

COMPARISON OF EDUCATION DOCUMENTS IN THE NATIONAL AND SCHOOL CURRICULUMS WITH A FOCUS ON MUSIC EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract This article presents the results and interpretations of a study that aimed to compare the National curriculum for music education with the school educational programs and map the modification of the National music education curriculum and its implementation in school educational programs. Ten school educational programs were subjected to a qualitative content analysis and a mutual comparison. The most important finding was that the Thematic Educational Plans continue to be part of the curriculum even though their implementation is optional. The musical competences listed in the National curriculum are followed and developed by the schools through a wide range of musical activities. Varying criteria were used in the evaluation of students based on the school curriculum but all of them comply with the competences required by the National curriculum for music education. Despite a certain freedom in curriculum development, insufficient competence to modify educational standards can be observed among teachers.

Keywords:

music education,
state educational
program,
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program,
content analysis,
comparison

1 Introduction

Education in Slovakia, as in other European countries, has been subject to a number of changes and attempts at school reform. The school reform (2008), the legislation of which was defined by the *Zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z. zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z. o výchove a vzdelávaní (školský zákon) a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov*, brought a two-tier model of curriculum development. The requirements of the state curriculum in the form of a basic pedagogical document, called the state educational program, representing the first tier of the two-tier model of education, became binding for the school curriculum. Within the boundaries of the state curriculum, schools are required to incorporate the mandatory content of education and training aimed at the required competences into their programs. The state educational program comprises educational standards, i.e., requirements aimed at the education output and formulated as competences. These are knowledge, competences, skills, values, and attitudes in the context of the defined content of education. Using the two-tier model of the curriculum, schools further solidify, complete, and specify their own vision, focus and goals in their programs based on the pre-determined state educational standards as well as the content of education and training.

In this article, the focus is on monitoring the implementation of the state curriculum's requirements in school educational programs with a focus on the subject of music education.

2 Music Education in the First Level of Primary School

The target area of the study was the school subject of music education, which is part of the Arts and Culture educational field. Primary education for students covers seven educational areas. These comprise content for education beyond particular subjects and include some issues from those subjects. They provide continuity and coherence to the education content, in which students acquire knowledge, skills and key competences.

According to the State Educational program, the education area of Arts and Culture “creates a space for understanding the importance of culture and art in the life of man and society” (State Pedagogical Institute, hereinafter referred to as ŠPÚ, 2015, p. 9).

Music education in Slovakia is a compulsory subject that is carried out once a week from the first to the eighth grade of primary school. As part of the school educational program, primary schools can use the available (optional) lessons, defined in the framework curriculum of the state curriculum, according to their own preferences, e.g., to increase the weekly lesson allowance for compulsory subjects. This is one of the ways in which schools can create enough time to strengthen the educational standard of music education.

Music education incorporates many natural abilities, such as playfulness, spontaneity, curiosity, and attention, with which children enter primary schools. The goal of music education at the primary level is to continuously develop students' innate and natural abilities and skills. Based on the activity character, the aim of music education through musical activities is to develop students' basic musical competences, to foster a positive relationship with music art and music, and to develop their cultivated expression in speech, voice and movement in connection with music. The objective is to educate an active, receptive performer to and listener of music, and to develop the emotional world and musical taste of students (ŠPÚ, 2015). Music education is based on the student's activity and independence, whereby the teacher in the role of facilitator, together with the students creates, becomes familiar with, and experiences music through musical activities, thus creating the individual character of this activity.

The activity-related nature of music education needs to be understood in terms of education in music and education through music (Sedlák, 1985), with regard to the requirements of modern innovative pedagogy. On the topic of progressiveness and innovation, Petlák (2020, p. 15) points to the selection of goals in education, the formulation of educational goals, teaching of and learning by students, multimedia aids and techniques, the development of activating methods, techniques, the use of teaching strategies, and the search for methods and forms of pedagogical work.

2.1 Educational Standards in Music Education – Primary Education

The educational standards of the state curriculum define a set of requirements for a student, wherein their successful mastery allows the student to advance to the next grade of the given level of education. According to the state educational program “the requirements are formulated as competencies, which include knowledge,

competences, skills, attitudes and values in the context of defined content of education” (ŠPÚ, 2015, p. 14). Educational standards determine the minimum performance requirements, setting out the norm for students and the prescribed content.

The performance standard of music education includes 6 basic areas of student competency development in the field of music: vocal, instrumental, active listening to music, musical-motor, musical-dramatic, and musical-visual. They represent the student’s required performance in individual areas, expressed in the form of active verbs for achieving goals.

Boroš (2020, p. 83) states that music education can be defined by three elements: content, goal, and method. The content of music education anchored in the content standard consists of facts, concepts, processes, and metacognitive knowledge, as further specified by Fridman (2020, p. 49–50). The primary goal of music education is to acquire the given learning content, as well as the development of musical skills, which are the starting point and means for the development of a student’s key competences. The secondary goal is to deepen key competences via the art of music (art, aesthetics, creativity), which leads to comprehensive development of the student’s personality.

In connection to educational practice, the state educational program defines the following musical activities: vocal activities, instrumental activities, perceptual activities, musical-motor activities, musical-dramatic activities, and musical-visual activities. For students, musical activities are a means of getting to know and mastering the art of music, as well as of developing musical competences. At the same time, these activities are independent musical activities (performance and interpretation of music), methodological starting points (they are the medium of another teaching method, or they can have the function of a teaching aid), and methods (musical activities used to achieve an educational goal) (Boroš, 2018, p. 89). According to the educational standard, students at the end of the 4th grade should have the following musical abilities:

- **Vocal:** use the voice consciously to achieve a specific musical goal (rhythm, melody, dynamics, expression, mood); naturally apply the correct vocalising, sing purely and rhythmically correctly; know the specifics of the folk music

culture of their own region; sing a simple two-voice harmony (maintaining their own melodic line); intonate melodic models according to the notation; use the voice in improvisation and elementary composition.

- **Instrumental:** play elementary musical instruments; play on the body; play on objects; create elementary musical instruments; play rhythmic models; play simple melodic-rhythmic formations according to notation; create an instrumental accompaniment; improvise with an instrument; react to the teacher's gestures while playing musical instruments; adequately change tempo, dynamics; conduct.
- **Active music listening:** actively listen to songs and musical compositions, as well as their own musical expression; express feelings from listening to music verbally, through movement, and by other artistic means; identify the functions of music and its social significance; identify, characterise and use the correct terminology to name musical-expressive media; identify the cast of interpreted musical composition; identify musical forms and genres; recognise form-building elements; listen with concentration; decipher and express in own words atmosphere, emotions, associations, ideas; or create a specific program.
- **Musical-motor skills:** express feelings from the heard music through movement and other artistic means; adequately respond to rhythm, metre, and tempo; adequately express musical-expressive means through movement; realise dance elements and movement in simple choreographies; distinguish contrasting parts of musical forms through movement; distinguish form-building elements through movement; realise cultivated, aesthetic movement.
- **Musical-dramatic skills:** independently express the plot, mood, and characteristics of the characters in the story; create a musical-dramatic whole by using rhythmic and melodic instruments or other sources of sound; perform musical activities according to free and standardised graphic expression of musical storylines.
- **Musical-visual skills:** visually display sound perceptions; create (write), read, and perform (through voice or playing an instrument) notation (ŠPÚ, 2015).

2.1.1 Cross-Cutting Themes

In primary education, cross-cutting themes are a mandatory part of education. They have no precise time allowance, but they are integrated and overlap with individual subjects according to their content. Schools can implement cross-cutting themes by creating a separate subject within the available lessons or by integrating it into individual subjects in the form of projects, courses, or seminars. The method and form of cross-cutting themes falls within the competence of each school.

The state educational program for primary education defines topics with a cross-cutting character, such as: Personality and social development, Education in the field of marriage and parenthood, Environmental education, Media education, Multicultural education, Regional education and folk culture, Traffic education – road safety education, Protection of life and health. In their content, the cross-cutting themes complement and complete the education of students, as well as enable the creation of links between educational areas of the primary curriculum. The cross-cutting approach encourages the acquisition of new knowledge and the development of students' key competences.

2.2 Assessment in the Subject of Music Education

The assessment of music education in primary school is constantly confronted with the issue of the diversity of students' musical abilities, the temporal scope of teaching music education, subjectivism, and other variables that influence the assessment process. Many teachers place emphasis on giving marks in educational subjects, which fortifies their standing as educational subjects among other compulsory subjects in the state educational program.

Nevertheless, assessing students in the form of marks (grades) has its pitfalls, including insufficient respect for the characteristic features of the student, which makes it a constant subject of criticism in the field of education. Hanna (2007) points out that music education stands outside standardised testing, which causes "dishonour as being objectively measurable" (In: Fridman, 2020, p. 20). The above fact may result in its position in the education system that is associated with a time allowance, the nature and quality of teaching (Fridman, 2020).

Assessment of a primary school student is defined in Section 55 of Act no. 245/2008 Coll. According to this Act, the student's assessment is carried out according to the level of achieved results obtained through verbal assessment, giving a mark, or a combination of marks and verbal assessment (In: Metodický pokyn č. 22/2011 na hodnotenie žiakov základnej školy).

3 Research Problem and Research Goals

The focus in this paper is music education in the first level of primary school at the state and school educational programs. The subject of the study was the issue of transformation of the content of music education from the state educational program into the school educational program. The performance of the requirements of the state educational program with the subsequent transformation of the curriculum reflected in school educational programs was examined at individual selected primary schools in Slovakia.

Following the research problem, the following **research goals** were defined:

1. Create an overview of the basic areas of the content of music education in the state educational program for the first level of primary school. The study focused on the identification of the requirements declared in the state educational program.
2. Analyse the content of school educational programs with a focus on music education.
3. Compare school educational programs in terms of implementing the requirements from the state educational program into the school educational program.

These research goals were met with the aid of the following sub-objectives:

1. Research what student competences receive attention within the school educational program and compare them to the required competences under the state educational program.
2. Research whether the school educational program states that the school implements music education through activities other than lessons in music education.

3. Research whether the school educational program also states the assessment method for students in music education.

Research Questions

Following the research objective and its sub-objectives, the following research questions were set:

1. *Which student competences within the development of music receive attention in school educational programs?*
2. *Do school educational programs state music activities that are also implemented outside the compulsory subject of music education?*
3. *What method of student assessment is stated in school educational programs for the subject of music education at the first level of primary school?*

3.1 Design and Method

The study utilised the method of content analysis on the data found in educational documents at the state and school level. School educational programs were analysed through content analysis carried out in a qualitative way. Sentences and paragraphs were proceeded through coding with the goal to find the main idea. Using the open coding method, the data from the textual documents was broken down into separate parts. In order to identify the category, the most significant recurring data were identified as key dimensions of the key concepts in each category. The research material was gradually segmented and assigned to the created categories, which were further expanded and specified (as a result of the identification of new categories).

A qualitative analysis of the data was conducted by allowing key categories and concepts emerge from the data within the textual material.

The categories were then used to search for the answers to the research questions and to answer the main objective of the study.

Table 1: Categories and concepts in the curricular documents

Interpretation categories	Concepts
Students' competences	Students' ability to express themselves musically, ability to express themselves independently in all components of music education
Interest activity	Students' specific focus on the development of their potential
Student assessment	Feedback on the mastering of set goals

With the help of grounded theory, using the “constant comparative method of analysis,” as coined by Strauss and Corbinová (1999, p. 43), the school documents were compared with each other, as well as with the state educational program.

The constant comparative method, representing, according to Strauss (1987), one of the fundamental methodological pillars of grounded theory, was used in the comparison and in search of similarities and differences in the empirical data in individual school documents (Švaříček & Šedřová, p. 223).

In the framework of the analysis, the focus was on the school educational program as a whole (school characteristics, goals and mission in education, strategies, inclusion of cross-cutting themes), but specific attention was paid to areas such as: musical competences, student interest in activities, and assessment.

3.2 Research Set

The research set comprised curricular documents at the state level in the form of the State Educational program and documents at the school level, consisting of the school educational programs for ten selected primary schools in the Bratislava Region.

Owing to the principles of qualitative methodology in selecting the research file, a deliberate selection was made. The criteria for the selection of participants were applied according to a research sample by Strauss and Corbinová (1999). The composition of this research sample had a non-stochastic, more precisely intentional selection, because the schools were systematically selected according to certain criteria in order to feel sure that other new relevant categories of significance would no longer appear.

The criteria were as follows: Slovak language of instruction, school location (representation at the level of the capital city, regional city, and at the level of a municipality with full grade and non-full grade organisation of teaching in classes), and representation of music education at school (music education is/is not in the forefront of interest). The analysis was performed with a selected set of texts, which stood for a representative sample from the basic set, as the documents were very extensive.

The first basic research set was a curricular document at the state level, the state educational program. The representative set consisted of the State Educational program for Primary Education – 1st Level of Primary Schools and its components: the framework curriculum and educational standards of music education for the 4th grade.

The second basic research set included curricular documents at the school level and state educational programs. The representative set consisted of the school educational program for primary school – primary education and its components: Curriculum and Teaching Curriculum of the subject music education for the 4th grade. At the state level, the State Educational program, which came into effect September 1st, 2015, was examined. It is a supreme applicable curricular document and forms the foundations for developing school educational programs. It is issued and published by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research & Sport of the Slovak Republic.

The school educational program as a basic school document is the school's statement about its idea of the quality of education. It is developed by pedagogical staff at the school and, following its discussion within the pedagogical board and the school board, and the written consent of the school founder, the educational program is issued by the principal and must be published in a public place.

According to Gavora (2015), these curricular documents are complete materials that were created beyond the researcher's reach. The latter takes them over and analyses them.

These documents are a textual means of communication, and Krippendorff (2004) emphasises that “these means of communications were neither developed nor work in a vacuum, but in a specific context. The context is important because it adds additional meaning to the content that is being communicated. Sometimes, without knowing the context, it is even not possible to understand this means of communication” (Gavora, 2015, p. 351).

4 Research Findings

In the analysis of the documents in the state educational program, the following items were observed: the definition of the area of Arts and Culture, key competences, cross-cutting themes, and the educational standards of music education.

In school educational programs, the focus was on monitoring the implementation of the requirements of the state educational program into school educational programs with a focus on the development of musical literacy.

School educational programs in primary schools worked from the foundation of the state educational program. The teaching curriculum for music education in school educational programs are educational standards, and schools state this fact using the following formula in their school educational programs: “the teaching curriculum of music education is identical to the educational standard of the state educational programme.”

Educational standards did not specify a specific way of fulfilling and implementing standards as well as methods for achieving the required musical competences. The form of educational standards determined in this way, even though providing an opportunity for individual schools to freely implement the requirements of the state educational program, nevertheless require a competent teacher in the field of music education, who should use appropriate methods, determine and flexibly adjust the content of education with appropriate methodological materials, taking into account regional specifics, as well as students’ preferences, while respecting requirements of the state educational program.

Some music teaching curriculums were developed within the limits of the state educational program dating back to 2009. The teaching curriculum detailed the objectives of music education in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor areas. They recommended organisational forms, methods of music education, music materials, as well as the graded assessment of the subject of music education. The content of music education was determined by two thematic areas with a defined time allowance:

1. Folk song in the life of man and society (approx. 18 lessons); and
2. Mission of music in our lives (approx. 12 lessons) (ŠPÚ, 2009).

Based on the data analysis, using identified categories, a repertoire of possible information from individual schools was obtained from the research material. In the process of data analysis, the following research questions were posed:

1. *Which of the students' competences within the development of music receive attention in school educational programs?*

Based on the analysis of the state educational program, key competences are respected in school educational programs.

Musical competences are developed within school educational programs, especially in the field of key competences, such as the ability to perceive and understand culture and express oneself through cultural tools. This area of competences is only marginally mentioned by schools in the framework of the teaching strategy; they are achieved by supporting activities and out-of-school activities. Nothing is stated about the methods and forms of teaching.

School educational programs implement the development of musical literacy by integrating the content of cross-cutting themes into music education classes. Nonetheless, the inclusion of cross-cutting themes in music education happens without further specification. The method and implementation are only indicated as an abbreviation of the cross-cutting theme in the teaching curriculum.

The effectiveness of the cross-cutting theme of Regional Education and Folk Culture was strengthened in some school programs through informal experience activities carried out in the form of competitions in the field of art and viewing theatre performances.

Another topic of interest was social and personal development aimed at developing students' personal and social competences through extracurricular activities in some school educational programs.

One of the analysed school curriculums included lessons used for the subject of music education. The increased number of music education lessons was not aimed at expanding the content of the subject music education, rather it created space for the development of musical competences outside lessons, in the choir and band. The choir or band are unique in that they develop individual and social competences, lead to cooperation, and create a space for presentation.

2. Do school educational programs include music activities that are also implemented outside the compulsory subject of music education?

Despite the fact that the allocated time for music education is one lesson per week, school educational programs within non-formal education significantly support students' interests in further development and contribute to the consolidation of students' musical competences through interest groups. Schools cooperate with multiple entities and, owing to their spatial equipment, provide premises for art schools and hobby groups focused on musical activities.

Therefore, these schools offer targeted support for students' activities of interest. Schools provide premises for the realisation of activities, offering a choice of a number of hobby group activities and various courses outside of class.

As part of the development of students' competences in the context of musical literacy, school educational programs provide students with opportunities to represent the school at cultural events and to participate in the creation of school cultural events outside class.

3. *What method of student assessment is prescribed in school educational programs for the subject of music education at the first level of primary school?*

The system of student assessment, mentioned in school educational programs, is based on the Methodical Guidelines for Student Evaluation, issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

It outlines the principles of assessment, obtaining background data for assessment, and the procedure of assessment. In the case of verbal assessment, it lists the criteria for the student's required competences.

School educational programs recommend that the subject of music education be assessed according to the agreement of pedagogical staff on the school's pedagogical board. School educational programs include different criteria for assessing students in music education at different schools. They recommend assessing the subject with a written grade, a verbal grade, as well as a combination of both. Research findings suggest that schools do not specify criteria for a grade.

Some school programs recommend the use of different types and forms of assessment, especially self-assessment.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The paper deals with curricular issues in the context of music education at the first level of primary school. The aim was to get a holistic understanding of the characteristics, circumstances and conditions affecting the process of transformation of the state curriculum into the school educational programs at selected primary schools. The main findings and conclusion of the analysis of school documents were interpreted with regard to the fact that these documents contain information indicated in the schools' own educational programs. The selection of schools included in the analysis was not random, at the same time their number was too small to draw any generally valid conclusions from the results of the analysis.

Most schools did not have their school educational programs published on their websites. Some school documents were made available to the author for inspection in full at the school directorate, where they had the opportunity to create photo documentation of the documents. The principals of other primary schools were

contacted by telephone, and they willingly sent in their teaching curriculum for the subject of music education by email. These were not always part of their school educational program. The teaching curriculum of music education formed a separate document. To maintain the anonymity of the schools, their exact names were not given in the study. The schools were denominated by their initials.

The main limit of the study came from the nature of qualitative research, wherein the results may not be generalised to a broader research population (Hendl, 2016). The aim of the study was not to present generally valid theses, but to point out the space in which students' musical competences develop.

The focus was on the implementation of the music curriculum from the state educational program in school educational programs at selected primary schools in Slovakia. The subject matter of the study were the state educational program and school educational programs for primary education. The topic of interest was the subject of music education. Through open coding, the school educational programs were examined, coded, categorised, conceptualised and compared.

By analysing the text of the documents, the author identified the specifics, as well as the uniqueness of the educational programs at individual schools, which integrated and transformed the content of components from the music curriculum in their programs. The author sought answers to the research questions and pointed out the coincidences and differences in the basic components of the lesson contents in the subject of music education in school educational programs with the requirements of the state educational program. The school educational programs considered the basic framework of students' musical competences contained in the state curriculum. The state educational program formulated musical activities in a general and concise framework. The student acquires musical competences, such as: singing, playing, listening, expressing music through movement, verbally or by other means.

The development of musical competences is driven not only by the overall educational content of music education, but also by schools creating a stimulating environment through the implementation of various activities carried out during and outside classes with the aim of developing students' musical literacy. It was gratifying to find that schools worked with entities that contribute to the development of musical competences and offer a choice of hobby group activities and courses

focused on musical activities outside class. In terms of students' assessment, it can be concluded that teachers preferred verbal assessment.

Based on the research findings, the author recommends that the objectives of music education be broken down in the teaching curriculum, as was done in the past, so that it is clear which competences are developed in students, according to the taxonomy of objectives in various areas of developing the student's personality with a focus on music education. The choice of topic was related to the effort to highlight the area of music education in schools. The benefit of comparing individual school educational programs can be seen in the knowledge of how individual schools are able to transform the music curriculum in their school educational programs. In this study, it was necessary to point out the implementation and creation of the conditions and space for the targeted development of musical abilities in primary school students. It is important to further integrate music education to a level of equal standing with other compulsory subjects and seek a receptive home for the subject of music education.

The creation of school educational programs has always been a topical issue for every teacher. It is an expression of their pedagogical autonomy and the responsibility of the whole school for the methods and results of education. For this reason, it is important that all school teachers responsible for the implementation of individual parts of the program participate in the development of school educational programs.

As part of the triangulation, the qualitative findings were created using content analysis, and in the next stage of research, the author plans to apply the method of semi-structured interviews and in-depth observation in order to increase its validity.

In this sense, a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of the state curriculum, with a focus on the subject of music education would be interesting. In further research, it is important to map whether the curricular transformation formalised in school educational programs in the form of goals and content also takes place under school conditions, as well as what the attitudes are of music teachers in primary schools towards the processes of transformation of the state curriculum into school curricula.

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