading literacy. It should be noted that 84% of preschool teachers and 83% of primary school teachers understand reading literacy as learning sounds and letters, to join letters together, with special emphasis on reading and writing individual syllables and individual words. Only 10% of preschool and nearly 11% of primary school respondents admit that in addition to learning sounds and letters, the ability to decode sounds into words, there is also the perception and understanding of sentences and short texts and the analysis of what has been read or written. Accordingly, 5% of preschool teachers and 7% of primary school teachers had no opinion about the topic. None of the teachers interviewed emphasised that reading literacy is an individual value (the overview of the obtained results can be seen in Table 1).

Table 1 How is reading literacy understood by preschool and primary school teachers

Indicators	Preschool teachers		Primary school teachers	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Learning sounds and letters, reading words	84.24	81	82.8	69
Reading, analysis of sentences and short texts	10.4	10	10.8	9
No opinion	5.2	5	7.2	6

The obtained data allow us to conclude that the majority of respondents' understanding of literacy is too narrow, reducing it only to the technical side of reading and writing. An individual's level of literacy cannot be judged only by how quickly they decode sounds into words, if at the same time they are unable to read or write consciously, how to apply what they have read or written in a specific situation. Reading and writing with understanding are the most important signs of the quality of reading literacy (Kriekis, 2022). If in everyday life reading literacy is understood as the ability to spell, connect letters into words and words into sentences, then such a literate person does not differ much from a functional semi-illiterate person who is either unable to meet the necessary reading and writing requirements, or is only partially able to read and write (Ozola et al., 2023). It is also important to look at reading literacy from a social and emotional point of view, as a positive atmosphere activates the need to discuss with others what has been read or written, to confirm oneself, to enjoy the process. Whereas, negative emotions, such as

fear of failure, anxiety and self-doubt, reduce the capacity of brain to process information (Gupta, 2023; Ozola et al., 2023; Anspoka et al., 2023).

Development of reading literacy

Reading literacy to read and write are not innate. It can only be learned by reading and writing, and this happens very gradually from an early age, also with effort, time and patience. The children who have started learning it at an early age in the family and continued purposefully in preschool and school have better literacy results at school (Ozola et al., 2023; Moats, 2020; Morrow, 2005).

During the research, it has been important to find out the opinion of preschool and primary school teachers, at what age should children start learning the basics of reading literacy in the educational process (see the obtained data from the survey in Table 2).

Table 2 Attitude of preschool and primary school teachers towards the age from which the literacy

Indicators	Preschool teachers		Primary school teachers	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
2–3 years	12.4	12	0	0
4–5 years	30.4	29	90.5	76
5–7 years	57.2	55	9.5	8

The obtained data demonstrate that teachers have different opinions. If 12% of preschool teachers believe that the acquisition of the basics of literacy begins at an early age (2–3 years old), and its initial stage is associated with activities such as reading aloud, getting used to flipping through books, looking at pictures and talking about them or discussing them together, drawing letters, “writing according to one’s own understanding”, the main thing is to “read” one’s own writing, then primary school teachers do not mention such an age at all. 30% of preschool teachers consider 4–5 years of age as the most favourable time, while the other 57% of preschool teachers consider 5–7 years of age as the time for reading literacy acquisition. On the other hand, 90% of primary school teachers believe that the reading literacy acquisition could begin in 4–5 years of age, while 9% of respondents consider 6–7 years of age as the initial stage of reading literacy acquisition.

Regarding the importance of starting the acquisition of reading literacy at the earliest possible age, after each OECD PISA international study, recommendations are also developed, emphasizing that at first the child should be introduced to the reading and writing process as a whole, the so-called pre-reading and pre-writing tasks should be performed, and only then they should be introduced gradually in the world of sounds and letters, and these kinds of tasks cannot be left only to the family. This has to be done professionally in preschool and continued at school (Ozola et al., 2023; Latvia in the OECD

International Student Assessment Program PISA 2018 – First Results Conclusions, 2019; Geske et al., 2013). The survey also included a question on whether teachers are aware of the results of the international study and how research-based recommendations are taken into account in practice. All teachers surveyed are made aware of this research, but 48% of the teacher answers suggest that research results are not or are not sufficiently promoted in pedagogical process and not incorporated in methodological and teaching aids.

Teachers' answers show that they know about these studies, but only partially or episodically take them into account in their professional activities. Conversely, the other respondents have chosen not to answer this question at all.

In order to see the reading literacy of preschool children who will go to Class 1 the following school year, their reading and writing skills have been studied during play-based lessons at the end of May, 2023. A survey of teachers has also been conducted to find out their opinion about how ready the children are to start school and proceed with their studies successfully. In order to obtain objective results, the questionnaire offered theory-based criteria for assessing reading literacy:

- ability to recognize letters and pull them together into words in the text,
- ability to answer questions about what has been read,
- ability to replace printed letters with written letters, writing words and short sentences according to the task requirements,
- ability to understand reading literacy as an important individual value, to gain information from reading, enrich their emotional experience and help them learn more about maths, science and social studies.

Teachers believe that by observing the pedagogical process, they can see, that 92% students know the letters, join them together into words skilfully enough. However, only 37% are able to answer questions and talk about the connection of what they have read with their own experience. 77% of students write consciously, they are able to write a sentence according to the set task. Undoubtedly, we cannot yet talk about the skill of writing the hand-written letters and connecting them into words to form a neat, individual handwriting. This is due to the fact that 6–7-year-old children still have poorly developed hand musculature, they have difficulty drawing out the shape of a letter accurately, connecting letters into words, observing the width and height of the letters (Anspoka & Tübele, 2015). Teacher survey data shows that among the students 23% have low writing skills (do not distinguish between printed and hand-written letters, mix upper- and lower-case letters, write incorrectly, cannot read what is written), but none of the teachers surveyed believe that pre-primary and Year 1 pupils are able to see reading literacy as an important individual value in order to gain information from reading, to enrich their emotional experience and to be better able to learn mathematics, science and social studies.

The overview of the previously analysed results can be seen in Figure 1.

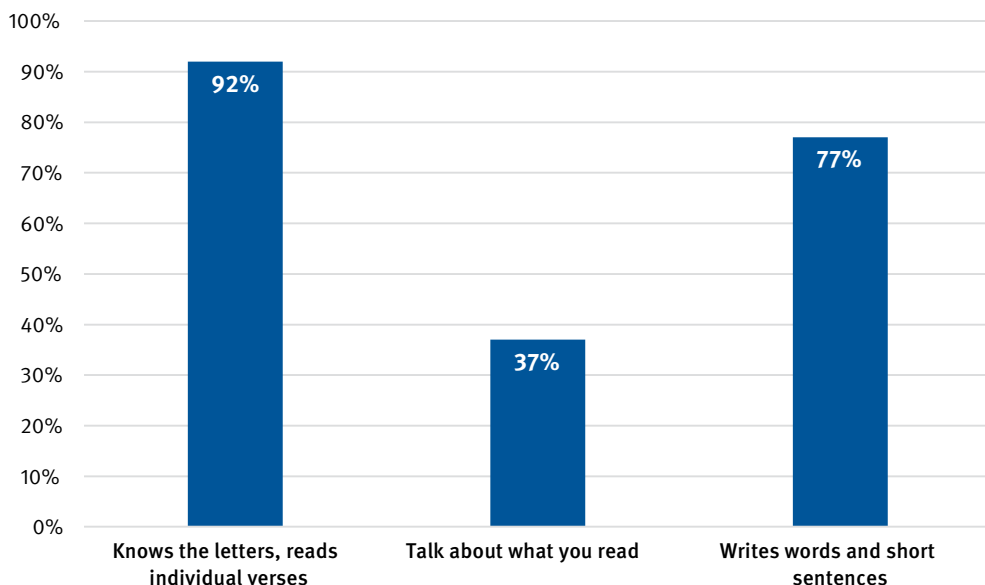


Figure 1 Reading literacy quality of 6–7-year-old children in May, 2023

Preschool teachers' responses to the survey on children's readiness for school are proportionally divided into two groups. As teachers believe, half of the respondents consider that the children are fully ready for school and will not have any difficulties to fit into the school environment, to cope with school assignments, while the other half of the respondents state that preschool requirements and school requirements are not exactly aligned with preschool. A high level of reading literacy in all subjects is required from the child already in the first weeks, regardless of the fact that it cannot be ensured in preschool. No less important is the opinion expressed by preschool teachers that often when children come to school, they have a distinctly different learning organization, and a gradual transition to a more academic environment is not ensured.

Ensuring continuity of reading literacy development

Since the didactic principle of succession requires taking into account previous experience and the provision of gradual acquisition of new experience, moving from the known to the unknown, from the easiest to the most difficult, the first most important task of the Class 1 teacher, commencing the school year, is to diagnose the physiological, psychological, social readiness for school, level of literacy acquisition, special individual needs, etc. A precisely diagnosed situation enables us to select a more targeted learning content, its arrangement in syllabus, educational aids, to choose the teaching methodology, plan deliberately the differentiation of pupils' work in Class 1, especially in the first half of the year, etc. For this reason, the same criteria have been applied to diagnose the level of literacy of the same respondents when they started learning in Class 1 (the overview can be seen in Figure 2).

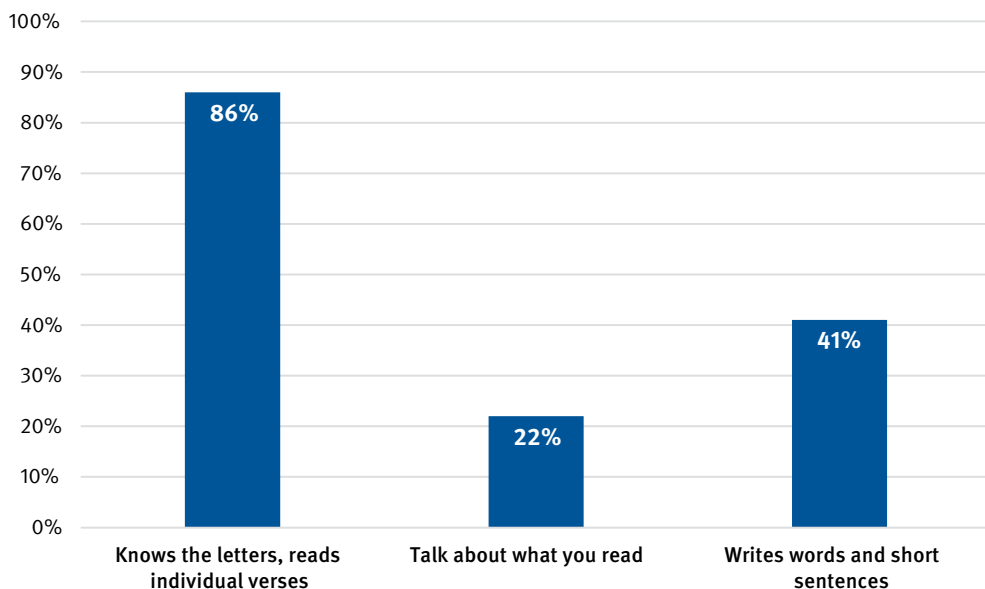


Figure 2 Reading literacy quality of 6–7-year-old children in September, 2023

According to the obtained data, the level of children’s reading literacy has decreased in all indicators after the summer. The survey for primary school teachers also includes the same criteria as for pre-primary school teachers. The results of the teacher survey outline that 86% of the students are able to recognize letters and join them together into words with sufficient skill, whereas only 22% of the students have shown the ability to answer questions and talk about the connection of what they have read with their own experience. The biggest decline is in terms of writing reading literacy. If in the spring, 2023 77% of students have been testified that they have sufficient writing skills, without paying attention to handwriting, then in autumn, only 41% of students have demonstrated sufficient writing skills. When surveying primary school teachers, 84% of them are worried about the obtained results, because they believe that the part of pupils who do not have good enough reading and writing skills will not be able to cope with the educational content in other subjects. There is an objective basis for this, because in natural sciences, social sciences, mathematics and also in the Latvian language, both textbooks and workbooks contain texts, instructions of the assignments, the perception and execution of which is possible only if the child has good literacy. The results of the survey of primary school teachers show that the most inconsistencies are in how children are taught the basics of writing in preschool and school. According to the results of the survey, it can be concluded that 53% of primary school teachers are concerned that in preschool, the necessary attention is not paid to how children hold a writing tool and move it along the paper while writing, how letters are joined into words in a written text. Teachers believe that this is essential, because as the amount of writing increases, the child gets tired faster, cannot concentrate, inattention and other errors occur, and the child’s health

suffers as well. In its turn, 42% of preschool teachers believe that primary school teachers require more work with texts during the process of reading literacy acquisition in order to promote conscious reading literacy. Children have difficulty understanding the content of mathematics, science or social studies, psychological discomfort occurs, motivation to learn decreases.

Discussion

The process of reading literacy acquisition does not begin with learning sounds or letters, but with the creation of an interest in the processes of reading and writing, with understanding of what the benefits of a person are if they know how to read or write, what is important to them in life. Initially, there is the family environment, it is done professionally successively in preschool, later in school. Nowadays, when working in an ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous environment, it is necessary to take into account the child's mother tongue, without forgetting that the acquisition of literacy is closely related to the ability to listen, ability to concentrate, ability to retain attention, ability to speak, etc. If initially parents or teachers read aloud in front of the children, and the child listens to them from their birth, after that the read material is discussed with the child, then at the age of two or three they are already ready to be actively involved, predict the content of the text based on pictures, headlines or individual fragments read in front of them, and talk about it, with the specific set task of listening to the adult's reading and getting involved frequently in a talk on what has been heard. Undoubtedly, a book or text is read in this way for a longer time, and it also requires the adult's patience, nevertheless it is a benefit for the development of the child's understanding of reading as a meaningful activity. Even more, if there are also words next to the pictures, the child is allowed to see these words, "photograph" them with their eyes, associate the words with their meaning in a specific context and even remember them in another situation. In the initial stages of literacy acquisition, the vocabulary development, phonological and phonemic perception is an essential prerequisite, and this is particularly important for children who have low language skills, the language of instruction is different from their mother tongue (Zariņa 2021; Gee, 2014). Even later, while learning the skill to recognise letters corresponding to their sounds, it is not useful at first to learn to read and write mechanically by calling or writing individual syllables that have no relation to the meaning of the word in a sentence (a syllable is a unit of speech, not a unit of language), in order to start doing it after some time later with understanding, if in a methodically thought-out system both processes – word decoding and perception and understanding of the meaning – can be learned simultaneously. Reading literacy is a complex skill. It is important to note that reading and writing skills can be acquired in a mutual relation, as they influence each other. Similar to the process of reading, writing is also based on complex mental processes – phonemic perception of speech, analysis and synthesis of sounds, coordinated operation of visual and movement analysers. Before writing, the child must hear the sounds, remember the corresponding letters and write them in

the correct order, the same way as they should be named when reading a word (Zariņa, 2021). Considering the data obtained in practice, in Class 1 the sort of acquired alphabet learning in preschool must not be neglected. It is important for children, regardless of their literacy level, to enter gradually the world of sounds and letters when they start school, to improve the basics of reading and writing according to each individual's needs, rather than immediately working with long texts. From the point of view of succession, teachers must consider carefully which of the methods of literacy acquisition will be dominant in both stages of education, because undoubtedly one has to count on children who are already reading alongside those who still need to learn letters when they come to school. In terms of succession provision, there will be problems if in preschool teachers have worked by choosing a text as the basic didactic unit, but at school teachers will take a step back and the pupil will learn to recognise letters, put them together in syllables, read words from them, and only after some time they will discover that words form sentences, and, in its turn, the sentences in the text allow us to judge the content of what has been read. Some of the children can quickly get bored with such activities, and they will lose interest in reading and writing. In terms of succession, a common understanding of both educational stages on the process of literacy acquisition, the conditions for the selection of literacy methods, the common terminology and how the specific method and methodological technique affects the child's intellectual, emotional development and the development of will, is really important.

In order the transition to school happened gradually, there would be no different requirements in the educational organization, preschool teachers should also take responsibility for how children are trained gradually to control and manage their behaviour, adhere to the rules, are able to listen, perceive the content of what they have heard, learn to overcome difficulties, finish the work they have started, acquire elementary behavioural norms, work culture.

Results of the teacher survey show that in terms of succession nowadays there are also other issues to which conscious attention should be paid. Since in recent years the educational institutions of the Latvian language of instruction have become multicultural, as children have different language levels within a single school, more attention should be paid to tasks of different levels in the content of literacy acquisition. If children with different experiences study in the same room and at the same time, then each of them has both the obligation and the right to participate in the educational process and receive the necessary help. Regardless of whether a child is of preschool or school age, each of them has a need for something new, interesting, exciting in the surrounding world, the need to find out the interrelations of things and phenomena, the need for contact with others in order to show oneself, the need to act, be active, the need to imagine, fantasize, see the results of one's efforts, to be recognized for it. The teacher just needs to learn to separate what it means to help the child and what it means to interfere with their work, in case the child cannot cope with the task at some point.

From the point of view of succession, uniform criteria for the children's achievement assessment are also important. When choosing them, the level of perception and

knowledge, which includes remembering facts and information, as well as the level of understanding to make sure that the information is sufficiently understood and the level of skills that make it possible to use the obtained information analytically, must be matched. On the other hand, a child who is capable of going deeper should be given the opportunity to create new knowledge applying the information they have learned or found, and to assess their own and other's experiences in this regard. The teacher in both stages of education cannot focus only on the needs of children, group or class with the average ability. It is important for teachers to recognise that it is equally important to ensure the reading literacy of all students, regardless of their cognitive and social experience.

Conclusions

- Teachers understand reading literacy as the ability to read and write. Most of the teachers surveyed associate reading literacy only with the technical side. Reading literacy is also not assessed from a social and emotional point of view.
- Preschool and primary school teachers also differ in their views on the age at which to start reading literacy. While 12% of pre-primary teachers consider it important to start reading literacy at two to three years, primary teachers do not mention this age at all. 31% of pre-primary teachers consider 4–5 years to be the best time, while the remaining 57% of pre-school teachers consider 5–7 years to be the best time to start learning to write.
- Teachers point out that a high level of reading literacy in all subjects is demanded of children in their first weeks at school, without taking into account that this cannot be achieved in pre-school. Often there is a different organisation of learning in pre-school and in primary school.
- As the level of literacy in all the indicators has dropped after the summer, in order to ensure the succession between preschool and primary school, it is essential to select the teaching content and methodology in a precisely diagnosed situation, so that the process of literacy acquisition would continue gradually, if necessary, also by stepping back and proceeding with the alphabet learning at school.

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