



Children's Expressions as a Key to Understanding Child's Level of Thinking, Creation and Action

Bronislava Kasáčová¹, Lenka Lipárová²

¹Matej Bel University, Slovakia

²Matej Bel University, Slovakia

Abstract

The study presents the results of the development and validation of the research tool UCD-ACR-NIM, aimed at exploring children's preconceptions. These preconceptions represent their internal representations and understandings of the world and its phenomena. For both teachers and researchers, diagnosing children presents a particular challenge, as this age group is often difficult to reach using exploratory research methods. The tool was developed based on the theoretical foundations of J. S. Bruner [1], reflective practice, and phenomenography [2], which served as the key research approach. The research instrument and data analysis methodology were created by the author and were first introduced at ICERI 2015. The Designed Semi-Structured Flexible Micro-Interview (SSFMI) was validated using qualitative research procedures. The findings provide evidence that, when conducted properly and in accordance with established interview principles, the instrument constitutes an appropriate method for collecting data on children. The UCD-ACR-NIM tool reduces individual, social, and cultural disadvantages and allows for ecological validity. Its application is accessible even to pre-service teachers, supporting the development of their diagnostic competencies and research skills. An electronic version of the tool is currently being developed for an e-platform, aimed at collecting diagnostic information for the teacher-researcher. This platform enables teachers to gather and record diagnostic data about learners, focusing on areas such as prerequisites of artistic giftedness, the risk of specific learning disorders and ADHD, or the development of language competencies. It supports pre-service teachers in developing diagnostic competence, conducting research, and reflecting on changes in speech development, specific skills, and cognitive growth, with a perspective of longitudinal research. The study is illustrated with a sample analysis of responses obtained from a selected group of respondents.

Keywords: *Diagnostic competencies of teachers, children's preconceptions, younger learners, diagnostic tool, e-support for diagnostics*

1. Introduction

Modern approaches to educational practice emphasize the importance of a personality-oriented approach, which takes into account the individual development of each child's specific characteristics. In the theoretical foundations, since the emergence of theories proposed by authors who transformed the understanding of childhood developmental possibilities – L. S. Vygotsky, J. Piaget, and A. Maslow – particular emphasis has been placed on the role of speech. J. Bruner [1], along with many subsequent authors, highlighted speech as an indicator of the actual stage of development. These ideas gave rise to the modern principle of individualization in teaching. Individualization involves the ability to uncover and identify not only a child's explicit but also their hidden potential. It concerns all the three dimensions of personality: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. This paradigm is important not only during the period of education but also for the development of an individual's readiness for lifelong growth, as well as the capacity to cultivate their personality and engage in lifelong learning. *Focusing on this topic is particularly important* because teachers are expected to provide modern and appropriate guidance to pupils during their development through individualized educational approaches. However, it is necessary to clarify the essence of such teaching from a theoretical perspective and to propose or present possible applications; we consider this to be *the aim of the present study*. In the separate sections, we will address the key terms: individualization, inclusive education, and educational diagnostics, and we will introduce the concept of UCD-ACR-NIM. We will present an electronic platform (<https://depistaz.aksay.sk/>) designed for teachers to collect and analyze structured information about learners.

The foundation of effective educational practice is a well-prepared, thoughtful, and proactive teacher who adopts the stance of a reflective practitioner and understands the methods, limits, and tools for comprehending children. This does not refer to an individual approach in the simplified sense (a



teacher working with a single student), but rather to the ability to acquire timely and objective knowledge using reliable methods and procedures. [2] We must recognize that teachers do not receive information about children only through explicit, professionally prepared reports from experts. Most information becomes available through everyday interactions between teachers and pupils in the classroom – often unplanned and spontaneous, but also in response to deliberately provoked situations. Both natural events during regular teaching and unexpected situations provide opportunities and space for children to demonstrate their knowledge, express themselves, engage in social interactions, and more. It is essential to recognize that a child's behavior and all forms of their expression convey important information about their inner experiences, which may not always be interpretable by a layperson. From the standpoint of ethical boundaries and teacher competence, teachers have access only to certain diagnostic procedures – specifically, those based on observable behavioral manifestations.

As we will gradually explain, our paper draws on the theory of reflective educational practice for teachers [3], our own research [4], studies by other authors, as well as the reflected practice of training pre-primary and primary education teachers [5].

2. Theoretical Bases

2.1 Individualization

Student-teachers are introduced to these theories during their undergraduate training for the teaching profession. The early school-age period is the most important stage in a child's development as a 'learner.' Many potentialities, such as intellect, talent, and skills, have periods particularly sensitive for their development, during which a 'healthy start' is essential. If this sensitive period is missed, or if the child lacks appropriate stimuli and opportunities, development may slow, talent may diminish. Otherwise its cultivation may be neglected, which can significantly affect the child's future, as well as their self-awareness, self-development, and lifelong growth. These consequences can manifest not only in educational contexts – such as attention and concentration during school activities, interest in educational content, initiative in self-directed learning, academic achievement, and application in the broader social environment.

Psychologists active in counseling practice often emphasize that missed or underutilized time during early education in the development of speech, interests, talents, and skills can manifest in adolescents as a lack of hobbies, sadness, diminished social connections, loss of purpose, and even deprivation. Therefore, it is important that teachers of younger learners, in addition to achieving the educational objectives set by the official curriculum, are also able to support the development of children's personalities according to their individual abilities and interests.

The question is: *how can teachers act appropriately and in an individualized manner* if they do not know the child well, lack accurate information about them, and have no guidance on how to proceed correctly and effectively in supporting the development of each child's personality? They have only relatively specific instructions on what they are expected to convey to their pupils and to achieve in terms of the curriculum. They have certain (mostly vague) individualized methodological procedures for addressing specific problematic cases. Even if the vast majority of children appear to be 'non-problematic,' this does not in any way imply that they do not require special attention. Can a teacher rely solely on frontal, uniform approach? There is no straightforward answer to the above question. One possible way to provide support is through diagnostic competence, understood as mastering the methods and tools for obtaining objective pedagogical knowledge about a child. Because the foundation is knowledge – i.e., diagnostics – only then can individualized or group-targeted stimulation or intervention be initiated

2.2 Inclusive Education

Humanistic ideas related to justice in education, which have evolved into the concept of inclusive education, significantly contribute to the enhancement and expansion of teacher competencies. Whereas, in the past, a large proportion of learners from the marginal part of the spectrum were educated in special schools and classes, today teachers in mainstream classrooms work with a more diverse group of learners. However, support and assistance from experts in schools – such as psychologists, special educators, speech therapists, and teaching assistants – cannot fully replace what a classroom teacher can achieve through several hours of daily interaction with children. However, this does not concern only deficits in concentration, attention, intellect, social skills, or developmental adaptation. This also includes children with above-average intelligence, artistic talent, or, more broadly, creativity. Several authors have recently highlighted the advantages and



disadvantages of inclusion in education, particularly regarding its impact on the training and work of teachers, especially those in primary education. [6]

Teachers are being prepared for most of the cases mentioned above, but primarily at a theoretical level and, at best, also methodologically. They are less proficient at recognizing individual cases early enough to prevent the problem from becoming generalized or entrenched in behavior. [7]

A particularly noteworthy and concerning finding is the result of research on teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. The research findings were presented by Cabanová et al. [8]. The authors reported a rather concerning finding, based on a substantial sample of respondents, that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education are not entirely favorable. However, the findings should be considered alongside the fact that the respondents do not reject the principle of educational justice, nor do they oppose children with specific educational needs. They criticize and emphasize that the conditions of the schools and the professional support provided – including ongoing collaboration with the parents of these children – are simply insufficient. Similarly, a group of authors investigating the subjectively perceived workload of primary education teachers. [9] Although the aforementioned findings originate from the Slovak Republic, other authors have reported similar results in their research. [10]

2.3 Diagnostic Competencies

A teacher's ability to conduct diagnostics entails a complex set of underlying assumptions. It includes knowledge and insights from the fields of pedagogy and the psychology of learning and ontogenesis, as well as the development of a child's personality. The teacher's conative readiness to employ appropriate and professionally legitimate methods and tools to diagnose various aspects of a child's personality is also important.

Last but not least, it also involves maintaining an attitude toward children that is open, unbiased, and impartial—embodying the stance of a reflective professional, in accordance with Andrew Pollard's theory of 'evidence-informed professional practice' [3]. In most EU countries, this topic is addressed through professional standards for teachers, which are increasingly assuming the status of recommended legislation. They assume that it is no longer sufficient for a teacher to act merely as a transmitter of knowledge and to ensure the conveyance of cultural content and moral values. Most importantly, they must possess diagnostic competencies that enable them to understand the individuality of each student. Not only his/her cognitive predispositions teacher has to interpret and decode the child's affective manifestations, and objectively assess psychomotor skills, including non-traditional and non-standard behaviors, as well as creative expressions and manifestations of creativity. To assess each child's capabilities and needs, the teacher also needs to be familiar with the child's family and social background. In order to diagnose an individual's position within the classroom, it is essential to understand the social relationships among learners. [7]

The demands placed on teachers today far exceed the traditional concept of the profession as transmitters of knowledge, positioning them instead as the child's development experts. The most appropriate approach for a teacher's educational practice is that of a reflective professional, as highlighted by several authors. [2] Although a teacher cannot become an expert in psychological or medical diagnosis and therapy, undergraduate training can guide them to adopt the attitudes of a reflective practitioner, along with the knowledge and skills required for dynamic diagnostics. Based on our research experience [4], which methodologically focused on the study of children's speech and its development following Bruner [1], we developed an original research tool UCD-ACR-NIM

Understanding Child's Development as Core of Reflection Via Narration Inside Mind [4]. We have also developed a battery of research tools grounded in the theoretical framework of dynamic diagnostics, which are made available on an e-platform (<https://depistaz.aksay.sk/>)

An important aspect of a reflective practitioner's profile is the readiness to continually learn, update, and revise student results and information about pupils. Andrew Pollard [3] defined six key characteristics of reflective teaching. He based his work on the concept of applying knowledge about reflective activity into the teaching process, which he elaborated in his work *How We Think: The Relationship between Reflective Thinking and the Educational Process*:

1. Reflective teaching entails an active engagement with the goals and outcomes of the educational process, aimed at achieving optimal teaching effectiveness.
2. Reflective teaching occurs within a cyclical spiral process, during which the teachers continuously monitor, assess, and revise their own performance.
3. Reflective teaching requires the ability to employ diagnostic methods—gathering information about the classroom to support the development of teaching competence.
4. Reflective teaching requires attitudes such as impartiality, responsibility, and enthusiasm.



5. Reflective teaching is based on teacher judgment, which draws information both from self-reflection and from pedagogical and psychological knowledge.
6. Reflective teaching, professional development, and personal fulfillment are fostered through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues. [3]

We have consistently and in the long-term focused on the issue of diagnostics by developing practical, teacher-friendly diagnostic tools, which can also serve for screening and early detection [13]. All published tools have been applied and evaluated by teachers in educational practice and are now part of undergraduate training. However, it is important that their use is freely available to the teaching public, that these are easily accessible, and that these are designed to facilitate the analysis of the results obtained. This enables the teachers to conduct the evaluation independently and identify the child's strengths and weaknesses. They then determine themselves whether they are able to address the identified problem, deficit, or risk on their own, or whether they need the support of an expert.

3. Discussion and implications for practice

Drawing on both theoretical knowledge and several research and educational projects, we have developed not only a set of diagnostic tools, but also a diagnostic approach for examining children's preconceptions through interviews with them. The interviews are conducted according to a recommended procedure that incorporates reflection as a phenomenological principle.

A research model grounded in these principles was developed within the framework of reflective phenomenography as both a research and diagnostic approach [4; 14]. Its distinctive feature is that we sought to design a scientific procedure that is closely aligned with common teaching practices, ways of thinking, and applications in pedagogical reasoning.

The tool is called UCD-ACR-NIM – *Understanding Child's Development As Core of Reflection Via Narration Inside Mind*. This acronym is derived from three elements or principles:

UCD – Understanding Child's Development. Developing examples from children's everyday lives helps adults to better understand them and provides support for their developmental efforts. Action research and an understanding of children's preconceptions regarding the phenomena of literacy, family, school, and the broader social environment will enable teachers to gain insight into children's cognitive level, language and communication skills, as well as into manifestations of their emotional and moral development.

ACR - Analysis - Categories - Reflected theory. Providing the results obtained through analysis and categorization according to theoretical frameworks helps teachers develop a reflective methodology. Based on the data obtained, the teacher analyzes and interprets it, subsequently developing their own nuanced theory, which serves as the foundation for designing educational practices and interventions.

NIM - Narrative Instruments and Methods. The model helps to enhance and extend the potential of diagnostic tools by incorporating innovative, child-appropriate methods in line with dynamic diagnostics. As a researcher, the teacher can use a semi-structured micro-interview to ask children questions about their understanding of the meaning, their perception of the purpose, and the origins of their experience with the concept being studied. The questions can also help teachers identify relationships, such as a child's attitude toward a subject or educational content.

We present the structure of a flexible, semi-structured micro-interview along with the recommended phrasing of simple questions. [12] The teacher can flexibly adapt the focus of the investigation within the context of the educational content. It proceeds as follows:

- We assessed whether children understood the concept by asking the question: 'What is it...?'
- We assessed whether children understood the purpose by asking the question: How can we use it?.
- We assessed the source of the experience by asking the question: How do you know this?
- What would happen, if ... (there was/were no...)? Here, understanding of reality is further explored through a paradoxical question designed to provoke cognitive conflict in the child's mind. Based on the context of the responses, one can infer the child's relationship to the examined reality.

Drawing on these theoretical and methodological foundations, we also took into account the theory of children's preconceptions, which encompasses cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. When evaluating children's statements, the teacher must recognize that they should be considered and assessed as a whole. This is because the child interprets their experiences holistically rather than in isolation, as the theory explains and suggests. The first three questions primarily leaned towards the cognitive dimension of the preconception, while the fourth focused mainly on the affective dimension. This procedure is recommended for teachers conducting a diagnostic interview with a child.



3.1 Digital Platform of Diagnostic Tools for Teachers

We are developing a digital platform to address the training needs of students preparing to become teachers in primary and pre-primary education, also including diagnostic competencies across several areas. The platform is an open system to which we will gradually be adding diagnostic tools related to the implementation of support measures for inclusive education. The goal of developing this platform is to make it accessible to educators for use in educational practice. It currently includes the following screening tools:

- **RISK OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES IN PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN:** Screening questionnaire for kindergarten teachers on young children's development (Sitková, D. - Kasáčová, B., 2012) [13]. The aim of the questionnaire is to gather comprehensive information on children's development at the start of schooling, with the purpose of preventing and mitigating learning disabilities, which is crucial for their healthy development and future academic success. The focus is less on assessing the children and more on supporting their development.
- **RISK OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES IN YOUNGER SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN:** Screening questionnaire for first-grade elementary school teachers (Kasáčová, B. - Sitková, D.) [13]. The aim of the questionnaire is to gather comprehensive information on younger learners' development at the start of schooling, with the goal of preventing and addressing learning disabilities. This plays crucial role for their healthy development and future academic success. Supporting pupils, parents, and teachers is the primary goal of diagnostics, which is only possible through active cooperation with teachers. Diagnosing is not about evaluating or categorizing children, but about supporting their development.
- **RISK OF BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS:** Screening questionnaire for assessing behavioral disorders and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in children (Kasáčová B. - Sabo R. 2011) [13]. The aim of this screening tool is to gather information on behavioral patterns in young school-aged pupils. The results are used for the detection-screening, and prevention of behavioral, activity, and attention disorders.

Completing the questionnaire can help:

- more easily distinguish behavioral disorders from activity and attention disorders, which is crucial for preventing the development of secondary behavioral disorders and, subsequently, specific learning disorders;
- gather information on the risk of one of the subtypes of activity and attention disorders, including Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Completing the questionnaire will help the teacher organize and clarify their knowledge about the children.

PROFILER OF ARTISTIC POTENTIAL

Estimating the potential and form of a child's artistic talent. (Lipárová, L. - Pondelíková. R.) [5; 15;16]
A prerequisite for assessing a child is the analytical observation of their behavior during artistic activities, as well as during other regular doing. The observation items are designed to capture a broad range of the child's expressions, with the aim of assessing the extent and nature of their artistic gift. The child should be assessed in comparison with other children in the group or with peers of a similar age.

The assessment is largely subjective and relies on intuition. Each item must be rated on a scale ranging from 0, indicating the absence of the phenomenon, to the highest value, indicating very frequent occurrence of the phenomenon. After providing answers to the items, a graph will be displayed showing the child's profile of inclinations toward the defined types of giftedness. [16]
As part of pilot testing the platform's functionality with students, we are evaluating the validity of individual items and examining students' perceptions of the value of early assessment of potential giftedness, as well as the associated developmental risks for the child. To the question: *Is it meaningful to address a child's talent potential at the preschool age?* Between 2022 and 2025, we collected 242 responses from students who used the interactive questionnaire Profiler of Artistic Potential to assess a child they were familiar with.



3.2 Findings

Most respondents agree that identifying giftedness in preschool age holds significant predictive and intervention value. They perceive the preschool period as a stage of development in which a child is highly receptive, creative, and open to new stimuli. It is during this period that the foundations of a child's future abilities, skills, interests, and self-esteem are established. The students' responses highlighted the key reasons supporting the importance of early recognition of artistic potential:

- **Early Support for Potential Development.** Identifying the type of giftedness allows targeted support for a child in the areas where he/she excels, whether in artistic, logical, motor, or language skills.
- **Prevention of Frustration and Problematic Behavior.** Gifted children may become bored, disruptive, or withdrawn in a mainstream environment if their needs are not properly recognized and addressed.
- **Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Confidence.** A child who experiences success and has the opportunity to develop their strengths naturally develops a positive self-image, which in turn also enhances their interest in learning.
- **Possibility of Individual Approach.** Early identification of giftedness helps teachers tailor educational strategies to the needs of individual children, plan activities more effectively, and also guide their extracurricular learning.
- **Foundations for Interests.** Perceptions of one's abilities and interests at an early age can shape a child's future trajectory, influencing everything from their leisure activities to career choices.

Several student responses emphasized the importance of artistic expression as a tool for assessing preliteracy skills and other developmental manifestations in children within the context of school entry. Artistic activity supports a child not only in the development of motor skills and aesthetic sensibilities, but also in emotional expression, social relationships, and cognitive growth. Early recognition and support of giftedness in preschool-aged children appears to offer significant pedagogical benefits. It helps children develop their potential at a natural pace, strengthens their self-confidence, and provides teachers and parents with valuable information for creating an individualized and stimulating learning environment.

CONCLUSION

In line with current theoretical approaches to education that respect child development, as well as with contemporary trends in the preparation of primary education teachers, we reached the following conclusions:

- A teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge, but a reflective professional who respects each child's individuality and embraces the natural diversity of children, their social environments, and cultural patterns.
- Modern education requires not only knowledge acquired during undergraduate training, but also the development of prosocial and pro-inclusive attitudes, along with high-quality diagnostic skills based on the principles of reflective learning and dynamic diagnostics.
- Technical and instrumental support not only facilitates teachers' work, but also enhances its quality, saves time, and improves educational practice as well as professional dialogue between teachers and the expert support team.
- Research and teaching should be based on mutual understanding, reflection, and the support of child development. Dialogue among educational stakeholders should be grounded in knowledge and evidence and aim to reach agreements that serve the best interests of the child.

An additional benefit is that diagnostic tools can also be used for research purposes, providing opportunities to develop teachers' research competencies.

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