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CONSTRUCTION AND METHODS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH OF READING HABITS AND DIGITAL LITERACY OF YOUNG CHILDREN UP TO 11 YEARS OLD

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ABSTRACT

Children's reading literacy is so important nowadays as digital literacy, because Reading is a prerequisite for almost all cultural and social activities. That's why it is necessary to pay attention to the formation of both since the earliest ages of children.

The article presents the construction and methods of a survey among students of primary schools that will be provided. The survey is a part of a study by the Working Group "Interconnection between Reading and Digital Literacy of Children under 11 years old" of the project funded by the Bulgarian Science Fund – Digital Competencies and Media Education at Pre-school and Primary School Age (DN 05/8 14.12.2016, Prof. Papancheva).

The focus of the study is on the opportunities offered by the usage of digital technologies for the education of children and their development, for creating the conditions for digital literacy, as well as the benefits that new technologies give in cognitive way to our children.

Keywords: students, survey, reading, digital literacy, interaction

1. Introduction

After Guttenberg, literacy has been dramatically transformed. We are witnesses of radically transformation of the literacy now as that Guttenberg development did.

Children live in digital era and their everyday life is inevitably associated with digital technologies since their birth. Alpha generation (born after 2010) is expected to be the most transforming ever (McCrinkle, 2012). Alpha kids interact with a touchscreen from a very early age. They will not think of technology as a tool; they integrate information technologies into their lives – Internet for them is everywhere. There will not boundaries between real and virtual life.

At present, all across Europe there are insufficient research data about the degree, scope and opportunities of using the new multimedia devices at an early childhood age in the family, in the community and at school, as well as about the extent to which reading literacy affects digital literacy and vice versa. According to Richard Lanham, literacy has extended its semantic reach from meaning “the ability to read and write” to now meaning “the ability to understand information however presented” (Lanham, 1995).

The problem of digital literacy and reading literacy has not been studied in Bulgaria. What is more, some major documents regarding education do not include terms such as “digital literacy” or “digital competence” (“digital competence” of students is indeed mentioned once in the Pre-School and School Education Act, published in the State Gazette, No. 79/13.10.2015, effective from 01.08.2016, but it is not defined).

The term and the concept of digital competence are still new and insufficiently studied and described. The fact that technologies lie at the basis of digital competence makes it even harder to identify precise criteria to define them. Information technologies change extremely rapidly and hence follows a change of practices and necessary competences (Papancheva, Dimitrova, 2017 : 6116).

The issue of the risks of digital technologies in all aspects is widely discussed in the international as well as the Bulgarian environment. But the opportunities offered by the usage of digital technologies for the children’s education and their full development are spoken and sought for purposeful education in this direction, mainly in Western Europe (See, for example COST Action IS1410 „The digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children” (DigiLitEY),

Australia and the United States. There are such initiatives in Bulgaria, but we can not talk about the trend.

There are some research in Bulgarian language connected with children and their digital technologies usage. The National-representative survey ‘Online behaviour of children in Bulgaria’ (2016) of Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre is among 9-17 year-olds using the Internet. The main conclusion of the study is like that: ‘More time online does not make children more digital/media literate’ (Kanchev, Georgiev, Haydinyak, & Apostolov, 2016a : 5). The report ‘Are children born in the digital age digitally literate?’ is also a part of this national study. It describes that children born in the digital age cannot develop their digital and media literacy by themselves, but their parents, school, and society are responsible for do this (Kanchev, Georgiev, Haydinyak, & Apostolov, 2016b).

The study ‘Young Children (0-8) and Digital Technology: A qualitative exploratory study across seven countries’ (2016), funded by Applied Research and Communications Fund, is a part of the project ‘Empowering Children in the Digital Age through Early Digital Literacy’ (Shahbazyan, Haydinyak, & Kumanova, 2016). Parents should talk to children about risks in Internet such as exposure to inappropriate content in movies, violence videogames, and other users’ behaviour as well as some ads as children often see in the virtual space. According to the study many parents have a positive opinion about online technology, but most of them use them as a babysitter. A small majority of parents are aware of the long-term effects of using digital devices from children. Most are worried about the dangers of the Internet – contacting unknown people, violent sites, fake information, etc. Some of interviewed believe that using digital devices is useful because they give to children skills that are important for their realization. But parents themselves do not stimulate the usage of digital technologies for creative activity, although they try to find a balance between positives and negatives. Parents should teach their children to use technology safe and creatively.

2. Research Objectives

The problem of digital competencies and reading skills of students is important because reading literacy is based almost every cognitive activities and is implemented in the digital literacy. There

are not any studies in Bulgaria about a connection between reading literacy and forming of digital literacy.

Reading enriches intellectually and emotionally, but there must be assess the motivation for reading, the subject's need to absorb information, a desire for self-improvement, and if there is no desire, it could be difficult to find a way to stimulate it. (Parijkova, 2017 : 2996). Reading is a prerequisite for almost all cultural and social activities (International Literacy Agency).

In this context is the current project „Digital Competencies and Media Education at Pre-school and Primary School Age (DN 05/8 14.12.2016) with project manager Prof. R. Papancheva. This fundamental research is in an area of social sciences. The focus of Working Package “Interconnection between reading and digital literacy” is on the creation of the conditions for digital literacy's formation, as well as on the advantages and positives which new technologies give in children's cognitive development.

The study refers to the results of national and international surveys and builds its main hypothesis on them. The analysis of existing Bulgarian literature related to children's digital literacy clearly indicates that the emphasis is placed on the risks posed by usage of digital devices by children. The research questions are “How not to oppose reading literacy and digital one?” and “Is there a tension between the book and the tablet for example?”

The main purpose of the study is to reveal the interaction between reading literacy and the use of digital technologies from the point of view of students. This goal will be accomplished by solving the following tasks:

- to study students' attitudes towards books and reading; their interests and habits for reading;
- to reveal pupils' attitudes towards digital technologies and their use;
- to seek the interrelation between reading and digital literacy.

The subject of this study is students up to 11 years old, and the object is their attitude to books and digital technologies and their impact on the formation of reading and digital literacy respectively.

The research is based on the hypothesis that if a student reads more, then he/she will develop his digital literacy better. Mark Warshauer discovers that reading and writing skills and cultural

literacy help students make full use of the Internet, find information, create meaningful multimodal content (Warshauer). The main thesis of the study is that reading and functional literacies are at the heart of the formation of the digital one.

The project's focus is on the positive effects of technologies on the education. The negatives will not especially investigate.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The study will be conducted among primary school students (up to 11 years old). Tablets and smartphones are the favorite devices of 3-4 years old children, and even earlier, kids use them primarily for entertainment – games, movies, videos, animation, communication. Most of them are passive consumers, especially these from lower-income families (Parijkova, 2017 : 3004). The report “Young Children (0-8) and Digital Technology: A qualitative exploratory study across seven countries” presents that all children aged 6-7 years from the 6 surveyed families in Sofia, regardless of the parents' social status, use digital technologies. By the age of six, children in the surveyed group are “regular users of at least one, and in most cases, several, digital devices” (Shahbazyan, Haydinyak, & Kumanova, 2016 : 35). With this in mind, this survey is based on the presumption that children over 7 years not only know digital technologies but also skillfully deal with them. However, while Western Europe and Australia have years of experience in developing digital literacy programs since the kindergarten, there are schools in Bulgaria where up to 4th grade is not covered by IT training. That is why, in the age category that is in focus in the study (initial stage of training – up to 11 years old), we cannot talk about digital literacy yet, but only for forming of conditions for digital literacy.

3.2. Materials

The survey toolbox contains a questionnaire with 43 questions for students and a questionnaire for a semi-standardized interview for the second stage of the project. The design of the study is divided in three parts – section Reading, section Digital literacy and Connection between them. There is also a demographic part.

3.3. Measures

The first section of the study Reading consists 16 closed questions about reading habits of students and their parents, what the child thinks about reading, about shared reading, etc.; and two open-ended questions, connected with quantity of read books, an explanation of the reason that student likes or doesn't like reading books, what kind of books prefers responded student and how many hours per week he/she reads books.

The study will compare parent's education, reading-stimulating home environment (parents read, home library, regular visits of cultural events), early literacy in the family, etc. The most important in this age group is the influence of parents, so attention is paid to the study of this impact on children.

The Criterion An environment conducive to reading has three indicators: An existence of a library at home; Usage a library at school or town library; Attendance at cultural events – theater, concerts, etc. The Criterion Reading for pleasure and Reading on duty will be measured with Number of read books, Frequency of reading, Choosing a book – for reading and for present, Evaluation of satisfaction from reading. The Criterion Best Practices for reading at home has three indicators: Parents read to their children; Parents buy/borrow from library books for their children and Parents read books – personal example.

Second section “Digital literacy” consists 20 closed questions – student should compare information from different sources, upgrade information; will have the ability to make conclusions. It will also investigate how the students use applications for creating texts; and one open-ended question: How many hours per day do you use digital technologies? Criteria and Indicators are as follow: Criterion The role of digital technologies with indicators Access to technology at home; Time spent with technology; Attitude towards technology; Applications.

The Criterion Formation of digital literacy with indicators Critical thinking – identifying, searching, storing and critically evaluating information; Online communication; Creating digital content – creating and editing text, photos and videos, etc.; Online safety – knowing of the risks on the internet, problem solving skills; Self-estimation of digital competencies.

Third section “Connection between reading and digital literacy” has 4 closed questions about reading and technologies. Indicators are Enrichment of knowledge; Developing specific skills, Accessing to information; Developing creative thinking. The last one is: Is it true this statement: “If the student reads more, he/she will work better with technology”.

The selection criteria will be based on the results of quantity of read books, age of starting reading, respect for books and reading, but also ability to work with digital technologies. One of the most important questions is connected with applications that students prefer – it will be search positive association between access to apps and print knowledge. The results will be processed through SPSS and analysis.

3.4. Procedure

Methods for collecting and registering sociological information are direct individual anonymous survey for students as well as a semi-standardized interview with selected students after an analysis of the interviews in the next stage of the project. The stages of the survey include an organizational stage; recruitment and registration of sociological information; processing of the collected sociological information; analysis of the results of the sociological survey and semi-standardized interviews.

The survey is based on a random sample, the poll is being conducted according to the classification of the cities of the Law on Territory Planning – ‘very large cities’ (with population over 200,000 inhabitants), ‘big cities’ (from 100,000 to 200,000 (with a population of 30,000 to 100,000 inhabitants), ‘small towns’ (with a population of 10,000 to 30,000 inhabitants) and ‘very small towns’ (population below 10 thousand inhabitants).

Students of 5 Bulgarian towns (3 from capital Sofia, one or two classes from 4 different towns will be asked to fill out a questionnaire.

4. Results

This study explores the traditional reading of the students, and when asking questions about reading we mean reading a paper book. When asking about electronic readers and digital reading, it is explicitly mentioned in the questions.

The technique of reading and understanding of read text is formed when a student is on primary school. This is the period that has been forming reading literacy. The first section is addressed to explore the family-generated learning conditions in book love and reading. The aim is to describe the students' family environment and to determine to what extent it influences their formation as readers. The behavior of parents, the context that they have been created for their children, their active or passive attitude to the studied objects has formed the children's attitudes towards reading, books, digital devices. Shared reading, upbringing in love for books creates a lasting positive attitude of children to language and written words. A "good foundation in communication and language is a prerequisite for further skills and literacy – such as writing and reading, for example" (Billington, 2016 : 5). According to other researchers up to the age of 5, the child's vocabulary will impact on an educational success and on an income when this person gets 30 years old (Duckworth, Feinstein, 2006).

The results of own survey at the preparatory stage of the project also confirmed that when someone's talking about "reading" he/she means reading a book in a traditional paper one not on screen (Parijkova, 2017a : 3001).

The questions are connected with the students' abilities to extract essential information from texts. The study asks children about their digital skills. The study relies on student's self-assessment, which in itself is not the most reliable method. That's why it will be conducted an additional study – based on an interviews – with specially selected students from this survey.

Understanding of the general content of the text, extraction information from the text, adequate communication, an identification of key information in the text are some of the most important measures for reading literacy.

PISA analyzes Reading literacy is reported on three subscales – retrieving information, interpreting text, and reflecting on and evaluating text. Following the PISA 2000 assessment,

five proficiency levels were developed to indicate students' capacities in the reading assessment. Students at the highest level are able to carry out high order tasks such as locating complex information from within an unfamiliar text which contains competing information, whereas at the lowest proficiency levels students are only able to locate information which is more evident and has less competing information accompanying it. At the highest levels students are expected to reflect on the goals of an author in a certain piece of text, whereas students at the lower levels would be expected to make a simple connection between information in the text and everyday life (PISA). There is a criterion in the survey: ability to transfer knowledge, which may measure with some indicators – rationalization of knowledge and its proper usage out of context; an ability to use knowledge in different situations. The criterion 'Solving creative tasks' will be identifying by some tasks that students should make – for example – to create an appropriate title for a new text and/or to devise a short story in five random words.

The family and an environment at home are the most important things for the formation of reading literacy of young children – the parent's behavior, their reading preferences, home library, and an attendance at cultural events – theatre, concerts, etc.

Kres and van Leeuwen (2001) and Burn and Durran (2007) adapt Bill Green's 3D model of literacy and Colvert (2015) revises what has been done and gives a new definition of digital literacy and its elements – Design, production, distribution and acceptance are the new key elements of meaning-making process. These processes are contained in the creation of text and reading /viewing all kinds of formal education and everyday life.

Digital literacy does involve the acquisition of skills, including traditional skills related to alphabetic print, but also skills related to accessing and using digital technologies. This category might also include skills related to the processes involved in accessing, using and creating knowledge (Sefton-Green, Marsh, Erstad, and Flewitt, 2016).

5. Discussion

The questions about different kind of reading devices /as a traditional/paper book, an e-reader or an interactive e-book/ are not relevant to the Bulgarian reality. Many publications worldwide (primarily in the UK, Australia, and the USA – for example Kucirkova, 2016; Neumann, 2014)

present conducted research that investigate which format children and their parents choose, and why. But in Bulgaria e-books for children are not popular. There aren't interactive e-books at all.

Technology can play an important role in supporting early communication, language and literacy by offering new opportunities such as interactive and intuitive presentation from eBooks and applications as well as video calls. But the interaction with adults should not be missed. Rather, Technology should be used as a teaching tool. It is known that if used properly technologies can play an important role in groups of children who have any problems or in boys (Billington, 2016).

6. Conclusion

New in the 21st century is multimodality in education, not digital. The multimodal is that the child uses sounds, music and normal paper book. Apps should help to education, not replace it! The study of digital competence and its relation to reading by children can contribute to acquiring sustainable knowledge that can be used in teachers' guidebooks, educational policies and recommendations for parents and pedagogues.

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