TODAY’S STUDENTS DO (NOT) READ
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Abstract
Nowadays, teachers often say their students do not read books. They have trouble motivating them to pick up a book and often the teachers in literature classes tend to struggle when it comes to their students enjoying reading.

As part of our research, we conducted a questionnaire and distributed it to Czech students at the age 11-13 at a secondary school. We were trying to discover whether these students like reading, read regularly at home (and how many books they are able to read in some time period) and are able to identify with the characters in books.

In this text, we share the information we discovered during our research and connect the data to the overall situation in education, specifically literature.

Keywords: reading, students, secondary school, motivation, literature classes, books.

1 INTRODUCTION

Teachers today often complain that their students don’t read. They say it’s hard to make them interested in a book and that the situation is getting worse. We have quite a lot of experience with children and young people and believe the situation is not as bad as some people think. Of course, today’s technologies are offering many opportunities how young people can spend their free time. In the world of Youtube or computer games there might not be as much place for reading as in the past. Yet, we believe books are still an important part of people’s lives. And what is more, technologies are not standing in opposition to reading, those two can complete one another, for example when people make videos about the book they had read or they play a game based on a book (like the so popular Witcher based on the books by Sapkowski).

Challies (2017) says that on one hand, technologies can be a reason why some people don’t read and replace book with a video or posts on social media. On the other hand, he adds, such media can be also a way to read, only differently. Heick (2015) too speaks of some advantages technologies have on people’s reading. Some teachers, such as Paquet-Bélanger (2017) even believe that technologies can be used as a helpful tool to support reading comprehension.

We decided to find out whether these complains we so often hear from our colleagues have any truth to them and conducted a research connected to reading of children in our country. As part of a broader study we created a questionnaire asking the students at secondary school question about their reading routine and literature classes. Similarly to Merga (2017), we believe it is very important for the research in this area to be child-centered, because only this way, we can really get to the core of what our students want and need.

Our aim was firstly to find out whether they read and what genres they enjoy. Secondly, we were also asking them about their experience with literature at school and whether they enjoy the classes and books read there. Buckingham (2015) explains the readers used at school often don’t interest the students and their makers seem to know very little about what today’s children actually like.

Main purpose of our study was to discover what they enjoy so we could incorporate it into our teaching and make the classes as enjoyable as possible. Fox (2013) points out that every child should be able to find something they enjoy in their literature classes. We believe a big part of the students becoming a life-long readers is their inner motivation and how the teacher reacts to their needs and wishes. And according to Merga (2017) making a life-long readers out of our students should be the main purpose of literature at school.

In this article, we will introduce you part of the questionnaire connected to their reading experience outside school. We asked them eight questions in this area, and we will introduce each of them to you. In first part of the article, we will shortly describe our study. Then we will make it a part of a broader context. We work with the concept of inner motivation while reading as well. In the end, we give some
general advice to teachers wanting to help their students to become readers and enjoy their literature classes.

2 METHODOLOGY

We conducted a year-long quasi-experiment dealing with character education and literature (focused mostly on inner motivation while reading). There are several parts of the study and each has a different focus. In this article we are dealing with the first part of the questionnaire connected to students’ reading outside the classroom; something we could call reading for pleasure.

The quasi-experiment was conducted at one secondary school in the Czech Republic and there were 94 respondents in the pre-test (questionnaires). The students are in their sixth and seventh grade, which means they are in the age from eleven to thirteen. The over-all number of students that are part of our study is higher but some of them were not present at the time of filling in the questionnaire.

We created eight questions in this area: Do you like reading books?; How many books do you read per year?; What is your favourite genre?; What book did you enjoy lately and why?; Do you read in your free time?; Is reading important according to you?; Have you found anything you could relate to your own life in the books you read?; How much time do you spend reading per week?.

In seven of these questions there were given answers they had to choose from. Except for the question connected to their favourite genre they could always choose only one answer. They could, however, choose three of their favourite genres. In the question connected to some book they enjoyed, the question was opened and they could write the title of such book and the reason why they enjoyed reading it.

Primarily, we wanted to discover whether they read in their free time, how much time they spend reading and what are their favourite genres/books. This information was then used in the quasi-experiment and helped us create their literature lessons and choose the suitable books for the students in the experimental classes (those were taught through texts we chose together with other teachers at the school in contrast to the control classes they are taught using their readers without any interference from our side).

We used descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and created frequency tables of each of the answers, both in each class and in all the classes together. We also work with relative frequency and use percentage rate of each of the answers. We mostly focused on the most frequented answers.

In the next part, we will deal with each of the questions more closely. We firstly dealt with the results in each of the four classes and then we also considered each question on a broader level, taking into account the answers from all the students.

3 RESULTS

As a first question, we wanted to know, whether our students consider themselves as readers. We realise this is a very subjective matter, but the question was whether they like reading and that they can easily answer. From the 94 people more than a half answered with yes (52%). This was truth in three out of four classes, in one there was only around 24% with the answer yes. 31% of the respondents said they did not know, whether they liked reading. And the rest (17%) decided they didn’t like reading.

This was quite close to our expectation, because we knew not everybody reads for pleasure but still expected at least a half of them to like books. And those 31% answering they are not sure might be somewhere on the way to becoming readers by choice.
Second question was more specific. We asked them how many books they read per year. Here, we realise it can be only their guess, because we do not expect them to right journals with lists of read books (as we do) but as an assignment in literature, they have to create their reading journals through the whole school year, so they could have at least a rough idea.

They had more possibilities starting with no reading at all and ending somewhere along 30 books and more per year. The most frequent answer was 6 to 10 books chosen by 31 people (giving us the 33% of all of the respondents). Close to that was the option of 1 to 5 books answered by 29%. Quite a lot of them (20%) said they read 11 to 20 books. The number of people saying they don’t read any book was quite low, of course, being it 5 students all together (around 5%). On the other hand, 6 people said they read more than 20 books per year. From these results we can say there are approximately 6% of people that are heavy readers, almost the same amount of people that do not read at all, and the rest lies somewhere in the middle.

When it comes to their favourite genres, we had a pretty specific idea of what they like. We work with children and young people for many years and we are also part of the community of readers in our country. What is more, our favourite books are often quite similar to those of our students.

Each of the students could choose three different genres, so most of them chose more than just one option. Quite expectedly, most of them chose adventure books (62%) and fantasy (54%). Many of them also seem to like detective stories (37%) and sci-fi (25%). These are all favourite genres generally, so there was nothing surprising in them choosing this way. Some of them also chose fairy-tales, romantic novels, encyclopaedias or horrors. One boy explained he doesn’t read books, but he enjoys reading fanfiction on the internet.
Our next question was whether they read in their free time. More than a half of them (62%) answered they sometimes read. The same amount of people (15%) chose either they read often or hardly ever. Now we do realise, this is very hard to measure in any way because their comprehension of time might differ but since we were interested in their perception of themselves as readers, this is still meaningful to us as teachers. From the number of 94 people 8 said they never read.

Since our idea is to work with books that are meaningful to them, we were interested whether they identified with anything in the stories or whether they found any link to their personal life or the world around them. Here, the most frequent answer was yes (58,5%). The rest split between no (21,3%) and I don’t know (20,2%). Again, we realise this is a hard question for them, not only because they simply don’t have to remember the feeling they had reading such book but also because they might not realise they underwent such experience when reading. This was still important information for us because we believe they can only get positively motivated to read when the books have the power to speak to them and create a link between the story and their own lives.

We also asked them whether they think reading is important. Half of them (50%) answered positively saying it is important a lot. A big amount of them (40%) agreed that it is quite important. The rest of respondents said they either don’t know (4,25%) or that it is not important (4,25%). We can connect this question to the very first one whether they like reading, because approximately the same amount of people saying they like reading also believe reading is important.

Lastly, we wanted to know how much time they spend reading per week. The most often answer being 30 minutes (32%), 20 of them (21,3%) read around one hour per week. 15% said they read at least two hours per week, but 12 people (12,7%) said they spend no time reading (those might be the non-readers and the very sporadic readers that read one or two books per year and don’t have a weekly routine of reading).

![Figure 3: How much time do you spend reading per week?](image)

We find their answers here very important because the amount of time most of them spends reading is quite low making the reading at school even more important. As teachers, we have a big responsibility to introduce them to such books they could enjoy and such titles might have a positive influence on their future reading.

Lastly, we asked them whether there was any book they enjoyed lately (they wrote down a title and a reason why they liked it). We asked them mostly because we wanted some real examples of books they like, not only genres. The most frequent answer was the book *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or some other diaries (such as *Dork Diaries*). Some of them like reading books about real people they like (such as a football player, youtuber or a parkourist). Many answers were some fantasy or adventure book, such as *Harry Potter*, *Narnia* or *Eragon*.

When we focus on the reason why they liked the book, mostly they said it was fun, there was tension, it was very adventurous or hilarious or that it includes somebody close to them (a girl in the same age,
some famous person they like, dogs…). Some of them also said the book was well written or fast-paced or they simply had seen a movie and then read the book as well.

We realise their answers might be influenced in many ways. The questionnaire was mostly conducted as a support method in our quasi-experiment because we needed to learn something about our students before starting to work with them. We still think there might be something generally helpful also for other teachers that want to understand what their students like and how they can make the literature classes interesting to them to motivate them to read.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As it was already said, we believe positive motivation is a very important aspect in reading of young people. The purpose of this study was firstly to find out what today’s students like so we can work with this information as teachers and make the lessons as enjoyable as possible. As Merga (2017) explains, the development of a regular reading habit of our students should be central for us teachers. People change and we need to keep up and always find out what is best for our students at that specific time.

Since the time spent reading was not very high (at least when it comes to our students), reading at school is the opportunity to make them read more and possibly create reading habit that would lead to life-long reading. Buckingham (2015) asks herself a question what the actual aim of literature at school should be. She believes often the readers that are used there are too hard and uninteresting for the students and we need to offer them such books they would like. Merga (2017) adds the students need the books they enjoy to be available to them (for example in a school library).

Our idea is to choose such books the students would enjoy but still could be new or challenging to them. Fox (2013) explains that every child should be able to find something they enjoy in their literature classes. It is our job as teachers to interpret the signals in children’s behaviour to always choose the right book for them.

The problem with that is that there is no universal advice for choosing such books. Gibney (2012) says there is no magic list of books that would work every time. We just each need to make our own list. And change it whenever it is necessary. Katz (2009) speaks of a canon, a list of books that are seen as “the best” ones, so called divined books. Such standard list might be helpful to teachers, parents or librarians but the books listed there might still not be “the best” ones for our students. That is also the reason why the canon changes with time and there could never be a fixed canon, because such thing as best books is nothing static.

Helterbran (2009) believes connecting curriculum and students’ lives is a way how to create an environment that makes our students motivated and can still be meaningful and teach them something new. With the idea of curriculum motivating students work also Reyes-Torres and Bird (2015) or Sulkunen (2013). Tomlinson (2000) suggests using children’s picture books, which can be easily used to motivate them, comparing their lives and the lives of character, finding the differences.

As teachers it is very important for us to realise we are not the ones that are important in the process of choosing the right book for our classroom. Ross (2000) explains that trying to change readers’ book preferences doesn’t work, because our students know what they want to read. In her study she found out the aspect of freedom is a crucial part of enjoyment in reading.

Our job is of course to give our students a hand in choosing the books they could like. Even for heavy readers the process of choosing a book to read is a hard one, but in that process, we should never get carried away and just choose something according to what we think is good for them, because it is not about our taste or preferences but about theirs. (Ross, 2000)

We see the process of choosing the books for our classes as key. (Kiiveri, 2012) It is also a crucial one. We have class of some 30 students, each with different lives and expectations, different upbringing and experiences. And they all deserve to read something that would help them on the way of becoming readers that enjoy the stories without any other reason except for simply the love of reading. Holdaway (2001) explains that the books read at school are often not so appealing to our students. They differ from those read to them by their parents and often the students simply don’t enjoy their school reading, which has a negative effect on their motivation to read for pleasure. The books offered to them both at home and in school have an effect on their reading motivation. (Duke and Purcell-Gates, 2003)

Motivating our students to read and to enjoy books might be the most important aim of the literature at school, especially at this age. (Fletcher, 2014) Becker (2010) conducted a long-term study dealing with
the relationship between motivation and being a reader. He believes only inner motivation can work. Similar results encountered Wang and Guthrie (2004). So if we work with their inner motivation and make the reading experience a pleasant one for our students, we can actually help them create a life-long habit of reading books. (McGeown, 2014). We believe this should be our purpose as literature teachers. Creating generation(s) of students that like reading books.

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REFERENCES


