

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF READING PREFERENCES OF YOUNGER SCHOOL AGE READERS AT PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The study presents the research findings from a comparison of younger school-aged readers from 3 countries – Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland. The research used a questionnaire of own design based on an initial exploration through focused interviews with readers. The research design was quantitative-qualitative in nature and those questions about preferred literary genres and literature content were semi-open. The research sample consisted of 693 Slovak, 254 Czech and 248 Polish younger-school readers. Respondents were divided according to reading levels into four groups. We searched for whether there were significant differences between the national groups. The research findings showed some similarities but also specific differences between national groups that were described in the research results. In the discussion, the authors present the importance of the research results in the context of pedagogical practice and undergraduate teacher preparation for students of primary education.

***Keywords:** reading interest, reading preferences, younger school age reader*

INTRODUCTION

Reading as a key phenomenon of intellectual-emotional education has a clear impact on individuals leading a successful and meaningful life, as well as the social, economic and cultural level of society. The aim of this study is to present international research findings in the preferences of literary genres among child readers aged 9-10 years and their content focus, including the targeted selection of an author and with a specific focus on book publication. The literary genre with valuable semantic content is one of the main indicators that contribute to the stimulation of a child's reading interest. The current book spectrum (ever-expanding) of literature available to child readers is extremely broad. Paradoxically, researches show that child readers read much less than in the past. "The reading crisis is global and is being watched with considerable attention around the world" [1]. It is important to prevent ways of influencing interest in reading, reading experience and reading habits from causing a reader's appetite from degrading into a reader's aversion. Creating a stimulating reading environment requires knowledge of changes in the current traits of child readers and their tastes with a focus on preferred topics and literary genres. For younger

school-aged readers, reading is based on the emotional experience evoked by the meaning of the content in the text. This presupposes a certain level of reading literacy as a complex of abilities and skills to decode the text and understand it at the horizontal and vertical level of meaning. Receptive-experiential processes are the main stimulus for creating a positive relationship or the internal motivation to read during free time. In terms of developmental psychology and learning theory, children repeat in their own lives those activities they associate with a feeling of pleasure, satisfaction, joy and appreciation. The reader's appetite is the key to form the reader's interest defined in 3 degrees of intensity: 1. neutral reading interest, 2. reading for pleasure presented 3. reading enthusiasm. Reading success is dependent upon the reader's interest [2]. The suitability of the meaning of content, topics, their artistic processing and the form of the literary genre are important factors in the structural concept of the reader's interest considering: the frequency of reading, the effect of reading, the typology of literature, a spectrum of specific literary genres, literary themes and literary heroes. The reader's interest reflects the reader's attitude to the reading process and its content-genre focus [3]. According to research findings [4], fiction, entertaining and adventure literature, as well as literature with elements of the paranormal and horror, dominate in terms of genre preference among younger and older school-age child readers. Theme preferences [5] are dominated by fun and funny themes, provoking reading imagination, mysterious plots and more difficult problems, a fictional story, instructive discovery, providing an escape from the real world, real stories with paranormal elements, childhood topics, love topics, and literary heroes depicting stories that resemble the readers themselves. Researches [6], [7] show that in the breakthrough age period of 10-11 years, readers (even enthusiastically attuned ones) show a significant decrease in reading appetite and a weakening of interest in reading. Research results from 2008 [8] show that if child readers masters reading skills well, then, at the age of 8-9 years, they enter the phase of enthusiastic reading. In contrast, the National Kids and Family Reading Report [9] states that a decline in reading interest occurs earlier, by 15% - 20% on average around the age of 8 to 9, and continues to decline over every two-year period as reading development continues towards the pubescent period.

METHODS

The study brings partial findings from the VEGA quantitative-qualitative empirical research project 1/0455/18 Research and development of readership in younger school-aged students. This was conducted in three stages:

The 1st stage of initial exploration of the problem was implemented in the form of focus interviews with primary school-aged students. From the results of the interviews, we formulated the established theory that readership in children contains three determinants: a) a personality context, b) a social context and c) the reading preferences of the individual. Personality traits were then used to identify four levels of readers, which were designated A, I, G, N. *Enthusiastic readers* (A) are those who actively seek out books, knowingly select literature and prefer

reading in their free time. *Interested readers* (I) know how to select texts according to their own interests and can handle compulsory textbooks without trouble. They need advice, help, and to be motivated to read. *Non-readers without problems* (G) they are indifferent, they are not "illiterate", they know how to read, but they do not read voluntarily or out of interest. *Non-readers with problems* (N) have serious difficulty with literacy and reading is a burden and a hassle for them. They do not read when they are not forced to and, when they are, they struggle mightily" [10].

The 2nd stage involved designing and implementing a structured research instrument (a questionnaire and obtaining the research data. Basic testing was used to divide respondents into the four reading levels: A, I, G, N.

The 3rd stage was focused on: a) a comparison of responses from younger (9-10 years) and older (12-13 years) Slovak students, and b) an international comparison of responses from younger (9-10 years) students from the three countries. A self-designed questionnaire based on qualitative research, specifically focus interviews, was used as a research instrument. The first group of items was focused on the data on respondents and schools, while the second focused on the *personality traits* of readers. These items distributed respondents into four groups of readers according to reading levels: A, I, G, N. The third group monitored the *social context of readership* in respondents and the fourth their *reading preferences*. The focus in this study was on items monitoring the preferences of Slovak, Czech and Polish younger school-aged readers specifically for preferred literary genres and thematic content. Phenomena identified in the initial analysis of the research findings of a descriptive nature concerning the reading preferences of national groups were then subjected to detailed statistical testing. Given that these were categorical variables, the hypotheses were tested using Pearson's chi-quadrant test for fit. A comparison of all combinations of national triplets was completed. The statistical findings are reported where statistical significance was found. Extreme values were used for partial comparisons.

The research set (N 1195) was created on the basis of available selection initiated through direct contact with teachers of younger students. The limit was the willingness of Slovak, Czech and Polish teachers to participate in the research. We divided all three national groups of respondents according to how they classified their criteria from the second group of questionnaire items into reading levels A, I, G, N.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Slovak, Czech and Polish ensemble

4th grade	A enthusiastic readers		I interested readers		G non-readers without problems		N non- readers with problems		Total N %	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
SK	309	44.59	268	38.67	110	15.87	6	0.87	693	100
CZ	76	29.97	120	47.24	54	21.26	4	1.58	254	100
PL	46	18.55	114	45.97	82	33.06	6	2.42	248	100
Total	431		502		246		16		1195	100

The aim of the study was to determine how reading preferences vary between Slovak, Czech and Polish younger school-aged children in terms of literary genre and content. We focused on specifying preferred literature titles for children that the children themselves identified in open questions. We evaluated the findings from two extensive sets of items from the questionnaire in detail. *The research questions* were as follows:

- What are the specifics of the national groups in terms of preferred literary genre?
- How do the national groups vary in terms of preferred thematic content in literature?
- What are the differences between the national groups in preferences for specific children's literature titles?
- What are the specific reading preferences in terms of the students' gender?

RESULTS

In one of the items included in the questionnaire – “*I prefer to read*”: we determined the **preferred literary genres** among younger school-age children. Respondents could mark more than one answer or complete an open-ended answer. We wondered if there were significant differences between the triplets of national groups. We formulated three hypotheses. Due to the method of measurement in this item, three hypotheses were tested using Pearson's chi-squared test of suitability of fit.

H1: We assume that there is a difference between Polish and Slovak respondents in the selection of literary genres. The biggest difference was manifested in the overall comparison of the preferences of literary genres among Polish and Slovak students ($\chi^2=66.95758$ $df=6$ $p = 0.000000$).

H2: We assume that there is a difference between Polish and Czech respondents in the selection of literary genres. There was also a significant, but

slightly smaller, difference between Polish and Czech students ($\chi^2=23.07295$ df=6 p=0.000773).

H3: We assume that there is a difference between Slovak and Czech respondents in preferred literary genres. Comparison of the Slovak and Czech samples showed differences, but of lower significance ($\chi^2=20.04246$ df=6 p=0.002722).

In the preferred genres, Polish students differed significantly to Czech and Slovak students. They read fewer *fairy tales* and significantly more *poems*, *short stories* and *novels*. Interestingly, Polish and Slovak readers with problems at the N level prefer to read fairy tales. Polish and Czech enthusiastic readers at the A level prefer to read short stories. Czech ones chose *poetry* the least of all groups. Slovak children preferred *encyclopaedias*. They read *short stories* much less than Czech and Polish children. (Table 2)

Table 2. Genre preferences

genre	Q I prefer to read							N /% in national groups
	fairy tales %	short stories %	novels %	encyclopaedias %	poetry %	other %	write their names %	
A	32.88	8.71	6.61	18.02	11.11	13.81	8.86	309
I	33.88	5.75	4.52	19.92	9.45	12.94	13.55	268
G	32.57	7.43	5.14	16.57	8.57	17.71	12.00	110
N	44.44	11.11	11.11	11.11	11.11	11.11	0.00	6
SK	33.28	7.48	5.68	18.47	10.17	13.99	10.92	693/100
A	28.57	18.05	9.77	9.77	5.26	15.79	12.78	76
I	33.16	14.74	6.32	8.42	6.84	18.42	12.11	120
G	32.84	8.96	4.48	5.97	4.48	31.34	11.94	54
N	28.57	0.00	0.00	14.29	14.29	28.57	14.29	4
CZ	31.49	14.61	7.05	8.56	6.05	19.90	12.34	254/100
A	14.81	19.44	15.74	5.56	16.67	17.59	10.19	46
I	20.67	22.60	11.54	4.81	17.79	14.42	8.17	114
G	21.37	15.38	5.13	2.56	22.22	17.95	15.38	82
N	30.00	20.00	10.00	10.00	10.00	20.00	0.00	6
PL	19.64	19.86	10.84	4.51	18.51	16.25	10.38	248/100

A – enthusiastic reader, I – interested reader, G – non-reader without problems, N – non-reader with problems

Content categories arose from categorization based on focus interviews. They were the basis for creating the structure in the item: “*What do I like to read about?*”. There were no statistically-significant differences in content preferences between national groups of respondents. Nevertheless, we can talk about some differences between Slovak, Czech and Polish students.

The most preferred content is *real-life stories*, slightly less mentioned by Polish students. *Fantasy and sci-fi* literature are most often chosen by Czech readers. *Detective stories and biographies* are read mostly by Slovak children. Czech students read the least *biographies* and Polish children read the least *articles in magazines*. Magazines are preferred by Slovak and Polish non-level N readers and Czech readers with interest - level I (Table 3).

Table 3. Content preferences

Q What I like to read about								
genre	real-life stories %	articles in magazines %	fantasy or sci-fi %	detective stories %	biographies %	other %	write their names %	N/% in national groups
A	25.32	9.84	22.10	19.19	11.61	8.39	3.55	309
I	28.79	9.67	19.78	14.95	11.65	9.01	6.15	268
G	25.71	12.00	17.14	13.71	17.71	9.14	4.57	110
N	42.86	14.29	0.00	0.00	28.57	14.29	0.00	6
SK	26.73	10.10	20.45	16.79	12.57	8.75	4.61	693/100
A	28.57	6.72	30.25	18.49	2.52	10.08	3.36	76
I	29.73	12.97	25.41	14.59	7.57	7.57	2.16	120
G	26.23	8.20	36.07	4.92	14.75	4.92	4.92	54
N	20.00	0.00	20.00	0.00	0.00	40.00	20.00	4
CZ	28.65	10.00	28.65	14.05	7.03	8.38	3.24	254/100
A	28.40	2.47	23.46	18.52	7.41	12.35	7.41	46
I	22.78	4.43	30.38	12.03	12.03	12.03	6.33	114
G	17.00	5.00	23.00	14.00	13.00	17.00	11.00	82
N	16.67	16.67	50.00	0.00	16.67	0.00	0.00	6
PL	22.32	4.35	26.96	13.91	11.30	13.33	7.83	248/100

A – enthusiastic reader, I – interested reader, G – non-reader without problems, N – non-reader with problems

In both items, younger students had the opportunity to add an open-ended answer - which other genres or content they prefer to read and what are their titles or book titles. Of the national groups, 27% of Slovak, 22.8% of Czech and 14.9%

of Polish respondents used the opportunity to freely write down other genres and content, and 15% of Slovak, 23.6% of Czech and 7.6% of Polish respondents wrote a specific name of a preferred book. The willingness to answer freely was shown mostly by Czech students, the least by Polish students (Chart 1 and Chart 2).

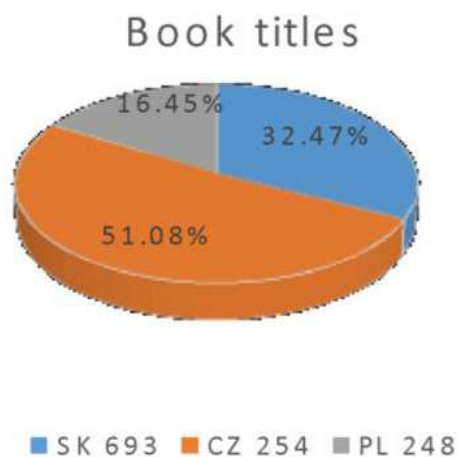


Fig. 1. Percentage share of respondents

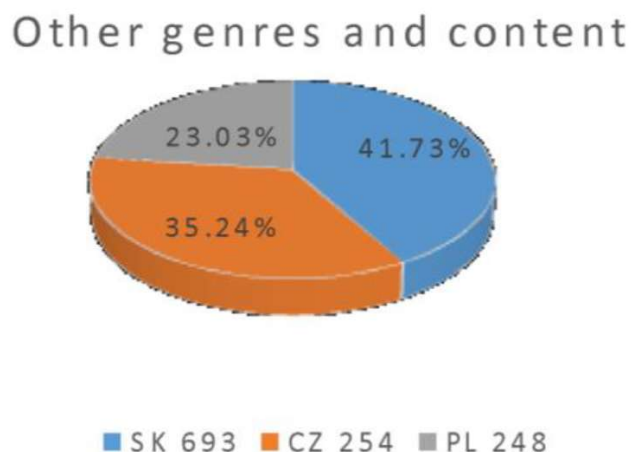


Fig. 2. Percentage share of respondents

Students were free to add other preferred genres and content. Slovak boys mainly mentioned war stories, action books, books with a criminal plot, encyclopedias cars, dinosaurs, and biographies about hockey players and football players. Polish boys mentioned historical stories, comics, books about the universe and YouTubers, and Czech boys reported adventure books and comics in particular. Slovak girls chose especially realistic stories, stories and encyclopedias about animals, especially horses and dogs. This selection aligns them closest to Polish girls, who also chose stories about animals, as well as various fantasy stories. Czech girls often provided responses along the lines of sad and happy stories. In the open-ended answers, poetry was only mentioned by Polish students, which is also confirmed by the result mentioned above in the item "I prefer to read". Legends and fables appeared very little in all three national groups among the preferred genres. The names of magazines were mentioned sporadically by Slovak, Czech and Polish students. Slovak students mentioned the entertaining magazine *Fľak* and Czech students mentioned the magazine *Čtyřlístek*. Czech research in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st Century showed that the largest number of students read literature intended for their age category [11], [12]. This is also the case in our research. Further evidence of this is the fact that the largest percentage of children from all three national groups prefer to read fairy tales. Polish children also like to read short stories. Many Slovak, Czech and Polish children reported stories from life and fantasy literature.

In our research, in contrast to previous research [12], it is surprising that Slovak, Czech and Polish students preferred books from foreign authors. Among the Slovak authors, the storyteller Pavol Dobšinský (*Slovenské rozprávky*) and

newer authors Branislav Jobus (*Muflón Anciáš*) and Alena Penzešová (*Prešibané dvojčatá*) appeared in the open-ended answers. Andrzej Maleszka (*Magioczne drzewo* - several parts) and the title of a series of children's books created by a Polish girl (2005) (*Nela Malá reporterka*) appeared among Polish works. Among Czech authors, children mentioned three: Martina Drijverová (*České pověsti pro malé děti*), Tereza Kramerová (*Dívka s havraními křídli*) and Jaroslav Foglar (*Rychlé šípy*). Children's literature from foreign authors dominated the answers of all children. The most common titles of books by foreign authors in free testimonies of students of all three national groups: *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney, the [*Tom Gates*] series by Liz Pichon, the *Horrid Henry's Underpants* series by Francesca Simon, *Tiger Team* by Thomas Brezina, *Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Complete Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs, and *Gangsta Granny* by David Walliams. There were also stories with supernatural phenomena, mysteries and terrible secrets: *Die Knickerbocker Bande* by Thomas Brezina, *Pretty Little Liars* by Sara Shepard, the *Star Friends Series* by Linda Chapman, as well as classic children's stories: *Matilda* by Roald Dahl and *Mio, min Mio* by Astrid Lindgren, as well as *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

DISCUSSION

The most significant finding is the difference of the Polish sample, which correlates to the better performance of Polish students in international measurements. In Poland, the concept of integrated curricular content has been deployed in primary education, which could also be reflected in the results in measuring literacy [13]. In Polish primary education, reading is incorporated into all subjects as a cross-cutting theme. In the new millennium after education reforms, Polish integrated teaching focuses on thematic integration, often based on a story close to children, but also on other types of art. The teaching focuses attention on the emotional experience of children [14]. Polish students chose short stories much more than their Slovak and Czech cohorts. They focus on artistic and experiential content. We explain this by the fact that in Poland the emphasis is on reading contemporary prose for children as well as prose from Polish history. Younger students have the opportunity to choose from a wide range of literary production [15]. Polish and Czech boys, unlike Slovak boys, very often preferred comics. This may be due to the fact that in Poland and the Czech Republic there is higher production and a broader range of this genre, and children have better access to it on the book market. Czech students chose fantasy and sci-fi literature, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the most out of the three groups. Slovak children preferred encyclopedias. In our opinion, this is related to the excessive overemphasis of cognitive goals in Slovak pedagogical practice. In recent decades, the attention of Slovak teachers has increasingly focused on reading literacy (with the intention of improving students' performance in international measurements), which is related to the development of the cognitive side of the student's personality. They pay less attention to the socio-emotional goals of

reading, specifically fostering the joy of reading and forming a positive attitude towards it. We also noticed a preference for reading biographies among Slovak children. Their open testimonies showed that they were biographies of contemporary "celebrities" of pop culture, modelling and sports. We think that this choice is primarily influenced by the media, which are a serious competitor to students' reading.

CONCLUSION

We found significant differences between younger Slovak, Czech and Polish students. The differences identified from the research certainly have a broader social and cultural context. There are significant differences in the preferences of literary genres. Polish students are more oriented towards short stories and novels, while Slovak students prefer encyclopaedias. Czech students gave the lowest level of preference towards the poetry of all the national groups. Research is particularly important in the context of international comparisons. The study of readership among students, include a perspective on the preference of literary genres and content, is a fundamental topic in innovations to the educational process along with leisure reading activities among students. Research findings are particularly important for teachers, who should fundamentally change their attitudes towards student reading. They should be interested in the reading preferences of their students and give them more time at school to read literary genres and content that they enjoy, not just in reading and literature classes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Project VEGA No. 1/0455/18 titled "Research and Development of Reading Enthusiasm with Younger School-Age Learners", principal investigator doc. PaedDr. Simoneta Babiaková, PhD.

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