

## BUTTONING UP THE GOLD COLLAR – THE CHILD IN NEOLIBERAL VISIONS OF EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This study refers to the discursive transformation in perceptions of preschool age children generated by central European Union policy on early childhood education and care. This policy is representative of the pervasion of contemporary entrepreneurial culture and curricula within preschool education. At the same time, the field is also starting to become subordinated to the neoliberal trend of economising the social. This study highlights the fact that, within discourses on the child, these trends are encouraging a particular conception of childhood and of developmental theories. This conception is also enabling entrepreneurial logic to be applied to the preschool education sector via the use of theoretical tools. Consequently, children are being shaped into so-called knowledge-workers, or gold-collar workers, as they are referred to in current employment discourse. Even authorised preschool education documents (e.g. NAEYS's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* etc.) are responding to this transformation by introducing a new type of normality into this sphere, as can be seen in the Slovak state education programme for preschool education.

**Key words:** universal child; normal child; autonomous child; superchildren; entrepreneurial children; DAP; gold-collar worker.

### Introduction

This article is a response to the various current discursive shifts occurring within the sphere of early childhood education and care (ECEC). In the context of international discourse (particularly in terms of the policies of supranational groupings such as the EU and organisations like the OECD), these shifts intersect with ECEC as it is enacted in Slovakia. The interrelationships are interesting primarily because they have led to a re-conceptualisation of post-communist ECEC, on the one hand, and, at the same time, have brought with them a new global “discursive formation” (Foucault 2002) on children and childhood, which is being adapted within new preschool legislation globally.

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<sup>1</sup> This research is the outcome of a project funded by VEGA 1/0224/11 *The archaeology of neoliberal governance in current education policy and in theories on education* and VEGA 1/0091/12 *The culture of performativity and accountability in the current wave of education reforms*.

This analysis of the current images of childhood, from the perspective of contemporary contexts for ECEC, deals with a viewpoint which legitimises the fact that “childhood is becoming increasingly de-childrified” (Hengst 2000, 18). It is as if there has been a convergence between the world of the child and the world of the adult; a convergence that in his day Postman (1982) highlighted in *The Disappearance of Childhood*. The essence of his conception was that distinctions between childhood and adulthood were founded on “adult secrets”, such as the written language. During the school stage of childhood, the written word creates the key to adulthood. Being able to produce the written language can be seen as a symbolic act in the transition from childhood to adulthood. The contemporary neoliberal discourse on children and the education in practice which is based upon it, however, do not make use of “adult language secrets” (Postman 1982, 133), nor do they deal with the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. The written language is supposed to become part of the life of the child at the earliest of ages—if we are to speak of the different concepts of pre-literacy as the goals of ECEC.

In the early years of childhood, there is no such thing as either non-competency or non-literacy. Instead we talk of pre-literacy, since there is no distinct dividing line between pre-literacy and literacy. In the same way, there is no distinct dividing line between the competences of the adult and the competences of the child. The adult/child distinctions referred to by Postman have become blurred with the emergence of the “superchild”—a child that is competent and that transcends its development potential. Reflecting the shift first noted by Kelley (1985) in the commercial sector from conformist white collar worker (office worker) to individualistic gold-collar worker (a highly-skilled, innovative employee in a well-paid job), we now find that the child has “outgrown” its etymological origins. Instead of “being unable to speak”, as the Latin *infans* would have it, the child is putting on the gold collar of the knowledge-worker. In contrast to the preschool child of the past, imprisoned in a network of developmental programmes, tables and lists of lacking competences, the superchild is a child that is full of potential, prepared for the new challenges that lie ahead, both in terms of education and career. The superchild is a competitive, individualised, risk-embracing being, capable of exceeding itself. The superchild is therefore a promise of knowledge economy workers to come.

This study refers to the discursive transformation in perceptions of preschool age children generated by European Union policy on early childhood education and care. This policy is representative of the pervasion of contemporary entrepreneurial culture and curricula within preschool education. At the same time, the field is also starting to become subordinated to the neoliberal trend of economising the social. This study highlights the fact that, within discourses on the child, these trends are encouraging a particular conception of childhood and of developmental theories. This conception is also enabling entrepreneurial logic to be applied to the preschool education sector via theoretical tools. Consequently, children are being shaped into so-called knowledge-workers, or gold-collar workers, as they are referred to in current employment discourse. Even authorised preschool education documents (e.g. NAEYS’s *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*) are responding to this transformation by introducing a new type of normality into this sphere. In this article we first highlight the global trends in the development of the discourse on early childhood influenced by the rationality of neoliberalism and then we provide an example of this discourse being applied

at the local, national level, in the Slovak Republic, a member of the OECD and EU. This enables us to demonstrate how national educational policies are being homogenised through pressures applied at the supranational level, as is indicated by the state education programme for preschool education in the Slovak Republic.

The aim of the study is to discursively reconstruct conceptions of childhood and the young child using appropriate theoretical resources, influential developmental theories and education policy documents that impact on both the international and national (in this case Slovak) level. The international documents that are of greatest interest to us are those that deal with the development and transformation of the authorised DAP (*Developmentally Appropriate Practice*) document, and some EU education policy documents. The national documents of primary interest are those that outline the reforms to state policies on for preschool education. The analysis also includes some programme initiatives from the non-state sector which seek to influence the changes to early years' education. These are motivated by economic interests in particular. The article shows how the common denominator in these documents is the prevailing neoliberal rationality of contemporary western culture, which is impacting on changes in conceptions of early childhood and is leading to the emergence of the so-called superchild.

### **From universal to decentralised**

Discourses on childhood do not lie somewhere beyond social or even political goals. Rather, they have evolved in response to social imperatives that led to the emergence of the human sciences and to the systematic study of specific aspects of humanity. Particular socio-political goals decide matters such as the kind of disciplinary backdrop underlying childcare. Pacini-Ketchabaw (2006a; 2006b), for instance, demonstrates how, in the case of institutional care for preschool-aged children in Canada, it was first of all paediatric discourse that gained social importance, followed by socio-pedagogical discourses and then psychological discourses. The varying degree to which they were emphasised was always related to specific social campaigns and political goals, which enabled the creation of various kinds of universal views of the child.

The link between various academic disciplines and forms of social governance has been described by Michel Foucault. Foucault had by the 1970s already identified modern shifts in the governance of the population leading from a universalising trend to one of individualisation, while at the same time maintaining attempts to monitor and assess:

firstly, the constitution of the individual as a describable, analysable object, not in order to reduce him to "specific" features, as did the naturalists in relation to living beings, but in order to maintain him in his individual features, in his particular evolution, in his own aptitudes or abilities, under the gaze of a permanent corpus of knowledge; and, secondly, the constitution of a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given "population" (Foucault 1995, 190).

Hultqvist (1998) has written about similar developments in relation to preschool children. Starting in Sweden in the 1970s, these developments related to the extensive process of

decentralisation in social governance. The socio-liberal reforms brought with them the new individualist terminology of personal responsibility for social success to be contrasted with the post-war welfare state terminology on individual wellbeing. These political changes led to a change in the way we understand individual ontology. In this way optimal development was thought not to occur under the paternalism of the state; rather it is about self-development and being autonomous. Social science methodologies encouraged this transformation by focusing on difference, variation and instability. As Hultqvist has argued “this change is part of a new power/knowledge agenda ... decentrism” (Hultqvist 1998, 106).

### **“The Normal Child”**

The logic of decentrism has substantially affected preschool education and our understanding of the development of the preschool child. Until this time the preschool sector had been dominated either by the traditional Fröbelian conception of the child or by a maturational developmental psychology prism. Fröbel saw the child as being part of God’s order and as developing in accordance with God’s plan. The developmental psychology discourse on maturation sees development as part of a natural biological plan, which occurs in stages. In both cases, there is some kind of central developmental plan. This is exactly what Foucault was discussing earlier, when he demonstrated the current move away from development perceived in naturalistic terms to one reduced to “‘specific’ features”. According to Hultqvist (1998, 107-108)

until the 1970s all children were universal children. The Fröbel child was a universal child as was Piaget’s... During the latter 1970s, this changed! Perhaps the most important sign here is the critique of the stage model in Piaget’s theory, a model that assumed that development is universal.

These newly emerging conceptions pointed to variability and the unforeseeable nature of development. The idea of decentrism became important both in the human and the social sciences. This does not, however, mean that the concepts of universalistic development were homogenous, even if they did all use similar discourses of “child-centeredness” when applied to pedagogy. As Baker (1998) pointed out there is a substantial difference between “romantic child-centeredness” (typical of Rousseau or Fröbel) and “developmentalist child-centeredness”. In the romantic notion, the relationship between development and growth is understood in circular terms. Here, the role of the teacher is to return the child to its natural state, to something original that cannot be abandoned and which is characteristic for the child. The developmental perspective is based on the notion that development and growth are ascending and linear in nature. The supposition is that the past is overcome by transitioning from one developmental stage to the next.

The discursive frame of this idea is found in the child-study movement from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “It is a key site for understanding how childhood became both divided and normalized, especially through new fields of knowledge like psychology...” (Baker 1998, 163). Psychological knowledge brought with it the idea that development involves differentiated stages and that normality can exist and be described. On the basis of this, the first manual for teachers appeared at the end of the nineteenth century,

which contained record sheets on pupil development (Baker 1998, 167). “Centering the child here meant monitoring children for particular characteristics—physical, mental, verbal...” (*ibid.*, 168). By the 1920s it was already possible to speak of “constituting childhood through the norm” (Holmer Nadesan 2002, 409), since the first “developmental ‘experts’”<sup>2</sup> were producing detailed checklists on the psychological behaviour appropriate for particular developmental stages. Thus, the first developmental scales emerged and pedagogical manuals were published often bearing titles such as “The Normal Child” (Pacini-Ketchabaw 2006b, 172). In the first half of the twentieth century these scales were often part of various social campaigns; for instance, in the USA competitions were organised such as “better baby contests” and “pretty baby contests” (Dorey 1999). These were “exhibitions” of children, who were judged according to developmental tables and were supposed to represent optimal patterns of development and care.

### **Discursive transformation of play**

Piaget’s concept of development was yet another to provide new empirical foundations for notions of the “universal” and “normal” child. This groundwork led to the fact that “a multitude of mechanisms have been designed and used to govern young children and their families; these range from procedures of assessment and developmental tables to casework techniques and standardization of training programs for teachers” (Pacini-Ketchabaw 2006b, 163). The most comprehensive mechanism is the concept of so-called “developmentally appropriate practice” (DAP), which emerged in the 1980s (e.g. Bredekamp 1987). There are extremely close links between this document and Piaget’s theory of development and, as far as younger children are concerned, the conceptualisation of child’s play became a central notion to forms of learning.

Child’s play was linked to the concept of normality in the first half of the twentieth century, when “romantic/nostalgic discourses of play”, autotelic in nature, gradually began to be replaced by “developmental discourse” (Ailwood 2003). This discourse refers to the significance of play in a child’s development and at the same time introduces a play repertoire appropriate to the child’s particular developmental stage. Play can therefore be seen as an activity which can be assessed and at the same time purposefully influenced. Ailwood (2003, 294) discusses two of the developmental discourses based on trends in approaches to child’s play—“the rationalising of play and the observation of play”. “Adults within early childhood education are trained to observe the play of young children in ways that identify a child’s individual needs. This training is supported through a plethora of props such as developmental checklists and developmentally appropriate toys and equipment” (Ailwood 2003, 296). The first version of DAP had the following to say about child’s play. It is

a primary vehicle for and indicator of mental growth. Play enables children to progress along the developmental sequence from the sensorimotor intelligence of infancy to preoperational thought in the preschool years to the concrete operational thinking exhibited by primary children... Therefore, child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp 1987, 3).

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most influential of these at the time was A. Gesell.

The link between this and Piaget's stages of development is clear and Piaget also lent authority to the original version of the DAP document (Jipson 1991).

### **The imperative to exceed the norm**

As the universalist notion of development began increasingly to be questioned from the 1970s onwards, normativisation and concepts based on normativity such as DAP also began to encounter criticism. The idea of "decentrism" and the unique nature of development led eventually in 1997 to a fundamental revision of the concept of DAP (Bredekamp, Copple 1997). At first glance this revision corresponded to criticisms many academics and teachers had of DAP, highlighting the way in which DAP was insensitive to the uniqueness of the child and its socio-cultural background (Jipson 1991). In reality, however, this criticism could only have emerged at a time of increased social sensitivity to all things that are unique and self-organising, and at a time when paternalism as a whole was being rejected. Criticisms of DAP, then, occurred against a socio-political backdrop as well—just as Hultqvist demonstrates in relation to the wave of social liberalisation in Sweden.

Since then, the care and upbringing of children has not been aligned to external norms, but rather to the child's individual traits and potential. In this context pedagogical intervention no longer monitors whether universal norms are being achieved, but whether individual performance is being heightened. Hultqvist (1998) refers to this as a transition from the notion of the "universal child" to the notion of the "autonomous child". Pedagogical encouragement leads to the "fixing ... of individual differences" and at the same time to the "pinning down of each individual in his own particularity" (Foucault 1995, 192). According to Foucault, under the influence of this new logic, new "documentary techniques" emerged which viewed each child a unique "case" (*ibid.*, 191).

The expansion of "expert" knowledge on the development of the child, whilst maintaining the mode of converging knowledge on the child and normalisation of childhood in relation to standardised developmental norms, was therefore transformed into a new normalising discourse. Norms have been replaced by a consideration of uniqueness and include an emphasis on the potential to exceed norms. At the end of the twentieth century discursive formations of this kind culminated in the emergence of the "superchild", assessed on the basis of his/her relationship to the established norms, and linked to the fact that parents were starting to desire something more:

They want their children to be healthy and normal, of course, but they also want them to be developing a little faster and a little better than the rest—doing more than they're supposed to be doing for their age (Eisenberg et al. 1996, 454).

The norm is therefore no longer a (developmental) norm in itself; but has become a norm to exceed the norm.

The transformative path, from "universal child" to "autonomous child" and later to "superchild", is the result of the transformation of the discursive regimes on the child and childhood in the twentieth century and is based on the principle that childhood and notions of the child are discursive phenomena. Holmer Nadesan (2002) has demonstrated that the current norm—the attempt to exceed the norm—first began as a discursive regime via

humanist psychology linked with the later *human potential movement* against the backdrop of the cold war and the economic rationality of the information revolution. The “autonomous child” functioning within the helping mode of childcare, was designed to ensure that the child can attain their individual development potential in its inherent state, has been modified. This occurred as a consequence of events that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, such that caring for self-actualisation started to be linked to the intellectual competitiveness of the child (and with the new regime of research development and cognitive intervention). The most recent version of the norm-exceeding child, that is the “superchild” model, is being created, according to Holmer Nadesan, against the backdrop of the rationality of the entrepreneurial culture and is helping to produce the entrepreneurial subject, represented by the *gold-collar* worker.<sup>3</sup> The superchild represents part of the entrepreneurial subject being produced for the current world of work:

the cultural production of individuals who self-actualize through work and who possess just the right mix of technical/intellectual and social skills seems a formidable project, project that could not be realized successfully unless the gold-collar entrepreneurial subject was cultivated from his or her earliest moments (Holmer Nadesan 2002, 412).

### **Educational programming of the gold-collar child**

A certain convergence is currently occurring between parental expectations, theoretical approaches to child development and a toy industry sustained by social projections of the child as a “superchild”, which is, naturally, tied up with the competitively oriented logic of innovation and entrepreneurship. This idea has consequently been adopted in EU strategic educational policy documents (such as the EESC below) which emphasise the role of national and international competition in today’s knowledge economy and the role of education within it. It is of interest that the idea of the super-entrepreneurial child is gradually starting to become established in the preschool education sector.

This can clearly be seen in the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on the Communication from the Commission “Fostering entrepreneurial mindsets through education and learning” (Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee 2006). It emphasises the fact that “The EESC supports the idea that a change in mindsets or attitudes is crucial to achieving an increase in entrepreneurship rates and needs to start at an early age” (EESC 111). What is important is that entrepreneurship is defined, using the constructivist and humanist terminology of autonomy and uniqueness, as “specific entrepreneurial skills... over and above the general knowledge and culture acquired in formal education, thus promoting creativity, a sense of initiative and a proactive approach to knowledge and learning, etc.” (*ibid.*).

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<sup>3</sup> *Gold Collar Worker (GCW)* is a neologism used to define a new tier of (young) workers who occupy high performance jobs in sectors based on the knowledge economy. *GCWs* are characterised as having a professional profile that requires flexibility, a non-repetitive performance, and a high level of worker independence. Changes in the nature of work within the so-called knowledge economy have led to a distinction being made between *GCWs* and *White Collar Workers* (Kelley 1985).

In the meantime the search is on for models of early entrepreneurial education: “Whether educational experiments such as the ‘Entrepreneurship Staircase’ (introduced by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise) can be employed more widely and effectively needs to be verified” (*ibid.*). This refers to the fact that the model operates by “introducing entrepreneurship education to a person early in life” in such a way that “Seven year old ‘Flashes of genius’ create simple and practical innovations” (*ibid.*). The child is seen here in super-terminology as a “genius”. This programme was created by the inventor Anders Rosén in 1993 and is introduced at the age of 6 onwards and is known as “Small Genius” (Creating Opportunities for Young Entrepreneurship 2005).

In some countries developments have progressed further and inspiration is sought for the creation of the super-entrepreneurial child in preschool programmes. Thus amongst the materials provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic entitled “Educational programmes to promote the knowledge economy and creativity, and foster an entrepreneurial spirit in selected countries” (Educational Programmes 2011) we find an Austrian programme, “Minopolis – Die Stadt der Kinder”, aimed at children aged 4 and above. This programme introduces children to the business, consumer and financial sectors (money and making deposits in a bank) as a form of experiential learning. These are linked to specific brand names. Children are viewed as being little geniuses, competent entrepreneurs who can exceed their own current level of development. The programme documentation states, “the first path [the child takes] leads either to the bank in order to open an account or directly to the Job Centre [Arbeitsmarktservice—AMS] and the search for a job”. In Minopolis the children use *Eurolino* money, investing it, depositing it in a particular bank, for looking for a job, for shopping at a particular supermarket (Minopolis 2005; 2009). Here we are dealing with the “child as capable; another version of the autonomous child. .... Capacity enables the child to respond flexibly to the demands of a changing external world (i.e. economics or the market)” (Hultqvist 1998, 108). It is the individualised performance characteristics of the child that are crucial. This shift is borne out by Larsson, Löfdahl a Prieto (2010, 179) who have ascertained that the image of the “active, competent and independent child” is a key concept in Swedish preschool education.

## Promotion of new theoretical incentives

The “superchild” was initially generated against the backdrop of the political struggles of the cold war and later against the backdrop of the economic contests between developed countries and a universalising entrepreneurial culture. Hence, the “superchild” is a child with the potential to exceed norms, and above all, is a child operating at the limits of its potential. In discursive regimes of this kind, new theories and research on approaches to diagnostic and interventionist methods are formulated, while older theoretical resources gain new significance. Politically fertile ground for the emerging “superchild” was constituted, for example, by the rediscovery of Vygotsky’s psychological concepts,<sup>4</sup> which have gained

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<sup>4</sup> There would appear to exist a kind of socio-political and academic convergence between the flourishing Vygotsky school in the 1980s in the USA and the new type of economic rationality and the related ontology, at that time promoted through the neoliberal economic reforms of the Reagan



a new practical dimension through so-called dynamic testing and intervention at the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This has been linked to new theoretical frameworks outlining the ways in which children can exceed their existing abilities.

The revival of Vygotsky's work in the USA during the 1970s and 1980s thus awaited the economic and political conditions required to create an interpretational current that would support the neoliberal individualisation of educational practice. Petrová (2008) has demonstrated how the work of Vygotsky has been variously interpreted according to political and economic context. Toward the end of the twentieth century, in America, in particular, Vygotsky was interpreted in the context of the prevailing individualism, while in Eastern and Central Europe, Vygotsky was viewed through a collectivist prism. The two interpretations thus differ substantially, with the American version embracing neoliberal ideology. Thus there was a reconceptualization of the approach in the Anglo-Saxon context (Petrová 2008). A more individualistic understanding of the conceptual framework emerged and it was moulded so as to support the new education policy discourse aimed at building the theory of extreme acceleration, upon which the concept of the "superchild" is based. The other frames and cultural historical departure points remained outside the focus of the new education policy discourse. In this reduced and trivialised format Vygotsky then appeared in planning documents relating to education and care in early childhood, despite the fact that the influence of Vygotsky's theories is currently fruitfully contained within other educational contexts and approaches.

The discourse shaping the "superchild" has been created using theoretical tools linking the individuality of the child to the specific conditions that enable it to exceed its existing individual developmental limits. The developmental discourse is configured in such a way that it flows into the discourse regime on development potential, which can be controlled by "proper" diagnosis and appropriate intervention (for instance, mediated learning, intervention aimed at preconceptions and so forth).<sup>5</sup> The theories of both Piaget and Vygotsky are basically becoming part of a parallel universal canon in child development lectures on university psychological courses (Hoffman, Zhao 2008). Yet, it is the cultural and historical denaturalisation of childhood and child development that enables us to state that it is the "superchild" ideology that is being filled with a discourse on a specific interpretation of the Vygotsky theoretical approach. This is to be contrasted with Piaget's discourse which includes the concept of the "universal child".

The image of the "super entrepreneurial infant" representing the social discourse of the last two decades has been chiefly created through the medium of scientific knowledge known as *brain science*. Research within brain science, the popularisation of which is interlinked

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administration. Reagan saw educational reform as being part of his economic reforms and the OECD represented the means of achieving this. The trend towards a more dynamic and a more academically cast education (which is often part of the Vygotsky approach) was bolstered by a critical report on education in the USA entitled *A Nation at Risk: Imperatives for Educational Reform*.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of mediated learning is based on learning at the zone of proximal development, where methods for accelerating cognitive development are being devised even for the preschool level of education (in Slovakia, see Petrová 2009a). In preschool education, great attention is currently being paid to the development of so-called pre-literacy skills, which relates to the concept of accelerating literacy development, once again stemming from Vygotsky (see Petrová 2009b).

with that of the new “knowledge worker”, promises that every child has the potential to become a superchild, and to be successful if exposed to the appropriate stimulation at a suitable developmental moment and during a crucial developmental period. Caring for a child’s development has been transformed so that it is now about stimulating its success: “The child’s ‘success’, that is, the child’s ability to exceed normative expectations, requires that measures of success be, out of necessity, visible and calculable” (Holmer Nadesan 2002, 413). And although brain research itself does not directly guarantee success nor provide the tools that enable these promises to be realised, this gap is now being plugged by a new industry of “educational toys”, the production and distribution of which is connected to “brain science” and the “entrepreneurial child”, and which promises that people (from the middle and lower classes) will gain the particular cultural capital required to develop successful lives and acquire the abilities required for an economically productive adulthood.

### **Transformations of “Developmentally Appropriate Practice” (DAP)**

In relation to programmes on the educational care of preschool age children, the transformation of the ideology on childhood, as we have already indicated, occurred either with the emergence of or during modifications to DAP (*Developmentally Appropriate Practice*). It became the authoritative model of preschool education in all countries receptive to the values of Western civilisation. While the original version of this model (Bredekamp 1987), as mentioned earlier, fitted into the notion of the “universal child” with its sealed normativity, the modified version (Bredekamp, Copple 1997) embraces a discursive regime that combines the “autonomous child” with the “superchild”. The revision mainly emphasises a sensitivity to development variations in children and individual learning paths and there are obvious textual links to Vygotsky’s thesis and a focus on the contextual grounding of curricula. The revised version sets norms for representative and exemplar DAP and at the same time formulates inappropriate practices—DIP (*Developmentally Inappropriate Practice*). The revised norms on approaches used with children are distinguished by an openness and a marked individualisation. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the children “work on the edge of their developing capabilities” and that teachers should have “knowledge of individual children’s differing abilities, developmental levels” (Cohen 2008, 14). Thus, the diagnostic competence of the teacher in terms of the standards of the teaching profession is key as well. Practices that are rejected (as being developmentally incommensurate) are those that presuppose that universal development occurs at the same time for all; hence, practices that fall below or well below the ability levels of the individual children.

Despite the fact that some authors (Lubeck, 1998) warned that the modified version of DAP simply incorporated new ideas into an old agenda, there is no doubting the shift in the discursive regime and the modified ideology of childhood. These are accepted in both as dogma by the preschool teacher community (Cohen 2008). Having an open view of child development and being accepting of an “autonomous childhood” are discursively expressed in a polarised juxtaposition of acceptable and unacceptable practices. The model of the “universal child” even features in the contrasted DAP-DIP as part of the inappropriate practices to be excluded. In a Foucauldian sense, it is as if the methods of scientific classification in this juxtaposition are discursively classifying the extent to which, according

to DAP, something is correct or incorrect, good or bad, and normal or abnormal (Cohen 2008).

In 2009 the third, revised edition of DAP was published (Copple, Bredekamp 2009). It abandons the ambivalence of the previous version in the sense that it is completely subordinated to the concept of learning at the zone of proximal development, and it highlights the need for early stimulation of brain development so that important neural connections can be made. DAP takes every opportunity to promote “active scaffolding” for learning. The concept of active scaffolding should even involve child’s play; the Piagetian roots of which, found in the first version, can no longer be identified in the third, revised edition. The conceptual background to the notion of the “autonomous superchild” is much in evidence.

This shift is explicitly confirmed in *A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children* published alongside the latest version of DAP (*Developmentally Appropriate Practice* 2009). The statement makes clear reference to Vygotsky’s terminology and the authors apply it in early years education in order to “speed up” child development:

In a task just beyond a child’s independent reach, adults and more-competent peers contribute significantly to the child’s development by providing the support or assistance that allows the child to succeed at that task. Once children make this stretch to a new level in a supportive context, they can go on to use the skill independently and in a variety of contexts, laying the foundation for the next challenge. Provision of such support, often called *scaffolding*, is a key feature of effective teaching (*Developmentally Appropriate Practice* 2009, 15).

Assessment looks not only at what children can do independently but also at what they can do with assistance from other children or adults. Therefore, teachers assess children as they participate in groups and other situations that are providing scaffolding (*Developmentally Appropriate Practice* 2009, 22).

Criticisms of the DAP model do not really attack the transformation of the normative discourse on child development as we have outlined above, rather they are sensitive to the fundamental cultural differences that distinguish Western civilisation from others. Twentieth century (universal) models on child development are basically founded on models of the Western world and transforming these models means transforming this world. The aim of the critical analysis is therefore more about revealing the incompatibility of Western models of childhood in relation to models of child development in other cultures, or about explaining the mechanisms that lead to the diffusion of dominant models of child care in other countries (Hoffman, Zhao 2008).<sup>6</sup> This changes nothing, therefore, about the fact that DAP, for instance, was really adapted for the regime of the “autonomous child” and that its further

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<sup>6</sup> For instance Popkewitz (2000) states that the mechanism for the global influence of Western concepts on childhood across the whole world is expressed in the centrality of the concept of the “indigenous foreigner” in early years and preschool educational programmes, which means that educational programmes even in the most distant of countries are adapting the Western model of childhood and child development to their own traditions. Popkewitz explains the creation of the image of the “indigenous foreigner” in terms of being 1. A consequence of power, 2. A manifestation of universal categories for interpreting good practice and 3. Interaction between the dynamics of global and local discourse.

transformation is creating a new generation of “superchildren” or “super entrepreneurial children” within the existing neoliberal conditions of western culture. This is evident in the links found in DAP and the World Bank, for instance, that relate to education and young children as demonstrated in research by Penn (2002).

A regime of entrepreneurial rationality is permeating the evolving model of “super entrepreneurial children”. It is being institutionalised with the help of the concept of competences as a prerequisite for future success on the global labour market. The competences model, in the form of standardised educational goals, is derived from the model of the “knowledge worker”; someone who is autonomous, intellectually agile, creative and flexible, socially competent in interpersonal relations, self-motivating and capable of self-realisation in the tireless effort of exceeding the normative skills required in his/her job (Holmer Nadesan 2002). Competence-oriented educational programmes for children at the earliest of ages are becoming the new “development” dogma for the pedagogical community. Concepts, that were originally political in nature, contain a pedagogical and psychological discourse on children and create a new basis for expert knowledge on child development, and a new foundation for the professionalism of the teacher, including personally formulated demands for diagnostic competence.

A prime example of this paradigmatic change is the general trend in education in Europe towards so-called key competences. Planning documents for education are replete with the language of child competences. The Slovak State Education Programme for Preschool Education (ŠVP 2008), which for the first time ever introduces the competences discourse into preschool education in Slovakia, states that “the competences are worked out in line with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC)” (ŠVP 2008, 7). According to the document, however, the process leading to the competent superchild requires that the system be rebuilt:

In order for children to gain the competences (capabilities), it is **necessary** that fundamental **changes** are made to the **content and method of education**, so that **methods and educational strategies** lead to **participative, interactive and experiential learning**, which is based on experience and connected to life (ŠVP 2008, 10; emphasis in bold as in original).

The competences are to be acquired through the autonomous construction of knowledge and collective participation. Earlier we outlined the constructivist and social constructivist theoretical sources for this new discursive formation and here we find them being promulgated in this current piece of rhetoric as well.

**The philosophy behind the programme is based on** information obtained from educational research, practical information and experiences of the teaching community; from research published in Slovakia and abroad on issues regarding preschool curricula; from Vygotskyian theory and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs... The focal point in this conception is the child as an actively educating subject, following the development of his/her character... In addition, it also stems from **a cognitive psychological and a social cognitive conception of education**... For these reasons the interactive theories of personality development which are acceptable in the programme involve collaborative work, where the *goal is always the development of the child*, and where it is a shared activity between child and teacher (ŠVP 2008, 10-11; emphasis in bold and italics as in original).

The convergence between the rhetoric on the economising competences of the child and the social constructivist rhetoric is self-evident.

### **The Slovak version of the “superchild”**

Slovakia is a country with a long tradition of a centralised (a uniform and state-set curriculum, monitored by a central school inspectorate) and unitary system of ECEC. A perfunctory glance reveals that comparisons can be drawn with ECEC in Scandinavia (Taguma, Litjens, Makowietzki 2012). Around 90 per cent of 5 and 6 year olds (they can start from the age of 3 and upwards) attend preschool education, which is a specific, local-government funded and run (and therefore basically free of charge) form of all-day education in institutions known as “maternal schools” or nursery schools. Up until 2008 activities in nursery schools were conducted in line with a curriculum consisting of “educational components” (physical education, work, intellectual, aesthetics and so forth), a relic of the former communist curriculum prior to 1989. In 2008 changes were implemented that heralded a departure from the way in which the curriculum had previously been planned and, in an eclectic fashion, responded to various supranational initiatives (seized upon indiscriminately), whether from the EU or the OECD. The formation of this policy was accompanied by a lack of reflection and a coincidental adaptability with regard to international discourse. It constituted a rupture of a similar magnitude to the one Ailwood (2004) refers to in connection with the Australian state of Queensland in 2002 and OECD policy, when the goals of ECEC were completely altered, leading to nursery schools being conceived of as part of lifelong preparation for the sector of work.

In Slovakia’s case, evidence for this shift can be found in the debate over whether the final year of nursery should be compulsory. A ministerial proposal suggested that the final year of nursery school should become part of compulsory schooling. Prior to the reforms of 2008, the proposed measures were primarily a response to low levels of training in Roma children, the fact that they were unprepared for primary school, and the problem of them consequently being sent to special schools (Pupala, Humajová 2007). A similar compensatory role was attributed to the pre-reform document from Queensland: “The survey is explicit in stating that preschool education has a compensatory role for the ‘deficiencies’ found in children of low socioeconomic groups” (Ailwood 2004, 25). The current Slovak minister for education is also keen to continue with his predecessor’s aims to introduce compulsory preschool attendance for 5 year old children; not, however, in relation to socio-economics, but in keeping with this shift towards the commercialisation of education.

It seems that the compensatory logic that lies behind this proposal is weakening in favour of the logic of the effective investment of resources in education with the aim of achieving the most optimal educational performance at an earlier age and of fostering the development of a competent workforce. Thus it is more a reaction to recommendations made by the EU and OECD that emphasise strengthening preschool preparation:

ECEC has a crucial role to play in laying the foundations for improved competences of future EU citizens, enabling us to meet the medium- and long-term challenge, and to create a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to technological change as set out in the flagship ‘Agenda for new skills and jobs’. There is clear evidence that participation in

high quality ECEC leads to significantly better attainment in international tests on basic skills, such as PISA and PIRLS, equivalent to between one and two school years of progress (Early Childhood Education and Care 2011).

As Ailwood (2004, 30) has stated “the preparatory year trial is aimed towards getting them [the children] ready for a lifetime of learning or earning as they grow into the twenty first century ... Therefore, whilst the developmental agenda remains, it is now in serious competition with notions of preparation for compulsory schooling and laying the foundations for lifelong learning”. The logic of universal development is being replaced by the new rationality of ECEC, which is bringing a new image of the child and early childhood, and at the same time, this governmentality is currently creating fertile ground for the global policy of ECEC.

The image of the “autonomous superchild” has noticeably taken root in the new planning documents for preschool education in Slovakia, chiefly represented in the completely new State Education Programme for Preschool Education (2008). Despite the fact that this programme has not been created directly on the basis of the original DAP programme, the discourse relating to the image of the “entrepreneurial superchild” is unmistakably present in the current psychological development norms and the universal framework for education for a so-called entrepreneurial culture (see Kaščák, Pupala 2010). The aims and content of preschool education in nursery schools have, for the first time, been defined using “key competences”, exactly in the same way that they are outlined in detail in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning (Recommendation 2006). The fundamental aim of preschool education, therefore, according to the State Education Programme (ŠVP 2008), is targeted at the “development of key competences” (*ibid.*, 3), and the politically defined competences are used to determine the content and performance standards for preschool education in Slovak nursery schools. We should just remind ourselves of the marked correspondence between the characteristics of the gold-collar worker, previously outlined, and the key competences adopted from the Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council of Europe for the State Education Programme. It is surely not by chance that education (now including preschool education) is being based on target norms for the universal entrepreneurial subject. It is in relation to this that we should be aware of the reasons why there is such a particular emphasis in the programme documents for preschool education on targets such as to “prepare for life-long learning”, “take personal responsibility”, “form an adequate level of self-esteem” (ŠVP 2008, 3-4) and why there is again an emphasis on fostering “creativity” and developing critical creative thinking and problem-solving skills (*ibid.*, 7-8).

In the State Education Programme for Preschool Education (ŠVP 2008) the autonomous dimension of the “superchild” is both repeatedly and emphatically expressed in the requirement for the “separate development of the individual potential of the child” and an inclination towards notions such as their “own uniqueness” and adapting the pedagogical approach in relation to the “development potential of the child”. Performance norms defining the “profile of a child who has successfully completed preschool education” are at the same time relativized in terms of expressing the value of autonomy, since “they should be set slightly above the limits of the development potential of the child” (ŠVP 2008, 28). Exceeding developmental norms has therefore become an official educational norm and is

considered to be “a tool for rewarding and motivating towards further learning” (*ibid.*).

The turnabout leading to the creation of the autonomous superchild through teacher implementation of state educational policy is simultaneously strengthening the significance of teachers’ diagnostic competences. As key indicators of pedagogical competences these are becoming part of the standards created for the teaching profession. Standardised performance indicators of the teaching profession are now established through an ability “to accept the individuality of the child”, “create diagnostic tools and individually test a child’s distinctive qualities” and an ability to “identify the individual educational needs of the child” (Pilotná verzia, 2010). Thus, the pedagogical profile of the teacher corresponds to expectations expressed in the state education programme. This kind of teacher capability occupies a dominant position on the list of performance measures on professionalism and is to become one of the main areas of professional competence.

Educational policy documents are granting the social discourse on the “autonomous superchild” a legitimate status and normative importance. In Slovakia, the permeation of competence-oriented preschool education and the competence-defined professionalism of teachers is being realised through across-the-board training of teachers as part of a project entitled The National Project of Training Teaching Staff in Nursery Schools as part of the Education Reforms (funded by the EU in 2009-2013). This is because the newly defined goals of preschool education are to become the general framework for the work of nursery schools in as short a time as possible. Implementing the new vision of the preschool age child as the “subject of competences” is thus substantially bolstered by state policy for training teachers, which is likewise based on the “competences profile” of teachers working in preschool education. The pressures brought on teachers by the preschool education reforms themselves, begun with the adoption of the new School Training Programme for Preschool Education (ŠVP 2008) and those associated with the extensive training on how to implement the reform goals are a strong political factor in Slovakia. They are linked to the general adoption of new pedagogic norms based on the reformed image of children in western societies. Conditions in Slovakia are more than favourable for propagating the new neoliberal discursive regime on children and for it to take root in the collective awareness of teachers, school policymakers and the general public.

Thus particular conceptions of children are formed in specific historical and ideological contexts and against the background of curricular documents. This is also demonstrated, for example, in a comparative study by Millei (2011) on Hungarian and Australian preschool education. The competences profile of the child is expressed, through curricular documents, in terms of a specific political image of childhood, where the representation of childhood (who children are and what they should be like) is a political analysis, conducted through curricular analyses: “a curriculum is not a neutral document but a cultural artefact. It represents desires, aspirations and ambitions for the child as future contributor to society from the viewpoint of powerful adults” (Duhn 2008, 84). Constructing the profile of the child on the basis of a set of politically defined competences primarily manifests itself in a profile of the child as prospective participant of the knowledge industry, as a worker generated by neoliberal human resource management for knowledge industry company cultures in a highly competitive business environment. This is also the fundamental motive for the political support for lifelong learning, via which the child is seen strictly as a “learner child”, whose

learning capacity is continually stimulated as a universal competence that will be required in the child's future (Millei 2011).

## Conclusion

The issues relating to forming a discourse on the education of young children are complex and multi-layered. However, it seems that there currently exists a significant driver in the relationships between the discursive units on nurturing children in early childhood. The metanarrative of neoliberalism with discursive units such as individual development, the competent child, autonomy, self-development, knowledge worker, school success, working at the zone of proximal development seems to control practices. It has been recast in theories and education policies in many different forms and it shapes early childhood discourse and practice at a variety of levels.

This article has sought to discuss the scope within which this impetus operates. At a theoretical and expert level it favours a certain category of developmental theories from the work of Vygotsky which are denoted as social cognitive or social constructivist. They create a new theoretical normative concept and also modify notions of normality in the development of the child in a particular way. Since normal means leaving behind and exceeding developmental norms, space is being created for the dissemination of the individualistic and competitive terminology contained within the categories of innovation and creativity in the same way that neoliberal notions of entrepreneurialism employ them. We have shown in this article that such notions have already permeated ECEC in the form of programmes that promote "little geniuses", innovators and entrepreneurs.

This logic has permeated school education programmes through the competences discourse that has now become almost obligatory. This was shown here in the example of state education programmes in Slovakia. It is, however, only one instance of it being applied nationally within post-communist and EU countries. Such instances are revered through the supranational documents that directly attest to the neoliberal agenda of ECEC in the EU member states. This was clearly demonstrated earlier in the citation recommending that ECEC be geared towards the creation of "a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to technological change as set out in the flagship 'Agenda for new skills and jobs'" found in the EU document entitled *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing All Our Children with the Best Start for the World of Tomorrow* (2011).

In addition to the educational policy documents referred to above, significant influence is also wielded on ECEC in both the global and local contexts by strategic documents produced by specialist and professional organisations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Such documents are shared amongst international professional communities, and are adapted for a variety of countries, which is a testament to their influence. One such authoritative document is DAP in all its permutations over the last 25 years. Although the document has undergone fundamental theoretical changes, it still bears the hallmark of the characteristics of neoliberalism and its selective reading of theory, such as that by Vygotsky.

Perhaps that is also why this article can be concluded by asserting, as we did in the first section, that just as in the nineteenth century, ECEC today does not lie beyond economic and



political influences. This does not simply affect the ideologically motivated transformation of education policy but also the transformation of specialist discourse and its harnessing in favour of the episteme of the era and the prevailing metanarrative.

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