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Media Education in Slovene Preschools: A Review of Four Studies

MATEJA REK¹

∞ In Slovenia, the concept of media literacy has been integrated into the formal education system, including early childhood education. The Preschool Curriculum sets certain goals to be followed in educating preschool children on media-related topics. Research done in other Member States of the EU points to the conclusion that the actual implementation and delivery of media education is both fragmented and inconsistent as well as dependent on the interests and motivation of individual preschool teachers. They are the ones who, in accordance with their professional capacity and autonomy, include the goals set in the curriculum into an actual learning process in preschools, also determining the timing and manner of this. The aim of this article is to review, compare, and analyse the data from recent research on the media education of preschool children in Slovenia in order to better understand how preschool teachers in Slovenia assess their capacity to work with media as well as their media literacy levels, which media they use, and how the media education is conducted in the groups of preschool children.

Keywords: media literacy, media education, preschool children, preschool teacher, early childhood education

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Medijska vzgoja v slovenskih vrtcih: pregled štirih študij

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☞ V Sloveniji je koncept medijske pismenosti vključen v sistem formalnega izobraževanja, tudi na ravni predšolske vzgoje. V Kurikulumu za vrtce so opredeljeni posamezni cilji, ki se nanašajo na področje medijske vzgoje. Raziskave, opravljene v več državah članicah Evropske unije, kažejo na to, da je dejansko izvajanje medijske vzgoje v predšolskem obdobju razdrobljeno, nedosledno in odvisno od zanimanja posameznih vzgojiteljic za medijske tematike, njihovih kompetenc in motivacije. Vzgojitelji so tisti, ki se avtonomno in skladno s svojimi strokovnimi kompetencami odločajo, kako bodo cilje, opredeljene v kurikulumu, vključili v dejanski učni proces v vrtcih, določijo način implementacije in čas, ki ga bodo doseganju posameznega cilja namenili. Namen tega članka je pregledati, primerjati in analizirati podatke nedavnih raziskav o medijski vzgoji predšolskih otrok v Sloveniji, da bi bolje razumeli: a) kako vzgojiteljice v Sloveniji ocenjujejo svojo sposobnost dela z mediji; b) kako ocenjujejo raven svoje medijske pismenosti; c) katere medije uporabljajo pri delu z otroki; č) kako se medijska vzgoja izvaja v skupinah predšolskih otrok.

Ključne besede: medijska pismenost, medijska vzgoja, predšolski otroci, predšolska vzgoja, vzgojitelji predšolskih otrok

Introduction

Mass media have become a daily fixture in people's lives. They have become indispensable tools of communication, a lever for spreading ideas, and a formation of concepts about the world, lifestyles, and behavioural patterns. The stronger the use and impact of mass media consumption in societies are, the more necessary it becomes in the framework of the formal education system to identify and develop the knowledge, competences, and skills required to use media in a meaningful manner. The results of surveys on the media exposure of preschool children (see, for instance Ciboci, Kanižaj, & Labaš, 2014; Duch, Fisher, Ensari, & Harrington, 2013; Farrel, Kagen, & Tisdall, 2016; Hesketh, Hinkley, & Campbell, 2013; Holloway, Green, & Livingstone, 2013; Lemish, 2015) show that media are increasingly an integral part of preschool children's every day lives, which creates numerous issues regarding the impact of media. Observing and understanding the media usage patterns of preschool children and the environment they are being raised in during this period (family, preschool, or other forms of daycare, broader society, etc.) and researching the effects of media use on various aspects of children's lives (health, social aspects, consumption, etc.) may offer us further understanding and guidelines about adequate media education for them.

Adults, through different social roles, perform various tasks in the media education of small children (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011). As parents or family members, they influence the child's knowledge of media through examples, conversations, and experience. They are the role models that children imitate. Thus, it is not surprising that several correlations have been found (as regards the amount of TV watching, reading habits, smartphone and internet use, etc.) between media habits of parents and their children (see for instance Anand & Krosnick, 2005; Boddum, 2013; Ciboci, Kanižaj, & Labaš, 2014; Genc, 2014; Ofcom, 2015; Vittrup, 2009). Furthermore, preschool teachers who use, reflect on and discuss media in the educational process can play an essential role in fostering the child's media literacy.

'Media education is the process of teaching and learning about media; media literacy is the outcome – the knowledge and skills learners acquire' (Buckingham, 2003, p. 4). The concept of media literacy is partly integrated into the formal education system in Slovenia. However, an assessment carried out by the European Commission in 2009 (EC, 2011) showed that even though the topic is included in the national curricula in 23 European countries (Slovenia included), the actual delivery of such education is fragmented and inconsistent. While increasing integration of media literacy and awareness-raising in school education is beneficial, the universal coverage of all children and parents, as well as consistency across all schools, remain significant challenges.

The Preschool Curriculum in Slovenia (1999) sets goals to be followed in educating preschool children on media-related topics. These are partially covered under the area of Arts as a part of audio-visual media, in which it is outlined that children should learn about films, games, educational programmes, and television programmes for children and adults. Children are supposed to observe, record, explore, take photos, identify, comment, use media, etc. and through these activities, the children should shape their first experiences with media and acquire media literacy (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011). Within the area of Languages, the majority of goals refer to literature, reading, and books. Electronic media are intended for listening to fairy tales, stories, puzzles, and songs; it is planned for the children to visit the cinema, watch cartoons, and listen to audio and watch video materials containing various literary texts for children. Preschool teachers should also give children the opportunity to independently create a book and a cartoon. Media-related topics are also included in the Preschool Curriculum within the area of Society, in which it is planned that a child should have an opportunity to discuss prejudices, stereotypes, fashion trends, commercials, etc., which are commonly transmitted by media messages.

The Preschool Curriculum encourages the participation of parents in the planning of activities as it is assumed that this may affect both parents' and children's attitudes towards media. However, preschool teachers are the ones who, in accordance with their professional capacity and autonomy, consider which goals will be included in teaching processes, also determining the timing and manner of this.

The aim of this article is to review, compare, and analyse the data from recent research on the media education of preschool children in Slovenia to better understand how preschool teachers in Slovenia assess their capacity to work with media and their media literacy level, which media they use, and how the media education is conducted in preschool children's groups. We present the data collected in our survey titled 'Media and preschool children in Slovenia' (Rek & Minlavoski Brumat, 2016), which we conducted in 2015 on a national representative sample of preschool children's parents and teachers. Additionally, we have used the results of other available surveys conducted in recent years in the field of preschool media education in Slovenia (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011; Madronič, 2014; Usar & Stritar, 2012) to better substantiate the arguments. The surveys we refer to in this article were performed on diverse samples, using different methodologies (quantitative and qualitative). For this reason, we did not opt for the use of quantitative methods to summarise the results from multiple samples in the form of a meta-analysis, but we have presented the research results of the surveys as a systemic review.

Recent research conducted in Slovenia in the field of media education of preschool children

We will draw the data from four surveys recently conducted in Slovenia in the field of media education of preschool children:

Table 1

Recent research conducted in Slovenia in the field of media education of preschool children

Authors	Year	Sample size	Data collecting methods	Summary of the research aims	Summary of the data that we refer to in this article
Rek & Milanovski Brumat	2016	1087 parents of 1–6-year-old preschool children and 265 preschool teachers	Survey	The purpose of the survey was to gather data on media exposure of preschool children and selected elements of educating preschool children about media, either in their home environment or in preschools. The survey includes parents' opinions and the opinions of preschool teachers of children aged 1 to 6 years of age about the impact of media on the mood, health, weight, speech development, aggressive behaviour, and consumption habits of children. It also presents the opinions of parents and teachers of preschoolers on the importance of setting the rules and restrictions to preschool children regarding the use of media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media exposure of preschool children - accessibility of different media devices to preschool children - aspects of the use of media in Slovene preschools - the ability of preschool teachers to develop media literacy competences in preschool children
Madonič	2014	100 preschool teachers	Survey	The survey focused mainly on media education planning and implementation by teachers in preschools. The survey also included the questions regarding the type of media used in the education process and the activities of media education in preschools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media education planning and implementation by preschool teachers - types of media used in education process - activities of media education in preschools
Usar & Stritar	2012	158 preschool children groups, in which preschool teachers use ICT	Participant observation	The aim of this research was predominantly in mapping the state of the use of information-communication technologies (ICT) in educational processes in Slovene preschools. Researchers focused on the conditions, safety, and meaningfulness of the ICT use in preschool children groups. They wanted to understand the rules referring to children's use of ICT in preschools and safety measures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - frequency of the use of electronic devices in preschool children groups

Authors	Year	Sample size	Data collecting methods	Summary of the research aims	Summary of the data that we refer to in this article
Lepičnik Vodopivec	2011	39 parents and 22 preschool teachers	Survey	The survey aimed to gather data on two aspects of fostering media literacy. One is the media-technical competence of parents and educators, while the other is the media-didactic competence of educators.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - parents and teachers' opinion on teachers' media literacy from the viewpoint of media technical competence - parents' and teachers' opinions on fostering media literacy in kindergarten - teachers' opinions on the role of media in teaching preschool children - teachers' opinions on the integration of media into the kindergarten education process - teachers' opinions on the frequency of media use in kindergarten - whether, according to teachers' opinion, children in kindergarten have the opportunity to use media actively.

Note. Adapted from Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011; Madonič, 2014; Rek & Milanovski Brumat, 2016; Usar & Stritar, 2012.

The surveys listed above use different methodological approaches and questionnaire designs and are targeting different samples, which makes a direct comparison of the data gathered questionable, even in cases where the surveys address the same issue. However, the added value of multiple perspectives and methodological approaches to the same phenomenon is in creating possibilities to understand better the phenomenon of media literacy and education in all its complexity, which is a typical characteristic of (post)modern concepts.

Analysing media literacy of preschool teachers

In a survey conducted by Lepičnik Vodopivec (2011), parents and teachers of preschool children were asked their opinions on media literacy of preschool teachers. Parents have expressed great trust in preschool teachers with 64.1% stating that they are media literate. In contrast, many preschool teachers do not consider themselves to be sufficiently media literate. As many as 77.3%

of preschool teachers were not satisfied with their media literacy or thought it to be too limited (68.3%). Only two preschool teachers (9%) were satisfied with their media literacy (*ibid.*). When self-assessing their media literacy, preschool teachers responding in a survey conducted in the Dolenjska Region (Madronič, 2014) were asked to simply choose between 'yes' and 'no' when responding to the question whether they are media literate; 78 % of them responded that they were. The results of both surveys (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011; Mandonič, 2014) showed that self-assessment of the preschool teachers regarding their media literacy was affected by their age and level of education. Younger preschool teachers as well as those with higher levels of education were more confident regarding their media literacy and vice versa.

In the research done by Lepičnik Vodopivec (2011), an overwhelming majority (94.9%) of parents supported the idea of fostering media literacy in preschool, while 5.1% thought that it was less important. In Croatia, for instance, a research study including the issue of supporting the idea of media education by parents of preschoolers was conducted in 2013 (Ciboci, Kanižaj, & Labaš, 2014). The research used a survey methodology. It was conducted in Zagreb and included 837 parents of preschool children. Most such parents (68.1 %) believed that media education was needed for children, starting at a very early age, for them to learn how to use media and how to separate positive media content from the negative. Only 17.4 % of parents did not agree with this view, while 13.5 % said that they did not know. As much as 69.1% of parents of preschool children thought that media education should start in preschool (Ciboci, Kanižaj, & Labaš, 2014).

Interestingly, only 54.5% of preschool teachers in Slovenia (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011) supported fostering media literacy, while 45.5% of them rejected it. Judging by the data from our survey (Rek & Malinovski Brumat, 2016), preschool teachers in Slovenia are relatively reserved when it comes to including electronic media into educational processes. The majority do not agree with the statement that children should learn how to use electronic devices in preschools (Mean=1.88 on a 1-5 scale); 92.6 % of preschool teachers also stated that a child could never use an electronic device of his/her own in a preschool children's group. This attitude may be related to teachers' assessment of the appropriate frequency of media use in educational processes in preschools. Results from a survey by Lepičnik Vodopivec (2011) show that preschool teachers do not use media often in education processes: 31.8% of them do not use media at all (57.1% of them being younger than 35) or merely use them once per month, and 18.2% of preschool teachers use media every day (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011).

Which media are preschool children exposed to in preschools?

In our survey among parents and preschool teachers (Rek & Milanovski Brumat, 2016), we learned that there were significant differences between exposure of the preschool children at home and in preschool, where children spend more than a half of their waking time on weekdays. In their home environment, children aged 1-3 years, on average use various media (TV, DVD or video, radio, computer or tablet, mobile phone, magazines or newspaper) for 2 hours daily. The amount of time spent using media increases in the age group 4-6 and is on average 2 hours and 40 minutes per day.

The average daily media exposure of preschool children aged 1-6 years to screens (TV, computer, tablet PC, mobile phone) in Slovene preschools is 7.6 minutes daily, and they watch either educational programmes or entertainment programmes. Among the more time-consuming activities of preschoolers in preschool are playing in playrooms, which in the opinion of preschool teachers takes on average an hour and a half daily, and playing outdoors, which on average lasts one hour a day. The most common media-related activity is listening to songs/ music. CD or MP3 players are on average switched on for half an hour daily, more precisely 33.1 minutes. Only rarely do children listen to radio programmes: on average, 2.4 minutes daily (Rek & Milanovski Brumat, 2016).

Madronič (2014) explored how often the media activities prescribed by the Curriculum for Preschools (1999) were conducted and showed that activities that include reading and 'paper media' were much more common compared to activities that included electronic devices (*ibid.*, 129). Books are also the most commonly used mass media as all the surveyed preschool teachers stated that they used books often (on a scale ranging from often, to occasionally, to rarely, and to never). All of them also use CD players. According to this study, digital cameras, printers, radios, posters, and computers are also used either often or occasionally by a majority of respondents (Madronič, 2014). Most preschool teachers never use interactive boards (70%) and newspapers (70%). The use of TV, which is the main media that children in Slovenia are exposed to in their home environment (Kovačič & Rek, 2016; Kovačič, Mavri, & Rek, 2016), is limited; 23% of preschool teachers never use it, while 40% use it very rarely. Only 7% of respondents reported that they used TV regularly.

In a survey titled *Ne/smiselna uporaba IK sredstev pri delu z otroki v vrtcu* ('Un/reasonableness of ICT use while working with children in preschool') (Usar & Stritar, 2012), conducted by the National Education Institute in Slovenia, we find different results regarding the use of electronic devices in education

process in Slovene preschools. Preschool teachers who are skilful in the use of ICT were selected to participate in the research (ibid., p. 1). One of the selection criteria of preschool children groups included in the research was that the use of ICT by the preschool teacher working with children was performed in the previous four years (ibid., p. 5). Using participant observation, a selected preschool teacher's ICT-related activities in 158 preschool children groups were observed during a limited time frame of 150 minutes. The results show that the computer was the most commonly used electronic device during the observed teacher's activities. It was used 453 times in all observed preschool groups and was more frequently used in the second age group (3-6 years old). The computer was used independently or in combination with LCD projector and I-white-board. According to the frequency of use, the computer is followed by a digital camera (used 381 times), CD player/radio (176 times), LCD projector (145 times), camera (96 times), I-table (33 times), phone (31 times), etc. TV was used only 15 times (Ibid., 13). These electronic devices were used both in the first and the second age groups as well as in combined groups. The frequency of the use of most of the above-mentioned digital devices grows with the age of children. The data gathered on the availability of digital devices for children pointed the authors of the study to a conclusion that preschool children in groups, where the research was conducted, have good conditions to use information and communication technologies. One of the issues that the survey identified was that digital devices are not adapted for the use of children (e.g., smaller mouse to fit child's hand). Also, when assessing whether a computer is placed in an appropriate place (furniture, light, room, etc.), a great number of respondents chose the option 'I cannot assess.' The authors of the study assumed that the level of knowledge regarding the correct placement of a computer is low and that additional knowledge regarding this should be provided.

How can we explain the seemingly contradictory claims of various surveys? On the one hand, the survey done in 2011 (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011) shows that preschool teachers in preschools do not often include media in educational processes. Also, the survey from 2016 (Rek & Milanovski Brumat, 2016) shows that the daily media exposure of children to screens in Slovene preschools is low. From a 2014 survey (Madronič, 2014), we can see that activities that include reading and 'paper media' are much more common compared to the activities that include electronic devices. However, the 2012 survey initiated by the National Education Institute in Slovenia points to the conclusion that the use of electronic devices in Slovenian preschools is common. We must, however, keep in mind that this survey was not conducted on a random sample as preschool teachers who were 'skilful in the use of ICT' (Usar & Stritar,

2012, p. 1) were selected to be included into the research and findings may not represent the state of ICT use in preschools on a broader national sample. The participation observation methodology used did offer valuable information regarding the way 'preschool teachers that are skilful in the use of ICT' can use electronic devices in the preschool children groups and their opinions regarding implementing guidelines and instructions from the curriculum. We should also keep in mind that the sole presence of observers in the preschool children group (even though they were a combination of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', which raises the probability of the objectivity of participant observation) can influence the behaviour of the observed preschool teacher (DeWatt & DeWatt, 2011; Murchison, 2012). One way to reduce the shortcomings of the qualitative methodological design is triangulation, which increases the reliability and validity of research evidence. This is also a significant argument for conducting several surveys using various methodological approaches, which allows for the triangulation of the data gathered and makes our claims about the state of the media literacy of preschool teachers and their use of media in educational processes in Slovenia more reliable and valid.

The results on the state of media education in preschools are highly dependent on the types of media the authors of the research choose to observe. If a survey involves 'paper media', such as books or magazines (see, for instance, Madronič, 2014), the results show that paper media are used most commonly during activities in teaching processes in preschools. If a survey focuses more on the use of electronic mass media (see, for instance, Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2011; Rek & Milanovski Brumat, 2016), the most common media-related activity is listening to songs/music as CD or MP3 players are on average switched on for half an hour daily. Here we would like to highlight an observation concerning collecting data regarding the use of radio in preschool children groups. We believe that the differences in research results we observed in data collected on the use of radio between the surveys included in our analysis occur due to differences in the formation of questions. In Slovenia, the word 'radio' is commonly used to refer to a device that may also include CD or MP3 player and not just a radio receiver. We would suggest making a distinction between the use of CD and MP3 players and listening to radio programmes in further studies to obtain accurate data on the source of the media content that preschool children listen to as well as focus on the media content listened to on the radio, CD or MP3 players.

Finally, if a survey focuses more on the use of ICT (see, for instance, Usar & Stritar, 2012), the computer and digital camera are listed as the most used electronic devices in the educational process in preschools.

We should be well aware that the way we see and understand the state of media use in preschools heavily depends on the conceptual and theoretical backgrounds we use to build our surveys.

Are children active participants in preschool media education?

Lepičnik Vodopivec (2011) found that merely 13.6% of preschool teachers regarded pedagogic work with electronic media as the active use of media, e.g., playing an audio or video recording with the teacher's assistance. Most children play a passive role (watching, listening). If watching or listening to a particular media text is followed by a discussion in a preschool children's group on what the children saw or heard, then this contributes to their activity. Mandonič (2014) collected data on watching media content and discussing it for the case of cartoons.

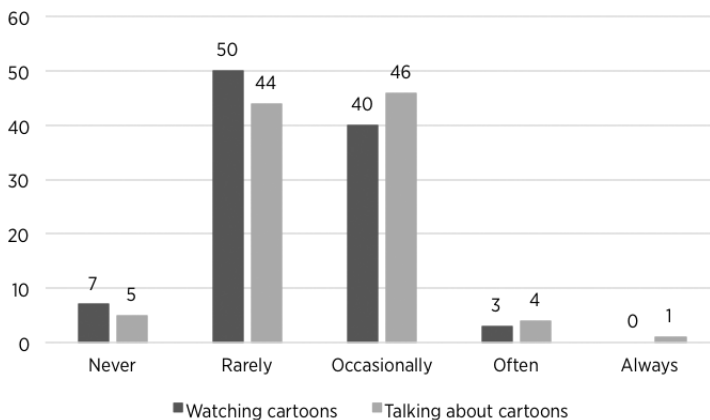


Figure 1. Watching and discussing cartoons in the educational process (expressed as a percentage of responses). Adapted from Madronič, 2014, p. 129.

The large majority of preschool children's media use takes place in their home environment (Kovačič & Rek, 2016). However, the media reception process is not limited to the act of watching TV, playing a video game or listening to a song. It also takes place afterwards through role-play, games, owning products or identifying with characters from media texts or other activities. Among preschoolers, media-related talk emerges mostly in play, which is an important

component of their relationship to media. They display their media knowledge when playing or acting together. Preschoolers do not just simply internalise and reproduce the ideas received from media, but they actively integrate them into their peer relations through thought and action (Roine, Valkonen, & Lahikainen, 2005; Suoninen, 2001). This is one of the reasons that giving an opportunity to discuss the media content children see or hear on television, videos, on the computer, tablet PC or in apps is an essential element of media education.

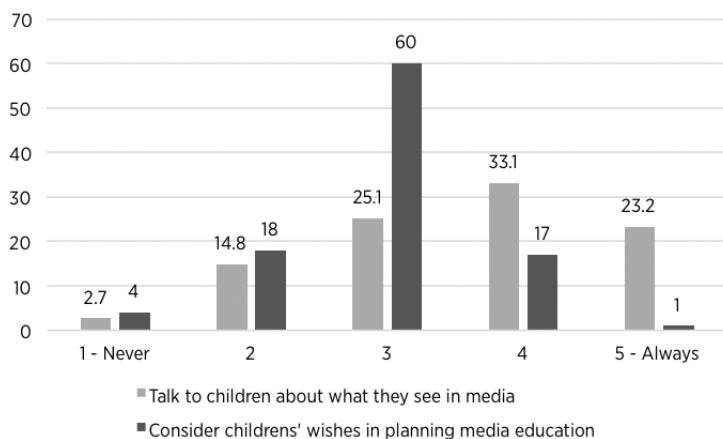


Figure 2. Talking to children about what they see in media and considering their wishes in planning media education activities (expressed as a percentage of responses). Adapted from Madronič, 2014; Rek & Milanovski Brumat, 2016.

From Figure 2, we can see that many preschool teachers state that they do consider the media contents the children bring to the preschool and that they do discuss media contents with children; however, there is no unique pattern of behaviour regarding this issue. As communication processes about the media use and media contents individuals engage in with others are important elements of media message reception, we should also continue to research this in preschool environments. Understanding the setting, causes, contents, impacts, judgments, and values involved in the communication that takes place about the media content between peers among preschoolers as well as the discussion between preschool teachers and children would give us an important insight not just into teaching the pragmatic competences of media literacy, but also the reflexive and creative ones (Hobbs, 2010). Further studies, also employing in-depth interviews or focus group methodology could provide such insights.

Conclusion

Media literacy is defined by a vast circle of policymakers and academics as the ability to access, analyse, and evaluate media in multiple forms and communicate competently within these forms (EC, 2011a). Media education should include not only the activities where children play a passive role in learning how to use media but also age appropriate teaching that will help them develop skills to analyse media codes, interpret and evaluate diverse media meanings and messages and develop an understanding of a constructive nature of media messages. In addition, considering the explanations of how media work, even young children should be (age appropriately) introduced to complex realms of cultural and social implications of mediated reality as they daily take part in it. Media messages and reference frameworks are exposed to affect children's perceptions of reality, their attitudes, their identity, peer-relations, consumer habits, etc.

The Preschool Curriculum in Slovenia (1999) does set goals to be followed in educating preschool children on media-related topics. These are not just goals that refer to skills of how to use various media, but also to activities that would promote reflexivity and some skills of media message creation. However, referring to the data presented in this article, we can agree with that opinion of the European Commission that even though the concept of media literacy is partly integrated into formal educational systems, the actual delivery of such education is fragmented and inconsistent. We can establish that researchers (Bahovec & Kodelja, 1996; Erjavec, 2005, 2010) in Slovenia have been arriving at similar conclusions for the last twenty years even though the use of digital media expanded greatly in this period, and the media landscape has changed significantly. The authors of a study titled 'Preschools for Today' (Bahovec & Kodelja, 1996) showed that the activities connected to media in preschools were rare. Erjavec (2005, 2010) found that preschool teachers mostly develop the production level of media education and much less the reflexive one. Her research also showed that the inclusion of media education in the everyday practice of preschool activities is dependent upon the individual preschool teacher (his / her interests and motivation). The Curriculum for Preschools is designed as an open syllabus and provides directions for content and objectives for separate fields of curriculum, but the number of daily or weekly hours and the frequency of learning activities in a particular field depends on choices made by preschool teachers (Zupančič, Čagran, & Mulej, 2015).

The future focus of both research and policy processes should, therefore, be on the actual implementation of curriculum guidelines in preschool

children's groups. Referring to our analysis, we would especially outline the following: a) developing the reflexive and creative competence in children and b) preschool teacher training in the field of media messaging. Additionally, as children are mostly exposed to media in their home environment, the implementation of events in preschools that would raise the awareness of parents regarding their attitude towards their own and their children's media habits, which are correlated (Rek & Milanovski Brumat, 2016), can have a positive effect on the extent of media exposure, the selection of media messages preschool children are exposed to, and their understanding.

The variety of conceptual and methodological approaches in researching media education and media literacy in Slovenia offer us an opportunity to perceive these complex phenomena from various viewpoints and, to a point, also to increase reliability and validity of research findings and conclusions. At the same time, we can benefit from a broader discussion on a more systematic way of measuring media literacy that would make longitudinal and cross-national comparative analysis. Furthermore, the broader use of qualitative research methods in the preschool environment could provide us with a more in-depth insight into children's reception, analysis, reflexion, and evaluation of media texts.

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