

Differences in the acquisition of cultural capital by students in different socio-geographical environments of family and school

Simoneta Babiaková¹

Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, Ružová 14, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

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DOI 10.2478/WSBJBF-2025-0012

Abstract

Sustainable development integrates and harmonizes three foundational pillars: economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, committing to 17 goals, including the provision of inclusive and equitable education, and the creation of inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements (European Commission, 2015). This research explores the issue of social equity in education in Slovakia and presents findings from the VEGA project 1/0720/22 Family Cultural Capital and Its Influence on Children's Academic Achievement. One of the project's aims is to examine differences in the acquisition of cultural capital among students from diverse socio-geographical backgrounds. The study is based on a quantitative sociological and pedagogical survey of students' perspectives (N=502), aged 12–15. The paper presents findings on personal and social aspects of students' reading habits, focusing on schools located in cultural centres and peripheral areas. Data analysis was conducted using contingency tables, with statistical independence tested via Pearson's chi-square test. Linear relationships between variables were examined using the linear association test. Results indicate that the school's location does not significantly impact the time students dedicate to reading, the frequency of reading books or online texts, or the number of books read within six months. Although no statistically significant differences were found between localities, specific trends suggest fewer daily magazine readers in cultural centres, potentially due to the availability of alternative cultural activities (e.g., libraries, theatres, and cinemas). However, a statistically significant difference was observed in how students from cultural centres and peripheral areas assess their reading abilities compared to their peers. Differences were also identified in social factors related to reading, such as the number of books at home and the presence of reading role models in the form of parents. While disparities exist in the socio-economic conditions influencing students' reading environments, the locality does not appear to affect reading frequency or duration. A notable decline in reading habits and interest has been recorded among Slovak students, correlating with their low reading literacy levels identified in international assessments (Miklovičová & Galádová, 2023).

Keywords: cultural capital, inclusive and equitable education, reading and student literacy, cultural center, peripheral locations

¹ Corresponding author. Tel.: +421 048 446 4862; E-mail address: simoneta.babiakova@umb.sk

1 Introduction

The cultural capital of Slovak students is a complex topic encompassing educational attainment, access to culture, family habits, and the broader socio-economic background of the students. This concept originates from the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1986). It refers to knowledge, skills, language competencies, attitudes, and cultural preferences acquired primarily within the family, significantly influencing a student's academic success. Bourdieu (1998) emphasised the family's role and the influence of the school environment. The connection between a family's cultural level and a student's academic achievement forms cultural capital, which tends to be reproduced from generation to generation (Bourdieu, 1998). An individual's cultural capital includes general cultural awareness, communicative competence, and the level of education attained. The level of education attained is closely linked to employment prospects and the associated socio-economic situation. A higher level of cultural capital increases a student's chances of success in school and life. Students from families with higher educational attainment generally possess greater cultural capital—they are more likely to read books, attend cultural events (such as theatre performances, museums, and concerts), and engage in conversations with their parents that foster language development and critical thinking. In contrast, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often lack access to such stimuli, which is reflected in their academic performance. Students from socially disadvantaged environments face significantly lower chances of success in education. Their results in the PISA assessment (2022) are considerably poorer compared to those of students from more favourable backgrounds. Reading literacy among Slovak students is, however, declining in general. As many as 30% of all tested Slovak students did not reach even the basic level of reading proficiency. Mathematical literacy has deteriorated even further, with a decline of 22 points—representing the steepest drop among all OECD countries. Slovakia ranked below the average of all participating countries in the overall assessment (PISA, 2022).

The influence of cultural capital on academic achievement has been addressed by several domestic and international scholars. The research conducted by Z. Kusá (2016) demonstrates how the competitive struggle among schools for students, along with parents' efforts to secure quality education for their children, leads to various forms of student stratification within the Slovak education system. This, in turn, reinforces the role of the cultural capital acquired by the student within the family (Kusá, 2016). I. Chorvát (2024) considered cultural capital in the context of the concept of lifestyle and selected leisure-time activities—particularly those that are culturally demanding and involve active sports—depending on the spatial distance of settlements from cultural centres (Chorvát, 2024). Various forms of cultural capital within the Czech context have been examined by M. Gorčíková and J. Šafr (2016), who studied the influence of family background on the development of students' reading abilities. Cultural capital as a predictor of academic success was also explored by Chinese researchers Hui, J., Shi, J., Xu, M., and Yunan, X. (2024). They identified significant differences between male and female students in secondary education concerning the impact of cultural capital on academic performance. The mother's education significantly influences female students' results in Chinese, English, mathematics, and overall academic achievement, while the father's education has a notable effect on male students' performance in English and overall attainment. The study's findings demonstrated that cultural capital contributes to the academic success of secondary-level students in various ways. Fenlian, X. and Fonny Dameaty H. (2025) examined the application of cultural capital theory in China. Their focus was on defining cultural capital, identifying aspects of cultural capital most relevant to academic achievement, and exploring the relationship between cultural capital and academic success. L. F. Tramonte and J. Wilms (2010) examined the relationship between two types of cultural capital—parents' intellectual practices and their communicative interaction with children—and students' reading literacy, sense of belonging at school, and occupational aspirations. The results offer strong evidence that communicative interaction significantly influences students' academic performance, while parents' intellectual practices have a more modest effect.

The current curriculum reform in Slovakia aims to significantly improve and strengthen primary education within the education system. It involves adapting the goals, content, and forms of education to the needs of contemporary and future society, as well as to the present and upcoming generations of children. The reform seeks to enhance students' educational outcomes in key literacy areas, while ensuring fairness, equality, and accessibility in education. The reform focuses on establishing a primary school system in which every school is capable of creating conditions for quality education (Pupala, B., 2022). The cultural capital of Slovak students is highly differentiated. It is influenced by the family environment, region, availability of cultural resources, and the quality of the school. The school can serve as a place where disparities in cultural capital are compensated for, for example, through school libraries, visits to cultural institutions, or project-based learning. However, the Slovak education system currently lacks robust mechanisms to effectively address and equalise these differences. Significant differences also exist between urban and rural environments. Children in urban areas have greater opportunities for cultural engagement. In certain regions of Slovakia (such as the least developed districts), children's cultural

capital is markedly lower. According to research on cultural consumption in Slovakia, students' access to cultural activities and media is uneven. Children from urban areas have more opportunities to attend cultural events and access quality literature. Children from rural or socially disadvantaged backgrounds face limitations in this regard (Mrva, Pietsch & Vojteková, 2016). Slovakia is currently confronted with challenges related to reducing these disparities and supporting the development of cultural capital among all children, regardless of their origin or place of residence. Statistics indicate the need for systematic measures to enhance the cultural capital of Slovak students, particularly through promoting reading, increasing access to cultural activities, and improving the quality of education.

The issue of social equity in education in Slovakia is addressed by the VEGA project 1/0720/22, Family Cultural Capital and Its Influence on Children's Academic Success, currently being conducted at the Faculty of Arts, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. This study represents a scientific output of the project and presents the differences in the acquisition of cultural capital by students across diverse socio-geographical contexts of family and school.

2 Methodology

The aim of the research was to determine the relationship between reading habits and the school and family environments. This study presents findings on the personal and social aspects of students' reading and literacy in relation to various socio-geographical locations of primary schools, cultural centres, and other peripheral areas.

The research was conducted in June 2023 across 10 schools in the Banská Bystrica region. Data collection was initially carried out at individual schools through online questionnaires (CAWI method), which students completed with the assistance of research team members on school computers over approximately two teaching hours. Prior to the study, the schools sent an information email to parents (or legal guardians), which included a request for consent for the participation of children under the age of fifteen in the research. A total of 507 students from the 6th and 9th grades of primary schools participated in the research. The research area was divided into a cultural centre (regional city) and other localities. The respondents attend 10 different schools varying in terms of location, size, organisation, and number of students. The cultural centre is represented by four schools from the regional city (257 respondents). These are fully organised schools for students from grades 1 to 9. One of the schools is a primary school with a kindergarten, and one is a private primary school. The other localities are represented by six schools (250 respondents) from one town and five villages. These include one primary school in a district town, one primary school located 10 km from the cultural centre, and four primary schools in villages with populations ranging from 500 to 3,300 inhabitants. In some of the schools in the other localities, a significant proportion of students come from marginalised Roma communities, representing lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Table 1: Research sample.

Grade	N	%	Gender	N	%	Focus on schools located	N	%
6. grade	287	56.6	Boy	260	51.3	Cultural centre	257	50.7
9. grade	220	43.4	Girl	247	48.7	Peripheral areas	250	49.3
Together	507	100.0	Together	507	100.0	Together	507	100.0

The research instrument was a CAWI questionnaire used to gather opinions on reading and literacy. The questions related to students' reading habits during their free time, outside of school obligations. We also inquired about the connections between reading and academic achievement. Students' literacy was examined in terms of both personal and social aspects. The questionnaire items consisted of closed, semi-closed, and open-ended questions with single or multiple-choice responses. The questionnaire contained 69 items, of which 24 addressed students' reading and literacy. We obtained 502 valid responses to the questions on reading and literacy. Data analysis involved contingency tables, and statistical independence was tested using Pearson's chi-square test. Linear relationships between variables were verified using the test of linear association.

3 Research results

3.1 Personal aspects of students' reading

We examined the amount of time students devote to reading on a daily basis and the frequency of their reading outside school during a typical school week. Subsequently, we compared the time spent on reading and the frequency of reading in relation to the location of the school (cultural centre vs. other localities). Two hypotheses were formulated:

H1 We assume that the amount of time students spend reading outside of school obligations during a regular school week is independent of the location of their school.

H2 We assume that the frequency of students' reading is independent of the location of their school.

How much time do students spend reading daily outside of school obligations?

Out of 502 respondents, as many as 193 students (38.1%) reported that they do not read voluntarily on a daily basis. These students only read what is required for school assignments and obligations. A total of 127 students (25%) reported reading less than 30 minutes per day voluntarily, 113 students (22.3%) read between 30 minutes and one hour per day, 43 students (8.5%) read between one and two hours per day, and 26 students (5.1%) read two or more hours per day. Differences in the amount of reading time between students from the cultural centre and those from other localities are illustrated in Figure 1.

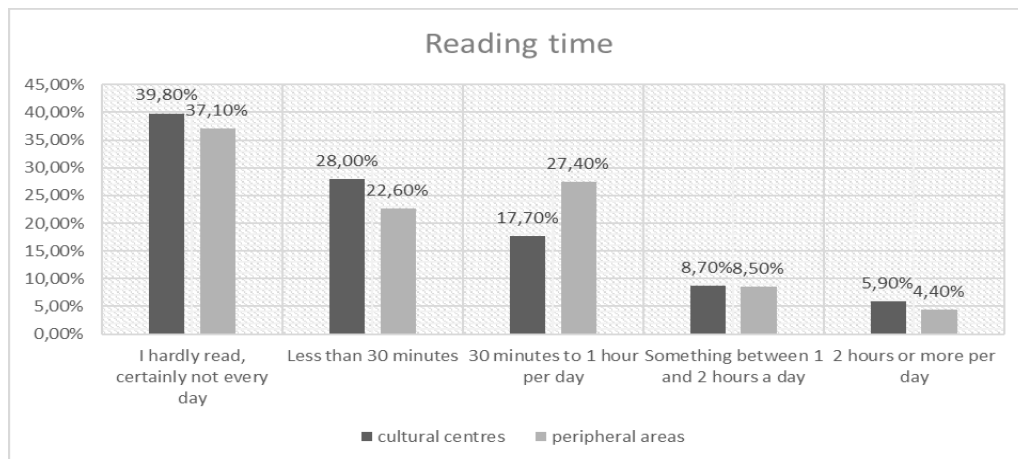


Fig. 1. Reading time.

No statistically significant relationship was found between the location of the primary school and the amount of time devoted to reading ($\chi^2 = 7.441$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.114$; $\chi^2 = 0.516$, $p = 0.472$). The data suggest a slightly higher proportion of students who engage in more intensive reading (30 minutes to 1 hour per day) in other localities (27.4%) compared to the cultural centre (17.7%), with this difference approaching the threshold of statistical significance (Adjusted Residual = ± 2.6). Other differences between the localities, however, were minimal and did not demonstrate a clear systematic tendency. Based on the results, we can conclude that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the location of the school (cultural centre vs. other localities) significantly influences the amount of time students devote to reading outside of school. Although slight differences were observed in certain categories, the overall patterns of reading behaviour do not differ in a statistically significant way across localities. While this research provides a quantitative analysis of the relationship between school location and reading habits, it does not take into account other variables, such as place of residence, students' access to literature, and so on. Hypothesis 1—that the amount of time students spend reading outside school does not depend on school location—was confirmed.

How often do students read for themselves (books, including e-books, magazines, texts on the internet)?

In formulating this question, we drew on the understanding that the frequency of students' reading has a direct and significant impact on their reading comprehension and reading strategies (Amir, 2023). The findings are illustrated in Figure 2.

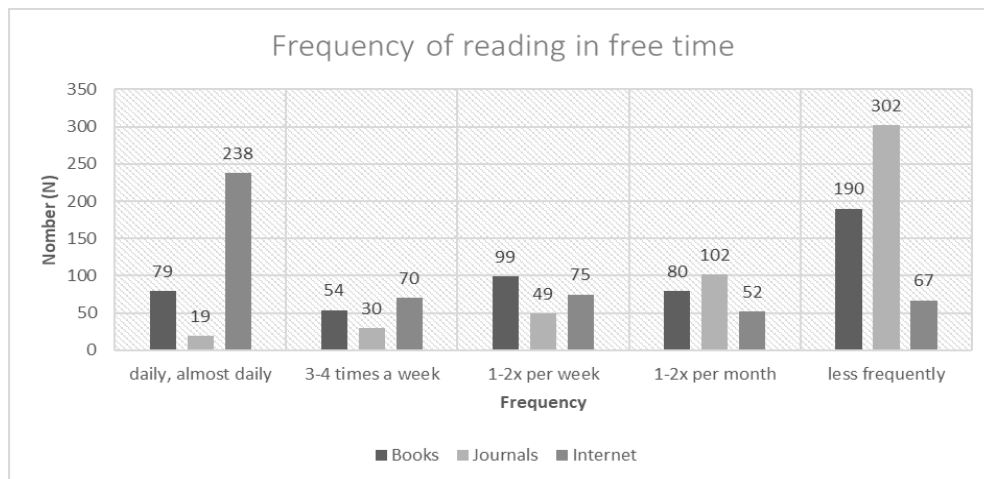


Fig. 2. Frequency of reading for yourself in your free time.

We found that only 79 students (15.6%) reported reading a book daily, while the largest group of students—190 (37.5%)—reported reading a book less frequently than once or twice a month. Magazines were read even less frequently than books. Only 19 students (3.7%) read magazines daily or almost daily, while 302 students (59.6%) reported reading magazines less than once a month. In contrast, as many as 238 students (46.9%) reported reading texts on the internet daily or almost daily, whereas 67 students (13.2%) read online content less than once a month. As illustrated in Graph 2, daily reading of online texts in students' free time clearly dominates over the reading of books and magazines. On the other hand, nearly 60% of students rarely or never read magazines, and nearly 38% read books no more than once or twice a month—or possibly not at all. This is a concerning finding.

The location of the school did not prove to be a significant factor influencing the frequency of students' book reading. The chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 6.605$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.158$) and the test of linear association ($p = 0.138$) did not confirm any statistically significant difference between the locations in terms of how often students read books. Thus, the assumption that book reading frequency is independent of school location was confirmed. The school's location (cultural centre vs. other localities) also did not have a significant impact on how often students read online texts ($p = 0.425$), with no statistical significance observed. Hypothesis 2 was not rejected.

How many books (excluding textbooks) do students read over the course of one school term (half a year)? How many of these are read as part of required school reading assignments?

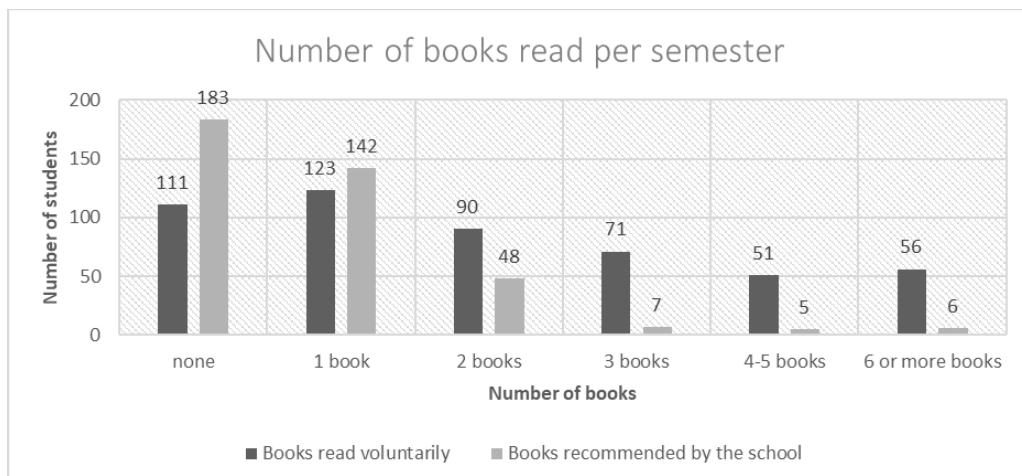


Fig. 3. Number of books per semester.

According to Figure 3, 111 students (21.9%) reported that they do not read a single book voluntarily over the course of one school term. Moreover, 81 students (15.17%) read only what is required for school purposes. In total, 391 valid responses were obtained to the question concerning required or recommended school reading,

while 22.9% of students did not respond—likely because they were unsure how to answer. A total of 183 students (36.1%) indicated that they do not read any recommended books during the term, stating that their schools do not assign any mandatory or recommended reading. One book from the recommended reading list is read by 142 students per term, while 48 students report reading two such books.

Although the proportion of students who read more than six books per term is slightly higher in the cultural centre, the differences between localities are not statistically significant. Interestingly, however, the locality shows a slight but statistically significant effect on the frequency of reading book reviews ($p = 0.049$). In the cultural centre, a higher proportion of students frequently read book reviews and recommendations, whereas in the other localities, the dominant response is “almost never/never”.

How do students perceive themselves as good readers compared to their peers?

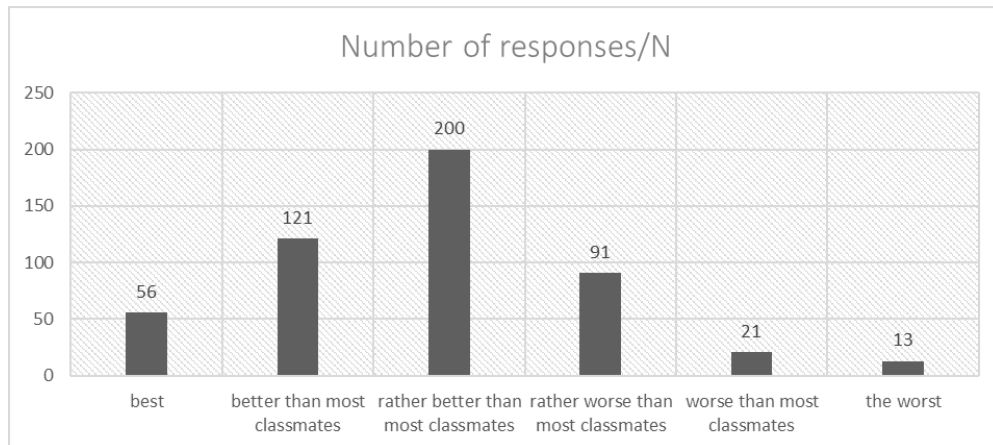


Fig. 4. How good readers do students consider themselves to be.

More than half of the students (63.9%) consider themselves to be better or somewhat better readers than most of their peers.

Based on the results of the chi-square test, it can be stated that there are statistically significant differences ($p = 0.027$) between students from the cultural centre and those from other localities in how they assess their reading abilities compared to their classmates, with students from the cultural centre rating themselves more positively.

3.2 Social aspects of students' reading

We examined the number of books in students' households, the reading stimuli, and role models provided by a reading mother, father, and other family members. We were also interested in how students assess their reading abilities in comparison to their classmates.

How many books do students have at home?

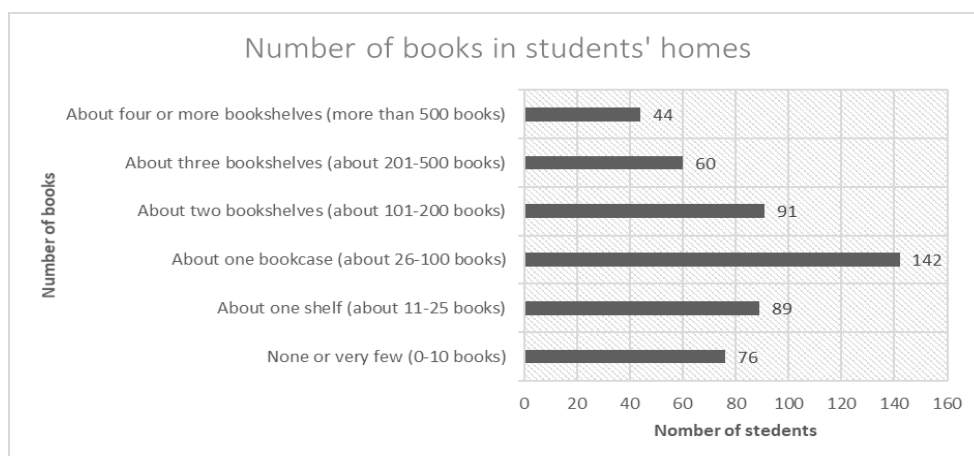


Fig. 5. Number of books in students' homes.

From Figure 5, we can see that nearly half of the respondents – 233 students (46.4%) – reported having between 26 and 200 books at home. A total of 165 students (32.9%) reported having only 0–25 books in their household. It can be assumed that such an environment is not conducive to reading or literacy development, and that books likely hold little value for members of these households. The Pearson Chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 54.739$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed a statistically significant relationship between school locality and the number of books in the household, in favour of students from the cultural centre.

Who in the students' households reads books regularly?

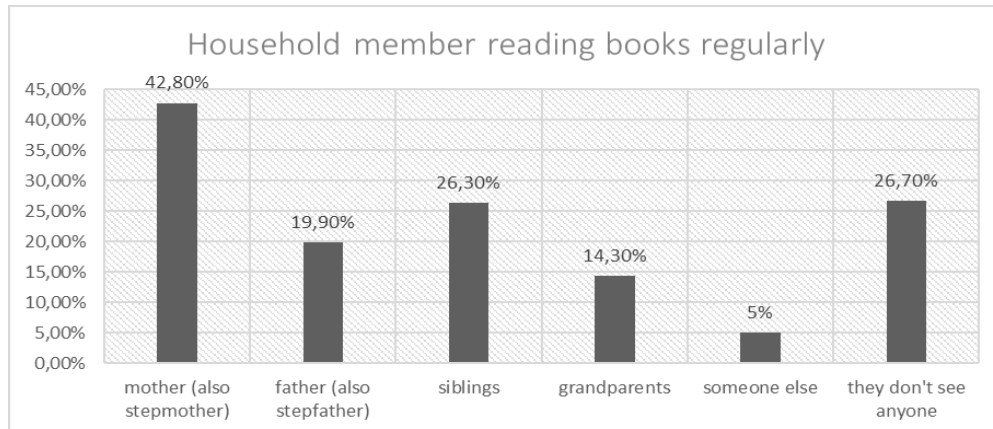


Fig. 6. Household member reading books regularly.

A concerning finding is that more than a quarter of students (26.7%) do not see anyone at home reading books. A statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level was identified between students from the cultural centre and those from other localities in relation to the regular reading habits of the mother. Students from the cultural centre reported their mother as a regular reader considerably more often (50%) than students from other areas (only 35.5%). Twice as many students in the cultural centre (26.4%) identified their father as someone who reads regularly compared to those in other localities (13.3%).

4 Discussion

Our assumption that the time students spend reading outside of school obligations is independent of the location of their school was confirmed. This aligns with the findings of a questionnaire survey conducted by the National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements (NÚCEM) in 2018. According to the survey, as many as two fifths (40%) of 15-year-old students read books not for pleasure, but because they have to. The findings also showed that 35% of students read fiction either very little or not at all. Yet it is precisely fiction that appears to be a crucial type of literature in developing reading literacy and influencing educational outcomes (Kiššová, 2019).

The location of the school does not affect the frequency with which students read books. Students from other areas do not read books more frequently than those from the cultural centre. It is possible that differences in access to books or in the development of reading habits between the cultural centre and other localities are no longer as pronounced. The frequency of book reading may be supported by factors such as the family environment, school activities, institutional support, or students' personal motivation. These factors may be more influential than the school's location itself. Although no statistically significant difference between the localities was found, some trends suggest that there are fewer daily magazine readers in the cultural centre, which may be related to other available cultural activities (e.g., performances, libraries, theatres, and cinemas), as well as to the wider range of leisure opportunities in the cultural centre.

Almost 22% of respondents do not read a single book in their free time over the course of six months. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Babiaková, Kasáčová, and Cabanová (2020), which involved a sample of 534 Year 7 students. In the current national curriculum for older students, only literary genres are defined in the standards, and it is up to the teacher of Slovak language and literature to recommend specific texts. This is based on the understanding that books designated as compulsory reading are generally not read by students. Students tend to show much greater motivation when books are merely recommended, allowing them to choose

what they wish to read. Nevertheless, only five respondents reported reading four to five books recommended by the school, and just six students read six or more.

Socioeconomic background, household resources, and the family's attitude towards reading undoubtedly influence the number of books a family owns. The physical availability of books in the immediate environment plays an important role in encouraging children and teenagers to read (Šebová & Marcinová, 2020). An interesting finding is that students living in the cultural centre tend to have more books at home, likely due to better access to cultural institutions, education, libraries, and bookshops.

The relationship of children to reading is largely influenced during pre-primary education. Research by Rochovská et al. (2021), which examined the use of various forms of art in kindergartens from the perspective of teachers, demonstrated that the area of literary arts was reflected upon by kindergarten teachers to a lesser extent than other forms of art. The authors of the study concluded that this may be largely caused by the current digital era, characterised by excessive screen time, which displaces reading habits not only among parents and their children but also within the current generation of teachers.

In the most recent PISA 2022 assessment, Slovak students scored below the OECD average in reading literacy, with a score of 447. More than half of the respondents believe they are better or somewhat better at reading than most of their classmates. It is assumed that students from other localities assessed themselves within peer groups where the overall level of reading literacy is lower than the OECD country average (PISA, 2022). Students from the cultural centre tend to show more extreme self-assessments (more reporting as “the best” or “the worst”), whereas students from other localities report more moderate evaluations. This could suggest that students from the cultural centre are more consistent or reflective in their self-evaluation of reading skills.

5 Conclusion

Unfortunately, our findings confirm that the frequency of reading books and magazines among secondary school students continues to decline. This aligns with other studies reporting similar data on students who read less frequently or not at all (Kiššová, 2019; Babiaková, Kasáčová & Cabanová, 2020). A comparison of responses from students in the cultural centre and other localities revealed that the availability of cultural institutions, libraries, and bookstores does not affect the number of books read by students. Although students in the cultural centre have a more stimulating reading environment, own more books at home, and have more reading role models in their mothers and fathers compared to students from other localities, this does not influence their reading frequency. Global changes have also affected the family, which no longer has its traditional securities, becoming highly individualistic and stressed by a lack of time. Children lack intergenerational contacts that are important for transmitting traditional values. The family's cultural capital alone is no longer sufficient to increase interest in regular reading and to develop students' reading literacy. The school environment, where students spend a significant part of their daily time, has a crucial impact on their motivation to read. In a world dominated by mass media information and entertainment, the school and teacher serve as guides for students in their search for truth about themselves and the world through literature and experiential reading. According to Kováčová, Švecová, and Šimanová (2020), a favourable reading culture in schools can contribute to this. Such a culture can be fostered through regular reading workshops, both competitive and non-competitive artistic reading activities, the establishment of reading corners and libraries, and the training of teachers who develop students' reading skills.

Our findings suggest the importance of further research objectives. The aim of subsequent research should be to investigate the influence of family and school cultural capital on students' academic achievements and career preferences.

Acknowledgements

This study was created within the framework of the grant project VEGA 1/0720/22 Family Cultural Capital and Its Influence on Children's Academic Achievement.

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