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Training Young Readers in a Multicultural World

ABSTRACT

This article presents the issue of child readership in a multicultural world. The article is based on the VEGA 1/0455/18 research project named “Research and Development of Reading Enthusiasm with Younger School-Age Learners”,² in which a team focused its research activities on the personality traits of readers, the social context of reading and their reading preferences. The period when children first encounter a book induces and stimulates a cultural need in children. This need appears at a pre-school age and fully develops during the early schooling years of a child. The current multicultural school presents relatively new social contexts that accompany the child in the context of their reading experience and experiences. The contents, genres and forms that children currently prefer when reading change in connection with cultural and social diversity.

The article presents certain findings from two phases of research in which the research team used the qualitative method of discussions with focus groups and a questionnaire to identify the typical traits of readers and non-readers, the social context of readership and their preferred content, forms and media. Several noteworthy differences were identified, which are closely related to a multicultural environment and significantly differentiate the young readers of today from readers in the past.

Keywords:

young readers, reading enthusiasm, multicultural education, reading preferences, the social context of readership

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INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen a tendency to quantify the results of reading literacy among pupils in OECD countries. The overall trend in reading literacy among Slovak pupils is positive, with growth occurring compared to the first cycle from 2001. The country improved by 17 points on the PIRLS scale over a fifteen-year period (2001 to 2016), which is a statistically significant increase. While Slovak pupils achieved the EU and OECD average in 2006 and 2011, their performance remained at the EU average, but was significantly lower than the OECD average by 2016. This speaks to the tremendous interest among EU and OECD countries in reading comprehension, which is resolved at a young schooling age among pupils in all the researched countries. PIRLS measurement results in Slovakia (2016) confirmed the strong association between the performance of a Slovak pupil and the social, economic and cultural capital of their family (socio-economic index). The belief here is that family culture has an impact on a pupil's performance when they read (reading literacy) as well as on readership in general, and therefore their relationship to reading and reading enthusiasm.

Given that literary works present children with a specific image of the world, they are an excellent resource for discovering something new, unknown and enriching. They are a means for learning about other cultures and different perspectives on the world and therefore a way of discovering diversity. Modern world is characterised by rising population migration, the result of which is an increase in the mixing and overlapping of the cultures of different ethnicities and nationalities. The modern multicultural character of Slovak society brings about the risk of prejudices and stereotypes that manifest themselves through various forms of hate, racism and xenophobia. Slovak pupils are exposed on a daily basis to various cultural influences and encounter the members of different cultures. The result of this is a need to focus on multiculturalism-related questions among the youngest pupils. Multicultural education is a cross-cutting topic in primary education curriculum (*Štátny vzdelávací program...*, 2015), which is transposed into numerous educational areas. Its objective is: "to make a contribution towards ensuring young school-age pupils respect the natural diversity in society, recognise different traditions and new cultures and subcultures, accept cultural diversity as a social reality, exercise their rights and respect the rights of others".

DISCOVERING DIFFERENCES THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Vančíková (2019) states that “multicultural education is not learning about cultures; rather it is discovering the diversity of lifestyles”. Multicultural education may be implemented at the primary level of the education system through literary stories. The reality created within a literary story and complemented by properly selected “aesthetic and instructional activities offers readers intellectual and emotional learning and pro-social behavioural models...” (Obert, 2002).

Youth readers at a young schooling age are able to evaluate simple works of art and the empathetic processes occurring within themselves take place at the level of their individual psychological development. Changes in readership are tangible in pupils around the ages of 10 to 11. A pupil's understanding becomes more rational as they develop abilities including conceptual thinking, abstraction, and categorisation of phenomena, and the ability to generalize. Pupils of a young schooling age are also enriched by their own life experience, other experiences and knowledge. This allows the recipient, and ideally the reader, of children's literature to search out and discover the objective values of a literary text. They thereby gain the prerequisites needed as readers to be able to interpret a literary text and the ability to create meta-texts, or texts about a text they have read (Obert, 2002).

In addition to an aesthetic function, literature plays an educational role for children and young people. Lederbuchová (2010, pp. 149–203) notes that the reception of a literary text goes through two phases: perception and response (reaction). In the perception phase, this involves experiencing and taking in the text through sensory perception and the creation of specific sensory ideas. The interpretation of this value and aesthetic basis is involved in the response phase. This is where an instructor can move a child reader forward from the denotative (simple) meanings to structured connotations (ambiguities).

Reading stories during literary education lessons and in other academic subjects (national history, ethics, music and arts education) should be interesting for pupils and complemented by an experiential dialogue about what was read. A teacher should strive to use various creative activities to ensure that pupils understand what the experience induces, the literary message from the author, the lesson from the text, emotions, and the like. Pupils may profit from a literary experience in terms of multicultural education as well. The values of a literary text provoke the reader to contemplate and are able to change their attitudes. Pupils may identify with literary figures. They may think about how they would have reacted in the place of a literary character, what they would do differently or change, how they could do better and the like. This serves to develop critical thinking skills in

pupils, as well as their communication skills and speech. The teacher is in a position to influence this process and may employ it within efforts to meet the goals of a multicultural education. It all depends on the story they choose. Such stories should focus on learning about one's own culture and native language, cooperation and tolerance between different people, recognising human rights and the rights of children, recognising the differences between different nations, nationalities and ethnicities and especially deal with the dilemmas of a multicultural world. Vančíková (2019, pp. 57–58) in her publication recommends using a constructive dialogue after reading a story that involves four phases:

- The description phase, in which open questions are posed to pupils to gain information about their first impression of the story.
- The individual investigation phase, in which questions are primarily focused on connecting the world in the story to the pupils' real-world reality.
- The critical understanding phase, in which the problem is analysed in more detail and children are given the space and opportunity to present and express their opinions.
- The consideration/transformation phase, where dialogue with the pupils is led to a conclusion. Pupils formulate answers to questions and talk about how to respond to similar situations in the future.

Children also encounter literature outside of their instruction at school, in their free time. Reading literacy and readership among children develops primarily during free time. The acquisition of reading literacy in a child involves the development of the cognitive side of their personality. Readership is closely related to the development of the socio-emotional side of personality and is supported by receptive-experiential processes and enthusiasm.

According to Australian research (Australian Kids and Family Reading Report, 2016), reasons for children's reading preferences can be characterized as follows today: they choose books that amuse them and make them laugh – 54%; let them use their imagination – 47%; have a mystery or a problem to solve – 42%; have characters children wish they could be like – 38%; tell a made-up story (fiction) – 36%; teach something new – 35%; let them forget about real life for a while – 35%; tell a true, slightly scary story – 28%; are about things children experience in their lives – 24%; have characters who are in love – 18%; or have characters who look like them – 14%. Other researchers however have found out that adults have misconceptions about the reading of young people. Their attention should focus on the meaning of reading in children's lives (Manuel & Robinson, 2002).

The research conducted within the VEGA 1/0455/18 project is concerned with determining if readership preferences in Slovak children have changed in the modern multicultural society compared to the past. For this reason, the composition of their reading preferences was analysed. Interest was focused on if they select interesting and intriguing books about the diversity of cultures and differences between people. For comparison, focus was devoted to Czechoslovak and Slovak research activities conducted from the first half of the 20th century to the present day.

RESEARCH INTO READERSHIP AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CZECH AND SLOVAK ENVIRONMENT

Zachová (2013) says that Frey conducted research titled *Čtenářský výskum pražských dětí* [Reading Study of Prague's Children] in 1931 in Czechoslovakia on a sample of 1,500 readers aged 7 to 14. Interest among boys was greatest in fairy tales about heroes, while girls preferred fairy tales about princesses. Local authors took home the top positions when specific books were concerned, especially *Babička* [lit. *Grandmother*] written by Božena Němcová. Similar research was conducted by Prachař in 1935, and he primarily reached the same conclusion. More boys than girls were readers at that time. Slovak girls currently outperform Slovak boys in terms of reading literacy (PIRLS, 2016). According to research conducted by Kopáčiková, Hrdináková and Gašparovičová (2011), fewer boys are reading today than girls. Slovak society was not as culturally diverse in the past as it is today. Much has changed since Slovakia joined the EU. The process of increasing international connectivity is clear in all spheres of life, including education. Children of mandatory schooling age encounter peers in Slovak schools whose parents have migrated from other countries. Many Slovak children also study abroad where their parents have temporarily moved or permanently emigrated. This has presented new problems with respect to teaching Slovak and literary education in bilingual and multilingual environments in both Slovak and foreign schools.

Research focused on child recipients was published by Chaloupka (1971). He determined that the greatest number of respondents read literature for their age category because it met their expectations as readers. This fact was confirmed in research conducted by Zachová (2013). Zachová conducted research in the Czech Republic in 2012 and focused on readers 11–15 years old. The collaborators on this research were inspired by the work conducted by Marhounová in 1987, and

they even selected some of the same questions in their questionnaire. For instance, they asked what book the respondents had read last. The names of authors that respondents mentioned in the previous century appeared again among the preferred authors: Jules Verne, Karl May, Mark Twain, and Erich Maria Remarque. Božena Němcová was there again among the local authors. The only difference in book preferences was observed in the question concerning which book the respondents would take with them on a desert island. While the respondents selected an entertaining or fun book in Marhounová's 1987 research, almost as if readers did not accept the seriousness of their situation, scouting guides, books about nature, atlases and encyclopaedias were the dominant choices among contemporary readers. This speaks to the maturity of today's readers (Zachová, 2013).

The most recent and extensive research titled *Výskum čítania mládeže v Slovenskej republike* [Survey of Youth Reading in Slovakia] was conducted by Kopáčiková, Hrdináková and Gašparovičová (2011) in 2008, 2010, and 2011. A total of 12,393 respondents between the ages of 13 and 17 were involved. Research results provided interesting findings in relation to the preferences of readers. Young readers read magazines for no more than one hour a day, but many of them do not read this format at all. Surprisingly, the most successful genre among respondents was horror novels, followed by novels about the lives of young people, and the third was romantic novels, followed by wartime and historical adventure novels. This research makes it clear that readership decreases with age and the authors consider the relationship between reading and young people at the age of 13 to 17 to be critical.

The research study presented herein focused on certain factors of readership among pupils aged 9 to 13 based on structured group micro-discussions and questionnaire results.

RESEARCH FINDINGS OF THE VEGA 1/0455/18 PROJECT ON CHILD READERSHIP

The subject of research in this project is that there are many other important factors involved in readership over and above reading literacy, which has its foundation in a child's cognition and the fact that a child achieves this milestone at an early educational age. The following factors were investigated in this research:

1. traits of readers (the reader's personal characteristics),

2. the social context of readership (social connections that accompany a child within the context of their reading experience, experiences and the need for social sharing in the form of discussions, recommendations and book gifts),
3. reading preferences (contents, genres and forms that children prefer and choose to read).

Objectives of the research study:

- Present the results of a qualitative investigation into readership factors implemented through focus group discussions with pupils 9 to 13 years old.
- Present the partial results of the questionnaire-based survey of readership preferences among primary school pupils between the ages of 9 and 10.

Discussions were conducted during the first phase of research at one urban and one rural school. Two focus groups with pupils 12 and 13 years of age were involved in each of the schools (for a total of 28 pupils in the 7th form) along with one group of pupils 9 and 10 years of age (a total of 15 pupils in the 4th form).

It was determined that children spend less time reading books and prefer watching television or computer games. Older children have open access to technologies and more often use them to occupy their free time. Most children in the second level of primary school have a smartphone with Internet access and their own tablet or computer at home. They spend much more time on passive online entertainment than reading books and prefer social networks online to finding literary content and continuous texts. From the discussions, it was determined that schools primarily require pupils to read during educational activities. Pupils are afraid to read out loud as they expect to be tested and classified. This is related to the tendency to quantify the results of reading literacy among pupils and to compare the results between countries. Teachers often compare excellent readers to those whose skills are weaker. Reading is also sometimes used as a form of punishment. Teachers infrequently promote reading among pupils for fun and to explore subjects they are interested in. Schools lack a reading culture, and the physical space and time for children to read books of their choosing and that they are interested in at school. Many children do not have family incentives because their parents do not read books. Even when children do not spend a lot of time with their parents, they still copy their behaviour. It was determined that the parents of children who already know how to read and become readers do not read with them or talk about the books they have read with them. They miss out on the pleasure of listening about works of literature they have read. Books become

less frequent gifts as children age. Qualitative analysis produced the established sequential theory on the levels of children's reading maturity:

1. acquisition of reading ability – the first step towards reading,
2. understanding the text and its interpretation on an aesthetic-value basis, without which readership cannot sprout,
3. interest in reading and the motivation to read as a free choice of a child,
4. reading enthusiasm as the highest level of childhood reading.

The reading preferences of children change. When children leave standard children's literature behind, they often are unable to find a suitable alternative. There is a lack of current literature for teens, or they are unaware of it as they do not have anyone to suggest it to them. If parents and teachers do not speak to them about what they read in their free time, they are unable to advise them and to influence their choices. Reading fans typically prefer literature for adults. As a child ages, time spent with a book becomes less attractive and children prefer the real world and virtual social networks.

The objective of the 1st phase of the research was to identify phenomena that are key for the creation of quantitative investigation categories from the authentic responses of pupils. The aim of the conversations was to fill out understanding of the tacit and hidden areas. This was then used in the creation of the structured items on the questionnaire. The objective was to ensure that questions on the questionnaire were comprehensible and motivating to the respondents.

The questionnaire-based survey formed the 2nd phase of the research. Given the topic and brevity of this study, focus was placed on the reading preferences only of pupils aged 9–10. Discussions showed that today's children do not choose to only read the books suggested by their teachers. They were more likely to consult with their peers and friends and to take suggestions from social networks, and other media influenced their choices as well.

The questionnaire-based survey was concerned, among other topics, with the specific genres and forms that the responding pupils preferred and if these were domestic or foreign titles. Therefore, statements concerning these preferences were included in the questionnaire. This involved the two partially open questions on the 47-item questionnaire (Babiaková, Kasáčová, & Cabanová, 2018). Pupils were free to provide their own answers. This was to determine what children like to read best.

Table 1. Questionnaire – Reading Preferences of Pupils

My favourite thing to read:	My favourite thing to read:
(you may choose multiple answers)	
a) Fairytales	a) Real-life stories
b) Short stories	b) Articles in magazines
c) Novels	c) Fantasy or sci-fi
d) Encyclopaedias	d) Detective stories
e) Poetry	e) Biographies
f) Other	f) Other
g) Please provide their names if you know them	g) Please provide their names if you know them

A total of 321 questionnaires were assessed. The respondents were pupils aged 9–10, 159 boys and 162 girls. Up to 63% of pupils prefer reading fairy tales. 50% of pupils selected real-life stories and 32% of respondents chose encyclopaedias. These were the favourite genres that pupils prefer. 19% of pupils prefer to read poetry and approximately the same number prefer reading articles in magazines. As opposed to the past, 30% of pupils prefer fantasy and sci-fi literature. 26% of respondents expressed an interest in detective stories and 22% in the biographies of famous actors, singers and athletes. 13% of pupils prefer reading short stories (in the short epic genre). Novels were the least chosen (longer epic genre) as these are longer, epic works and pupils of a younger schooling age tire more readily and therefore are likely to choose shorter literary texts. They were only reported by 10% of respondents.

The results of the research are the output of qualitative content analysis complemented by the categorisation procedure. Chart 1 shows the bare calculations.

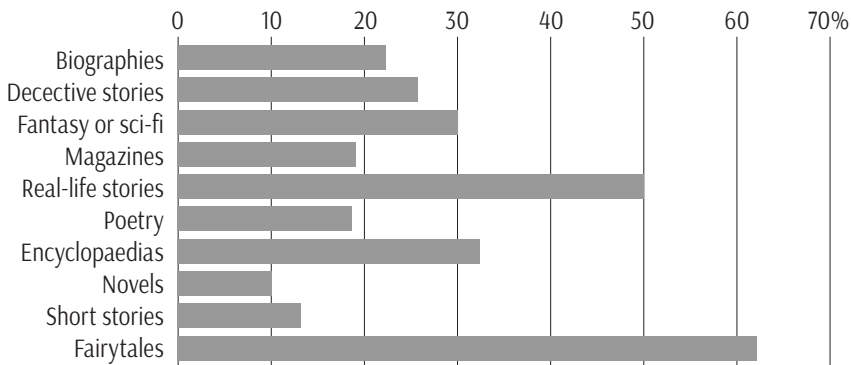


Chart 1. Genres and Literary Formats Preferred by Pupils

The questionnaire also included questions that allowed for open responses. Pupils were allowed to provide other literary formats. In particular, the boys reported war stories, action books, and criminal plot books. Girls primarily reported realistic stories and stories about animals. Some children prefer to read a children's version of the Bible – there were three rural respondents. Ten children prefer comics, four fables and two legends. Seven children prefer reading the magazine *Fľak*, which contains jokes and competitions for children, and which has been published in Slovakia for more than 20 years. The magazine recently came under criticism from the media for jokes that contained racist and xenophobic elements that have no place in a magazine for children. A child reader is able to identify that they were jokes, but their simple presence helps to build up racial stereotypes in their subconscious.

In line with the 2011 research conducted by Kopáčiková, Hrdináková and Gašparovičová, younger school-age learners in all eight of the schools involved in the research reported horror as a genre among their favourite literary formats. As a genre, these are prosaic works that attempt to induce various feelings of fear among readers. It is therefore quite surprising that children aged 9 and 10 choose these stories.

Czech research conducted in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries showed that the largest number of respondents read literature for their age category. The same is true in this research. Evidence of this is that more than half of children still like to read fairy tales. Only a small percentage of children said they read literature for adolescents and adults (e.g., *Fallen* by Lauren Kate, *Trhlina* from Jozef Karika, *Oteckovia* by Hana Lasicová and Katarina Mikulíková). The discussions made it clear that a shift occurs among older, 12 and 13-year-old pupils, who choose literature for adolescents and adults.

This research, as opposed to previous activities, was surprising in that pupils almost exclusively prefer books from foreign authors. The names of books that appeared the most in the open responses from pupils include: *Harry Potter* (Joanne K. Rowling) – 10 pupils, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Jeff Kinney) – 6 pupils, the *Horrid Henry's Underpants* series (Francesca Simon) – 4 pupils, *Tiger Team* (Thomas Brezina) – 2 pupils, *The Three Investigators* (Robert Arthur) – 2 pupils. Respondents also reported fantasy books – *Lord of the Rings* (John Ronald Reuel Tolkien), sci-fi stories – *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (Ransom Riggs), adventure plot stories – *Gangsta Granny* (David Walliams), stories with supernatural phenomena, mysteries, and frightening secrets – *The Knickerbocker Gang* (Thomas Brezina), *Pretty Little Liars* (Sara Shepard), stories about the adventurous world of magic – *Star Friends* series (Linda Chapman), as well as classic children's stories

– *Matilda* (Roald Dahl) and *Mio, My Son* (Astrid Lindgren). The respondents in Czech research from 2012 reported some well-known names among their preferred authors of children’s literature: Jules Verne, Karl May, Mark Twain, and Erich Maria Remarque. The only renowned authors to appear in this research were Lewis Carroll, Astrid Lindgren, and Roald Dahl.

The foreign authors preferred by respondents were largely authors of modern children’s books and some of them continue to write for children and young people. Francesca Simon, Sara Shepard and Jeff Kinney are Americans, Thomas Brezina is an Austrian author, Joanne K. Rowling, David Walliams, Linda Chapman and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien were born, wrote or continue to write in the United Kingdom. Books by these authors are a source of learning about different cultures and their traditions for the Slovak child reader. The contents of some children’s books differ from those books Slovak children read in the past. The moral example of a grandmother, commonplace in the past, for instance, in *Babička* [Grandmother] written by Božena Němcová, has now been replaced in modern books by characters more reflective of the “questioning” relationship today’s children have towards parental authority. Examples are *Gangsta Granny* (David Walliams) and *How to Update Your Parents* (Pete Johnson). The titles of these books indicate the language used in the stories will be less restricted and the text more appealing to children. Especially if that child is of the age where they typically push back against parental authority.

The Slovak book market has opened up to the world and children now choose from a larger set of foreign books, some of which are inappropriate to their age and level of critical thinking, not to mention the suitability of their content and language. Are all the books offered by book publishers and book retailers suitable for the young reader? Translated books accounted for 53% of all publications for young readers from 2000 to 2011, which is more than 1,000 individual books. If the country experienced a certain lack of freedom in the previous century, it is now “freedom without responsibility” (Koreňová, 2013). The problem is that the books presented to children do not also come with a suggested age for the reader, and some books are inappropriately recommended for an excessively young age. According to Koreňová (2013), certain staff at publishing houses defend unsuitable books by stating that their publishing activities must adapt to the expectations of young readers and they must give them something that will interest them, and therefore something they will read. However, critical thinking skills are not sufficiently developed in children, and the same is true of their ability to identify potentially harmful information. This argument is markedly short-sighted, especially given its complete disregard for the educational function of literature for

children and young people. Publishing houses are unfortunately focused on risk and they need to make sales. Koreňová (2013) therefore makes the claim that it is critical to anticipate the reception of a literary text by young readers and the potential consequences of such book.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research show that reading preferences among the young readers of today in Slovakia differ from those in the past in terms of certain indicators. The qualitative analysis of the research data permits the definition of a number of established sequential theories:

In terms of preferred literary genres:

- Children aged 9 to 10, as in the past, enjoy reading fairy tales and real-life stories the most. A relatively large percentage of children prefer encyclopaedias.
- Girls prefer realistic stories and stories about animals.
- Boys primarily choose fantasy and sci-fi stories, action books, and detective stories.
- Horror shows the greatest increase among the most read books by 9 and 10-year-olds compared to the past.
- Books with a declared resistance to authority, and mysterious, occult and horror stories are at the centre of attention.

With respect to preferred literary works:

- Compared to the previous century, contemporary Slovak children, affected by social and political changes, primarily prefer foreign literature in their free time reading.
- These are primarily books by American, English and Austrian authors.

With respect to preferred literary heroes:

- The image of the preferred literary hero as a model of nobleness, courage and love has turned into an archetype of the questioning rebel or a thrill-seeking adventurer.

While the domestic market offers a relatively large selection of quality books from well-known authors (Gabriela Futová, Roman Brat, Marta Hlušíková, Daniel

Hevier, Toňa Revajová, Nataša Tánska and others), no books from these authors appeared in the reading preferences of any respondent. It is clear that children are less likely to choose books recommended by teachers for their free time outside of extracurricular and compulsory reading. The books specified by the respondents speak to the important role advertising, media and their peers play in the selection process. The question remains if children speak to anyone about the books and magazines they enjoy reading the most and just who that person may be. This will be the subject of future research.

The limits of this research are based on the typical restrictions on qualitative research. The conclusions and theories herein are the result of deductive thought processes.

Children encounter a different culture and the lives of people of other nationalities or ethnicities in the books of foreign authors. The adults closest to them have the ability to discuss these differences with them and use them for the purposes of multicultural education. The role of the teacher is to identify the commonalities that link people together in these books. Pointing to the differences between cultures, nations and races that can produce xenophobia and racism should be avoided.

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