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A Book for Children as Symbiosis of a Text and a Picture: Can Future Teachers Evaluate Literary and Illustrative Value of Books for Children?

Gabriela Magalová, **Roman Gajdoš**, & **Štefania Vyskočová**
Trnava University, Slovak Republic
gabriela.magalova@truni.sk

Abstract

In the paper, the authors analyse to what extent university students – future teachers – can evaluate a book for children as a symbiosis of a text and a picture, and their ability to present these features to readers in preschool, and primary education. Comparing the international PISA results, the level of reading literacy in Slovakia is not sufficient. The authors of the paper look for possible reasons and analyse the current level of professional university students' preparation for work with the book for children. Furthermore, they suggest the procedures, and criteria that can be applied in evaluating the books' textual and illustrative quality, concerning their usage in the particular activities of the educational process.

Keywords: reading literacy in Slovakia; education at universities, a book illustration, a literary text, literature for children and young adults

Introduction

If we want to pay attention to the issue of reading among young people in Slovakia, we can rely on relevant statistical data. They are brought by the currently conducted research, which tells about the reading frequency of primary and secondary, less about university students (Kopačiková, 2011; Gašparovčová, Hrdináková, Kopáčiková & Rankov, 2009; 2011; Babiaková, Kasáčová & Cabanová, 2020, and others).

The above-mentioned researchers are looking for the answers to the questions of decreasing interest of pupils or young people in books or artistic texts. The weak incentive of young people to read is visible and measurable mainly in PISA and PIRLS testing. In our country, the development of reading literacy is monitored at a professional level from the preschool age, extending into primary education (Zápotočná & Petrová, 2010; Liptáková, 2011; Lipnická, 2019; Beláková, 2018; Kovalčíková et al., 2016), and the research continues in mapping later stages of pupil's relation to reading.

In Slovakia, we register many methodological manuals and publications that examine the issue or recommend specific activities suitable for building a relationship with literature (Kováčová, 2020; Orelová, 2014; Bachurová, 2013; Droppová & Valachová, 2011; Lederbuchová, 2004; Rankov, 1991). In the Czech Republic, this research has a long tradition too (Doláková, 2015; Gebhartová, 2011; Horáček, 1994, Gejgušová, 2015, 2019).

In the preparation of future teachers and directly in pedagogical practice, the need for professional training within literary studies, but also in methodology for working with a children's book is evident. The preparation is necessary for both: the textual, and also illustrative components of books. The updated National Educational Programme ISCED-0-pre-primary education defines within the two educational areas, Language and Communication, and Art and Culture, the specific aspects to which the teacher should pay attention. However, if the practice is not preceded by the theoretical and practical experience with a book for children by university students, the level of future teachers' quality preparedness can be reduced significantly.

In many foreign studies and publications, the research profiled to examine the preparedness of future teachers to evaluate professionally the textual and illustrative value of books for children has not been applied yet. Regarding the issue of children's book reception, experts focus primarily on mapping the specific criteria of teachers and students when choosing a book (Karpouza, Zampanioti & Karakitsios, 2014; Kragler, 2000). The authors Pasa & Beges (2006, p. 5) name two basic criteria for choosing a book by educators: 1. internal criteria: content, title, cover, the appearance of the book, illustrations, author, and publisher; 2. external criteria, which are divided into two groups: a) pedagogical (possibility of using the book for specific curricular goals), b) individual criteria of the teacher (personal preferences, the image of children's childhood and interests). Similar research was conducted by Gray (2009), who states that teachers can choose books that could interest their students appropriately, but the problem is the lack of time and resources to provide the books for the classrooms. In their research, Brookshire, Scharff & Moses (2002) devoted themselves to the influence of illustrations on children's choice of books. Malloy, Marinak & Gambrell (2014) investigated the level of children's motivation to read. Regarding the selection and evaluation of a children's book, Weih (2015) emphasizes the symbiosis of a text and an illustration. But she points to the difference between the attributes of artistic and factual literature.

A less frequent research sample concerning the issue of reading is university students. Information about their reading frequency and preferences is only partial, but we have at our disposal a statistical evaluation of their experience with the influence of teaching methods during their university studies (The Analysis of Findings on the State of the Education System in Slovakia. To dá rozum, 2019).

Previous research

The research that we conducted among university students in 2019/2020 (this paper partly follows it) concerned university students in pedagogical fields. The results were published in the monograph Literature in the Professional Training of the Teachers of Native and Foreign Language (Pokrivčáková, Magalová & Hriňák, 2020). We found out what experience the female and male respondents had with teaching literature during their studies at primary and secondary schools. We considered it a crucial issue since working with the books and artistic texts will form part of their pedagogical expertise in a few years. We will briefly recapitulate the results of this research because due to them, a new questionnaire was created. This questionnaire was sent to all universities in Slovakia that provided a preschool and elementary pedagogy study programme.

In the research from the years 2019/2020, students of full-time and part-time bachelor's studies of preschool and elementary pedagogy study programme at one Slovak university participated. The anonymous questionnaire was filled out by 74 full-time students and 48 part-time students, the total sample of respondents was 122 students. The questionnaire focused on the extent of the respondents' reading for one year and their motivation to read. The option I read regularly (8 – 10 books a year) was chosen preferentially by the part-time students (19%), and full-time students (only 8%). Moreover, there was no one among the part-time students who marked the option I read only when I have to; I have no relation to books, I only read magazines; I don't read at all. Among full-time students (they are usually in their twenties), we already noticed this category, and up to 18% of full-time students admitted to “forced” reading or a general dislike of reading books. At this point, we will not describe the findings regarding the respondents' basic knowledge of literature (the findings are described and evaluated in

the mentioned monograph *Literature in the Professional Training of Teachers of Native and Foreign Language*, Pokrivčáková, Magalová & Hriňák, 2020).

Essential to this research was the analysis of the previous experience that students of preschool and elementary pedagogy had with the literature courses during their studies in primary and secondary schools. Up to 41% of respondents (both full-time and part-time university students) expressed that they did not have any experience with creative work within literary education during primary or secondary school. In their literature courses, they mostly only encountered factual information without interesting work with a text or practising any literary interpretation. On the other hand, approximately 14% of the respondents had an experience with an innovative teacher approach in a literature course (at least once either at primary or secondary school). In total, 44% of respondents experienced a literary course where a teacher applied a creative approach to work with a book or a text.

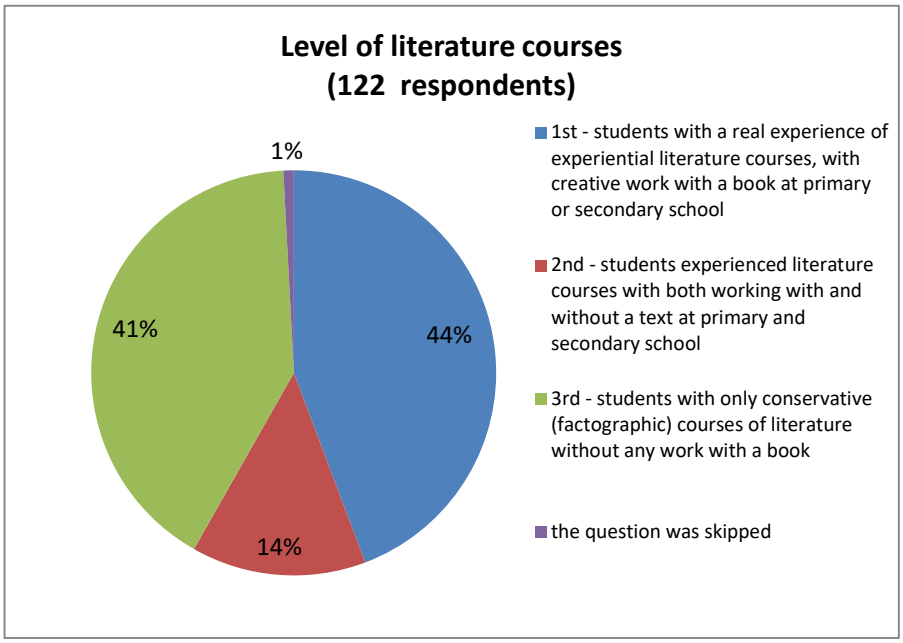

Figure 1: Experience of literature courses at primary or secondary school (university student respondents)

The results pointed out the fact of the necessary need to change the teaching methods within literary education courses at schools, to "reduce existing non-constructive views on literature, on reading or the form of education in this field" (Magalová, 2020). It is essential to emphasize that working with a book in primary education requires not only the teacher´s ability to use innovative divergent methods but also his ability to understand the co-existence of several aesthetic areas. Furthermore, this finding points out the necessary increase due to the demands on the education of future teachers.

In terms of school literary education, the teacher is required to have:

- the ability to assess the didactic suitability of the text concerning the child's age, skills, and needs about the given situation;
- the ability to recognize the qualitative parameters of a text;
- the ability to recognize the qualitative parameters of an illustration;
- the ability to present/interpret the text using appropriate methods considering the age of the recipient;
- the ability to find suitable means of expression to enhance the impression of what has been read and support a natural appetency for reading.

Activities aimed at educating a competent reader require the teacher to master (at least at an acceptable level) each of the named prerequisites. However, if almost half of the respondents have never experienced a comprehensive systematic education in the field of literature, would they be able to reflect on the current challenges that experiential learning requires?

The expert analyses are not optimistic in this regard – as research from Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica documents: "Research has shown that pupils at a younger age are mostly enthusiastic readers. It is also because their reading is more strongly supported by the social environment. The share of enthusiastic children's readers decreases rapidly with age because after the transition to the secondary level of education, we do not work with this potential. That is why many are classified as non-readers, although they did not have and do not have any problem with reading at all" (Babiaková et al., 2020, p. 97).

From an ontogenetic point of view, the primary education teacher has a higher chance to support the natural potential of the pupils by applying his erudite approach to the book, to the text, and also to the book illustration. If the teacher stimulates the desire of primary education pupils for reading, for experiencing a story in its textual or illustrative form, there is a strong assumption that reading and the aesthetic perception of books will become part of the intellectual equipment and needs even in later life.

How to evaluate an illustration for children professionally

With a professional approach to the evaluation of an artistic text, university students of preschool and elementary pedagogy programme meet at both levels of education. They talk about the text in connection with reading or language literacy, in the courses like literary education or literature for children and youth. However, the professional view of children's book illustration is much less present in the courses.

There are no textbooks that would offer a manual for perceiving the illustration of a book. The issue of book illustration is more complex than it might seem at first sight. Weih (2015) names the following scaling about text and illustration in the case of artistic literature (so-called story books):

1. setting (time and place are defined verbally, by illustration, or a combination of both, within the first book pages),
2. problem, conflict (stated in the introduction, something important for the child that stands out, something that interests the child),
3. plot/events of the story (in the case of longer texts with subsections, something interesting, surprising, or shocking must happen in each subsection; in the case of so-called picture books, something interesting, surprising, or shocking must be displayed on each page, in the illustration; it must lead to a clear and understandable solution of the problem),
4. characters (interesting, similar or completely different characters from the recipient; if the main characters are animals, they should be humanized as much as possible, they should be brought closer already within the opening pages; if not illustrative, the verbal description should sufficiently stimulate the child's imagination; the characters require its development, manifestations of diverse emotions just like a child who goes through a range of emotions in different situations).

However, in addition to reading literacy mentioned above, visual literacy can be reflected in primary or lower secondary education reading since its content is formed mainly by children's books. It is therefore not just about understanding the illustration as

a textual subordinate or complementary element, or about some artistic-aesthetic qualitative rules complex, that would enable the teacher to decode the illustrations using some predetermined formula. It is rather a complex model that can be understood as the ability of a teacher to read, receive, decode, and use images (Mitchell, 2007), which (among many others) include illustrations in children's books too.

For this reason, it is important to say that instead of evaluating the purely aesthetic qualities of book illustrations, university students of pedagogy should be able to follow the background of the images and the questions they would raise. With what intention were they created? What do they represent? Whom are they intended for? What current discourse do they present with their visuality and message? What values and beliefs do they communicate? Which element in these images triggers the emotion or interest of its recipient? Duncum (2020) also suggests asking such and other questions in connection with the illustration. In the current saturated market with children's books, which "seduce" the child reader with their visuality, these questions represent not only a selecting criterion of the teacher but also an opportunity to interpret interdisciplinary relations or the basics of general orientation in the visual world. Today, probably no one would take seriously the linear schematic model where picture books are intended exclusively for children; with increasing age, they recede into the background to strengthen the position of the text, this should correspond with the reader's mental performance at a higher level. Image dominance has increased dramatically in recent decades. Images of any kind have come to form the dominant form of our communication. This tendency applies to books too (in this paper we deliberately avoid the term "comic", because, in the Slovak context, it has mostly negative connotations). Today, so-called picture books are very popular. The books attempt to balance the position of the image concerning the text (Driggs Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). In the picture books, the image becomes a full-valued partner of the text; the illustration is no longer a supplement of the text, but together they represent an indivisible intertextual connection, which is ultimately more complex than just the sum of the individual parts (Sipe, 1998).

Regarding picture books in the context of the current production of books for children, it makes no sense to talk about book illustration as a separate genre. In the future, we could rather talk about specific types of texts, in which image and text do not exist as a binary opposition, but as a form of visual text, in which the textual and visual experience overlap (Mitchell, 2004).

Research in 2022

In 2022, we compiled and distributed a new online questionnaire to find out to what extent the respondents (future teachers) feel competent to evaluate the textual and illustrative attributes of the children's book and to what extent their erudition can influence children's readership. What assumptions for work with a book do they have due to their interest in fiction? What potential for developing the ability to evaluate a text and an illustration professionally does the university environment offer them? Does the university environment increase the interest of university students in fiction?

If we sent the compiled questionnaire to the respondents of one university, we would have received feedback regarding the quality of one specific study programme. Therefore, in 2022, we sent the new questionnaire in an online form to those universities that currently offer preschool and elementary pedagogy study programmes. The questionnaire was filled out by full-time and part-time students of the mentioned programme from five Slovak universities: Comenius University in Bratislava, Trnava University in Trnava, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Constantine the

Philosopher University in Nitra and Prešov University in Prešov. The students did not specify their university affiliation (we did not monitor qualitative differences in teaching between individual universities), and the questionnaire was anonymous. The only specified personal data relates to the information whether the person is a bachelor's or master's degree student. We received 331 relevant responses. Thus, it is a relatively rich sample of preschool and elementary pedagogy students from all over Slovakia. In this paper, we select, analyse and summarize only those items from the questionnaire, that are relevant to our goal.

As a research team, we established the following hypotheses:

H 1: The university environment weakly motivates preschool and elementary pedagogy students to read books/fiction more intensively.

H 2: The majority of students in the programme of preschool and elementary pedagogy have problems evaluating the artistic qualities of a text for children and the artistic qualities of a book illustration.

Compilation of the questionnaire, selection of items

331 respondents from five Slovak universities took part in the research. They were female and male full-time and part-time students studying programmes of preschool and elementary pedagogy at the mentioned universities in Slovakia. The questionnaire consisted of eleven questions. The first question verified degree identification (bachelor's or master's degree). We did not ask about affiliation with the specific university. In the next question, we were interested in information about what high school the student graduated from; whether it was a secondary grammar school, or the pedagogical, artistic, technical school, etc. From this data, by pairing individual items, a lot of information could be deduced: how secondary schools of a certain focus educate their students in the skill of handling a text/book, whether they lead them to be discursive readers, etc. The third question copied the research question from 2020/2021. The respondent should have assigned himself to a certain type of reader according to his preference for reading as a leisure activity. The fourth question specified the quantitative indicator of reading performance over the year. The fifth question monitored whether university studies influenced respondents reading frequency (an increase or, on the contrary, a decrease in their reading activities): "Has your books/fiction reading frequency changed over time?" The sixth and seventh questions examined the depth of the reading experience during childhood, the respondents were asked to specify which book (or books) was influential for their childhood. In the eighth question, we investigated the extent to which the respondents perceived the illustration in the book when reading in their childhood. The ninth question reflected the present, we asked: "Would you, as a future teacher, be able to evaluate the quality of book illustration?" The last two questions were linked to this question, they had a specific (and control) character. Question n. 10: "In your opinion, what important attributes should illustrations of children's books have? You can choose more options." In this question, the respondents could choose from the offered options. The last question was dominant for our research. It examined the respondents' opinion on the content and influence of their current university education in the aforementioned aesthetic areas: "Do you think that during your university studies, there was a shift in your view of children's books and their textual and illustrative qualities?"

Considering the scope and goal of this paper, we have selected only some questions from the questionnaire, which are necessary to be analysed and compared because of the formulated hypotheses. We will work with them to subsequently verify the two formulated hypotheses.

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Verification of hypothesis no. 1

The university environment weakly motivates preschool and elementary pedagogy students to read books/fiction more intensively.

We verified this hypothesis by comparing the responses to three questionnaire items.

1st item (question no. 3): What type of reader do you consider yourself to be?

2nd item (question no. 4): How many books do you read in a year approximately? The question refers exclusively to fiction, not to academic literature.

3rd item (question no. 5): Has your book/fiction reading frequency changed over time?

In our research, we had 331 responses to the questionnaire available. In question no. 3: "What type of reader do you consider yourself to be?", it was possible to choose from several options. After the option, we indicate the number of respondents who chose the option (two respondents skipped this question):

I like reading; I prefer reading to other activities (33)
I like reading, but only when I have time (216)
I only read when I have to (37)
If I have to read, I prefer magazines to books (13)
I hardly read at all (30)
I don't read at all (2)

Most respondents (216) chose the option I like reading, but only when I have time. Together with those who prefer reading to other activities (31 respondents), we could, with a certain amount of generalization, consider this group of respondents as real readers (249). We could assign non-readers to those who only read magazines (30 + 13 = 43). The third group consists of "forced" readers (37). We generated the following results:

Real readers – 216 + 33 = 249
"Forced" readers – 37
Non-readers – 30 +13 + 2 = 45

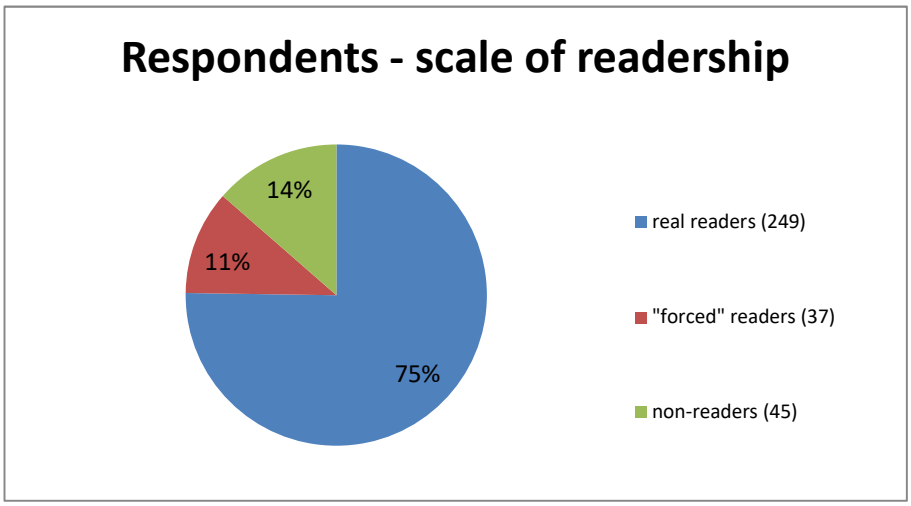

Figure 2: Scaling of reading experience and preference of the respondents

We received relatively optimistic results, which indicate that up to 75% of respondents are in the readers' section. To verify the actual readership, we asked another question about the number of books they read per year: "How many books do you read in a year?" The question refers exclusively to fiction, not to books of academic literature.

We will describe the item "real readers", which was represented by the highest percentage (75%).

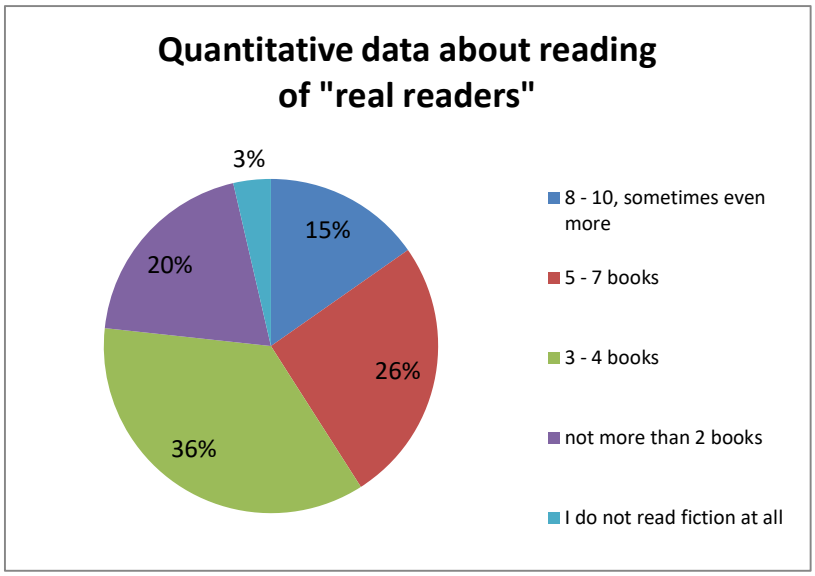

Figure 3: „Real readers“ and their reading frequency

The data show that the sample of those, we were able to assign to actual readers (based on their own opinion), is diverse. 36% of assigned “real readers” do not read more than 4 books a year, and 20% of them not more than two books. Even those who do not read fiction at all chose one of the options intended for “real readers”.

A sample of “forced readers” has the following scheme of reading frequency:

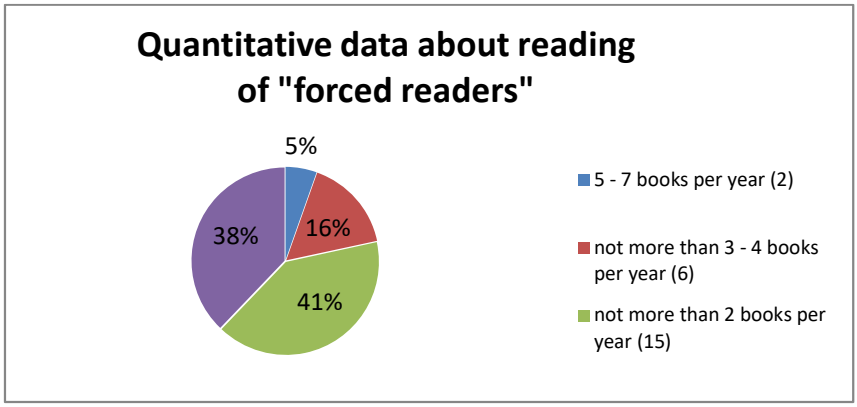

Figure 4: „Forced readers*“ and their reading frequency

Among the “forced readers”, no one was found who read more than 8 books per year. Only 16% of them read 3 – 4 books per year. Most respondents in this category were those who read two books per year (41%) and those who did not read a book at all, so they should belong to the category of non-readers (38%).

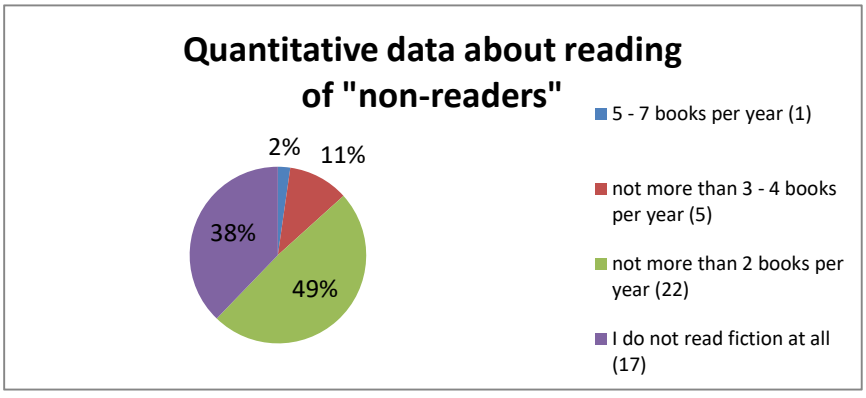

Figure 5: Non-readers and their reading frequency

Again, we can observe how the data provided by the respondents are distorted. In the category of so-called "non-readers", were included those who, for example, read 2 books a year (they make up 49% of the sample of non-readers), but the respondents with the same frequency of reading (2 books per year) can also be found among those who consider themselves to be "forced readers" (they make up 38% of the sample of the previous scheme). The respondents who read 2 books per year can also be found among "real readers" (20% of the sample are real readers). We can see that the term "reader" is defined by each of the respondents differently. In the future, into verifying the hypothesis to what extent their readership was influenced by the university environment, it will be interesting to include this finding in research too.

To the question "Has your book/fiction reading frequency changed over time?" the respondents could choose from several options. We list them with the number of received responses (in brackets). The final data figure is depicted below.

I always liked reading, it has not changed (84)
I used to read more in lower grades, but now I read less – I don't enjoy it (16)
I used to read more in lower grades, but now I read less – I prefer other activities (81)
Now I read much more than in primary and secondary school (78)
Sometimes I was forced to read, but now I read rarely (36)
Sometimes I was forced to read, but now I do not read at all (14)
I have never read a whole book, reading has never been and has never belonged to my favourite activities (7)
Other (15)

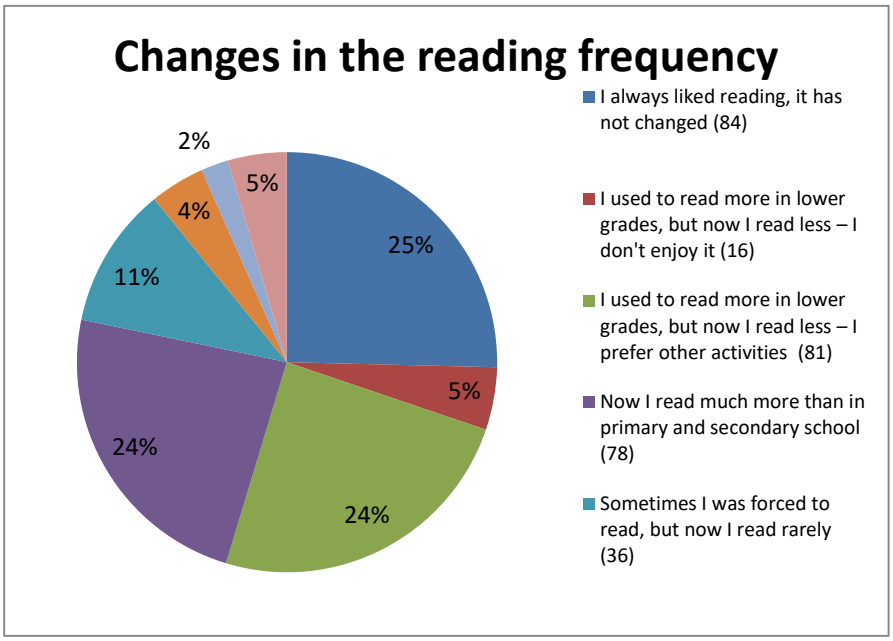

Figure 6: Changes in the reading frequency of respondents (detailed view)

Due to the chosen options, it is possible to select what direction the respondents' interest in reading is heading, and how they evaluate it during their current university studies. The questions were formulated to reveal not only the increasing or decreasing tendency of reading but also its reason. This factor will not be analysed in this paper. Based on the received responses about reading frequency changes, we can specify four groups of readers:

1. those who did not read in the past and do not read during their studies at university;
2. those who have always read and are still reading during their university studies;

3. those who read more in previous grades and now they read less (whether it's a dislike for reading, or preference for other activities, or lack of time);
4. those who read less in previous grades and now read more.

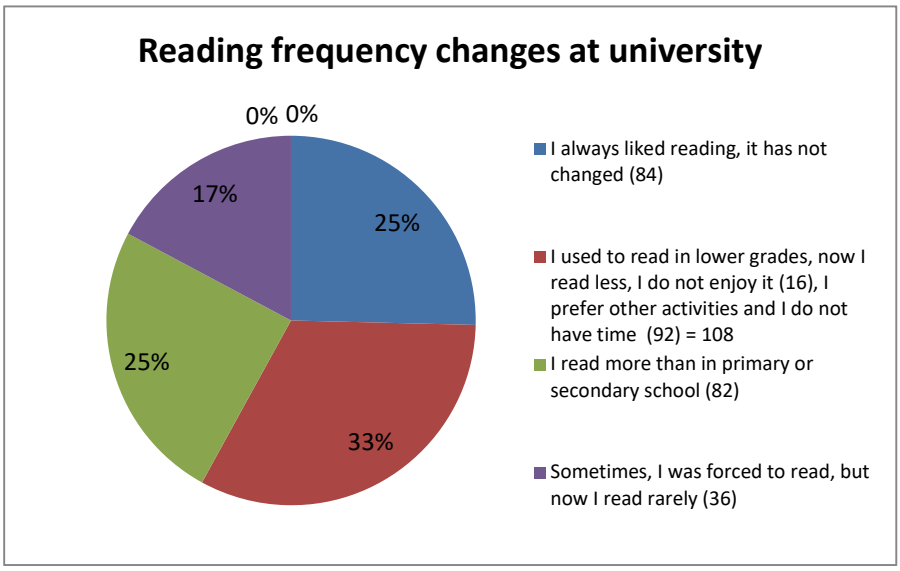

Figure 7: Reading frequency changes at university (scaling)

Among the university respondents of the preschool and elementary pedagogy programme, there are 25% of those that always like reading, and 25% of those whose reading activities have an increasing tendency. It is 50% of those respondents whose readership is at a satisfactory level. However, the same number of respondents shows values of below average, decreasing, or even no reading activity.

From this summarizing graph, by pairing other data, we get a relevant answer to the formulated hypothesis no. 1. During university studies, reading activities do not change in any way for those who always like reading (25%), for those who never like reading, or those whose reading was forced, who rarely read even now or they who do not read at all (17%). Reading frequency changes during university studies were noted by 58% of the respondents: those who admitted to reading less while studying at university (33%), and those who read more than in primary and secondary school (25%). Regarding these data, we can deduce, that the university environment mostly does not motivate university students to read fiction more intensively, even though it is not a significant percentage. However, the data on non-reading (or the low reading level of respondents who study preschool and elementary pedagogy at the university even though they are only "forced" readers, read little or not at all) is alarming.

If we sum the data on those whose reading level decreases during university studies with the percentage of rare, "forced" and non-reading respondents (17%), we get 50% of respondents who dislike reading (either because of long-term non-readership or for other reasons).

Hypothesis no. 1: "The university environment weakly motivates preschool and elementary pedagogy students to read books/fiction more intensively" is true.

Verification of hypothesis no. 2:

H 2: The majority of preschool and elementary pedagogy students have problems evaluating the artistic qualities of text for children and the artistic qualities of book illustrations.

To verify the following hypothesis, it is good to take into consideration the results of the previous verification (H 1). Among the 331 university students of the preschool and elementary pedagogy study programme, 50% are those whose reading activity is at a good level or on the rise. Then 50% of those whose reading activity is on the decline (including those who never had any reading habits). Evaluating the qualitative indicators of literary text and illustrations, being able to handle them, interpret them, and evaluate their aesthetic value must then be reflected in practical activities at seminars and later in teaching practice itself. To determine the level of the respondent´s ability to work with literary text/illustration, we evaluated three questions from the questionnaire.

Question no. 9: As a future teacher, would you be able to evaluate the quality of book illustration? The respondents could choose one of two options – yes or no.

In question no. 10 we asked more specifically: In your opinion, what important attributes should illustrations in children's books have? The respondents could choose from several options.

Question no. 11: Do you think that during your university studies, there was a shift in your view of the book for children and its textual and illustrative qualities?

For question no. 11, the respondents could choose from the following options:

- Yes, I can look at the text and illustration for children more professionally;
- Yes, I can look at the text for children more professionally, but I cannot comment on the illustration;
- Yes, I can look at illustrations in children's books more professionally, but I cannot evaluate the text;
- I don't think that I would be able to evaluate a book for children more professionally, either in terms of text or illustrations;
- Other.

For question no. 11 “Do you think that during your university studies, there was a shift in your view of a book for children and its textual and illustrative qualities?” we recorded the following responses:

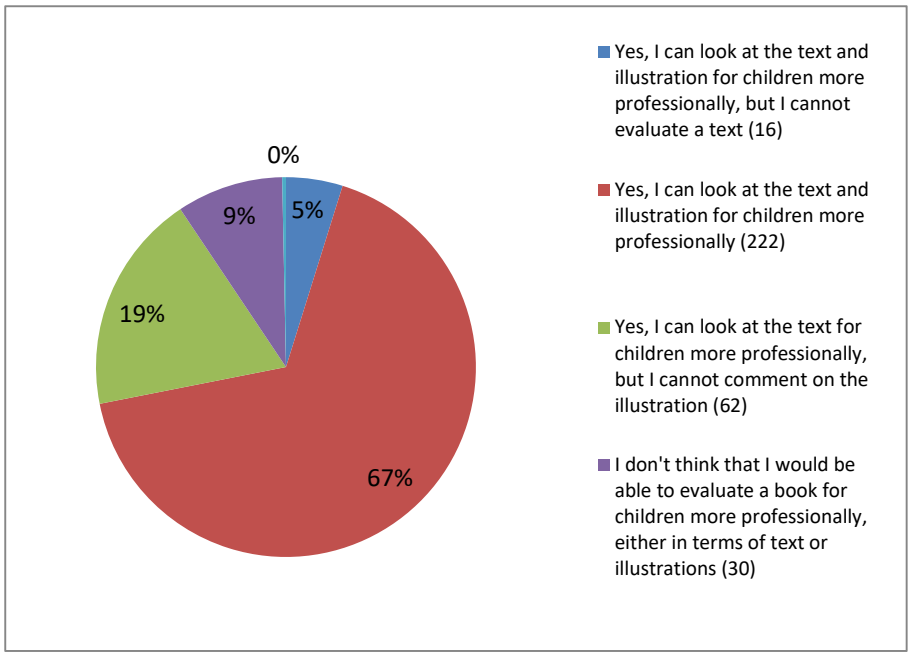

Figure 8: Ability of respondents to evaluate the book regarding its textual and illustrative qualities

A significant number of respondents expressed their potential ability to evaluate the text and the illustration professionally thanks to their university studies (67%). Together with those who can evaluate the text but are unable to expertly evaluate the illustration (19%), we have a sample of respondents capable of expertly evaluating a literary text in a book for children (up to 86%, i.e. 284 respondents). The percentage presenting the professional perception of the illustration is lower.

If we sum the percentage of those who can evaluate professionally both the text and the illustration (67%), and the percentage of those who can evaluate professionally only the illustration (but not the text), we get a sample of (67% + 5% = 72 %) 238 respondents who are convinced that thanks to their university studies they can evaluate the illustration in a children's book expertly (238). Only 9% of respondents expressed doubts about their ability to evaluate both components professionally.

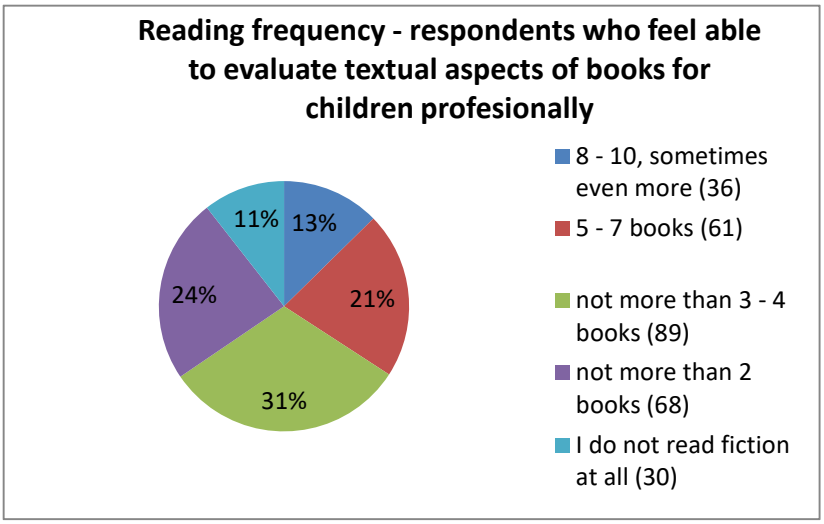

Figure 9:
Reading frequency - respondents who feel able to evaluate textual aspects of books for children professionally

We will take a closer look at those who expressed belief in their professional ability to evaluate literary texts intended for children. In the previous questions, 284 respondents out of a total of 331 expressed their belief to be able to evaluate professionally the textual aspect of the book. These respondents (284) report their readership as follows:

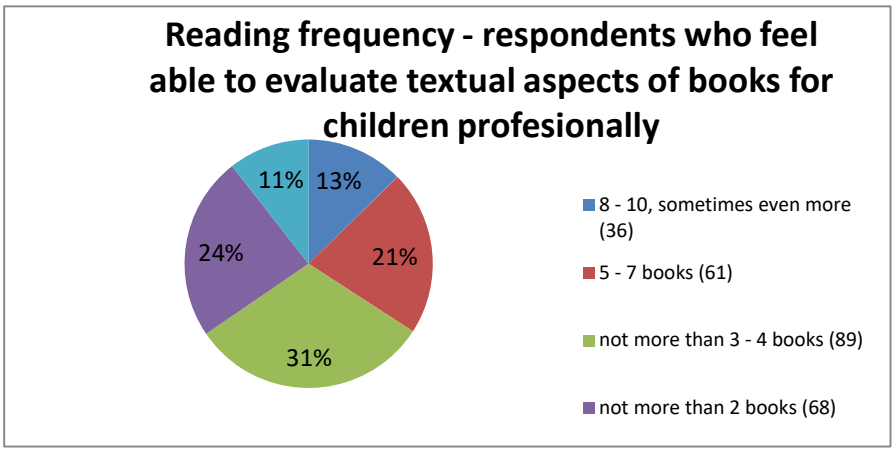

Figure 10:
Respondents able to evaluate textual aspects of the book for children professionally and their reading frequency

We can evaluate the data presenting the reading frequency of the respondents who can evaluate an illustration in a children's book professionally (238). How often do they read a book?

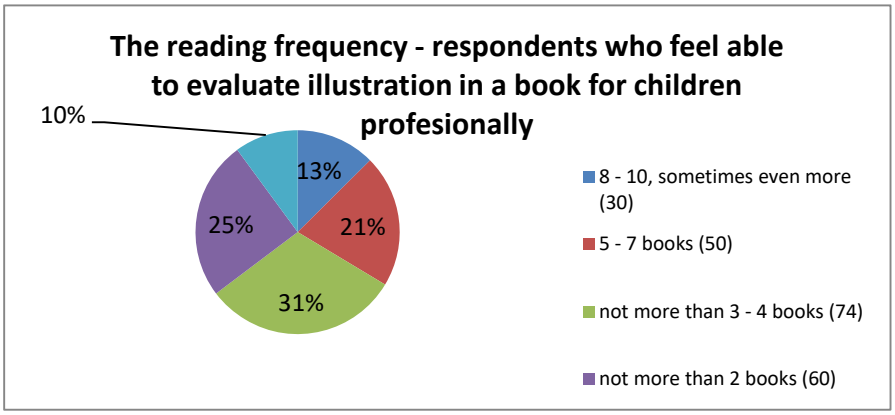

Figure 11: The reading frequency of the respondents who feel able to evaluate illustration in a book for children professionally

The compared data shows us an interesting fact. The two graphs presenting reading frequency are almost identical. Even though the students feel able to evaluate a children's book in terms of illustrations and text professionally, they rarely read more than 8 – 10 books per year. Almost a third of them do not read more than 4 books a year. Unexpectedly, even those who read only two books a year (approx. 25% of them) or do not read at all (approx. 10%) confirmed their ability to evaluate the books professionally.

However, we also checked the evaluation ability of the illustration in the children's book in a separate question no. 9: "As a future teacher, would you be able to evaluate the quality of book illustration?" Out of all 331 responses, we received 273 positive responses (82%). In comparison with the previous question (similar in meaning, different just in its formulation), to which only 238 respondents responded positively, it was 35 fewer positive responses.

In question no. 10, the respondents could choose from several options:

- the illustration depicts what is written in the text (208)
- the illustration should be attractive for children (189)
- to be sufficiently colourful and easy to read (167)
- to be stimulating and raise children's questions (164)
- to depict new ideas that may not be expressed directly in the text (123)
- not to be abstract (34)
- I can't judge it (3)

To summarize, the qualities of book illustrations were judged by preschool and elementary pedagogy university students through the attributes: children like it, the illustration copies the story in the text, and it should be colourful and easy to read. Less respondents chose the option of being stimulating, stimulating children's questions, and bringing new ideas that may not be directly expressed in the text. 34 respondents chose the option against abstraction in the illustration for children.

In terms of the percentage indicator, the formulated hypothesis no. 2 is evaluated as follows: **Hypothesis no. 2**: "**Most students of preschool and elementary pedagogy have problems evaluating the artistic qualities of text for children and the artistic qualities of book illustrations" is false.**

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the previous research about the cause of poor reading habits (skills, competencies) of current students at all levels of education, as shown by PIRLS and PISA student testing results. We focused on the level of reading activities of university students from the preschool and elementary pedagogy study programme. They will work

as preschool or primary school teachers – and thus they have the opportunity to influence the children´s relationship with books and reading from the very beginning.

Based on our analysis, during the university studies of future preschool and elementary pedagogy teachers, reading habits no longer increase. Thus after completing their studies, graduates very often go into educational practice with the same potential (and relationship to books) they acquired at previous levels of education. **The university environment weakly motivates preschool and elementary pedagogy students to read books/fiction more intensively**.

Analysis of the previous research (carried out in 2020/2021), provided the data that up to 41% of respondents experienced only factual teaching, teaching without creative work with the text during literary education courses at primary or secondary school. The existing dysfunctional model of teaching literature along with the lack of motivation for reading in the university environment is alarming.

The pressure to expand theoretical knowledge during university studies is certainly not a sufficient impetus for preschool and elementary pedagogy students. A fundamental practical teaching model that would more intensively present reading as an experiential (aesthetic) activity to the future teachers themselves is still missing. Applying such a model among university students – based on students´ own aesthetic experience of fiction along with professional university influence – can bring the desired experiential and complex teaching into school practice.

Considering the presented findings, the facts resulting from the hypothesis H2 verification are surprising. Due to the questionnaire responses, it is clear, that students are mostly convinced about their professional ability to evaluate so a book for children as an illustration: **Most preschool and elementary pedagogy students have no problems evaluating the artistic qualities of the text for children and the artistic qualities of book illustrations.** Comparing the related questions, it is evident that their convictions are rarely based on their own experience with the literary text. Their reading habits were often overestimated – and during university studies with a tendency to decrease. They also considered themselves to be a reader, despite they read two books a year or do not read at all. In the paper, we drew attention to these disproportions.

82% of respondents admitted the ability to evaluate a book illustration professionally (data from question no. 9). For question no. 11 (“Do you think that during your university studies, there was a shift in your view of a book for children and its textual and illustrative qualities?”), 72% responded positively to the ability to evaluate illustrative qualities professionally. In any case, even this data is not tied to one's own experience with book reading. Qualitative research should follow to verify the responses of the respondents. It would relevantly confirm the ability/inability of future teachers to interpret the artistic qualities of the text and illustrations in the books for children. We have already such research planned.

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Contacts

Gabriela Magalová
Department of Slovak Language and Literature
Faculty of Education, Trnava University
Priemyselná 4
918 43 Trnava
Slovak Republic
gabriela.magalova@truni.sk

Štefania Vyskočová
Department of Slovak Language and Literature
Faculty of Education, Trnava University
Priemyselná 4
918 43 Trnava
Slovak Republic
stefania.vyskocova@tvu.sk

Roman Gajdoš
Department of Art Education
Faculty of Education, Trnava University
Priemyselná 4
918 43 Trnava
Slovak Republic
roman.gajdos@truni.sk