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The impact of teachers' beliefs about literature teaching on reading habits and perceptions of literature among secondary school students

Thesis of doctoral (Ph.D.) dissertation

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I. The aim and structure of the dissertation

The subject of literature, its teaching methodology, and the issues and problems related to the core curriculum have recently become a popular topic not only in academic research, but also in the wider community. Another subject of similar importance, also related to the subject of literature, is reading and the transformation of reading habits. The paper relates these two themes to literature lessons through the perspectives of teachers. As a result, the research has two aims: firstly, it aims to provide a situation report on contemporary literary pedagogy and students' perceptions of reading habits and curricula, and secondly, it examines the attitudes that classroom-based pedagogical practices mobilise on the part of students.

The teacher-belief system contains subjective elements that determine the specificities of teaching at the level of the teacher and the classroom: preferred teaching methodologies, ways of organising learning, strategies of analysing art, teacher and student roles. What the literature teacher considers to be the objectives of teaching literature and the means by which these objectives are achieved. The relatively rapid changes in technology and the flow of information in the world, and the new social and economic demands placed on the individual, require that the education system also adapt. These changes call, for example, for the emergence of new teaching structures, the breaking down of traditional roles of student and teacher, and new possible objectives for the teaching of literature which are potentially more effective in meeting new economic and social needs. In addition, the belief system of the literature teacher can be an influential factor on the learner's attitude towards literature and reading.

In the theoretical part of my thesis, I will examine the teaching of literature from all aspects, thus explaining its cultural and methodological background, and I will write about the tradition and innovation motives of Hungarian literature teaching. I will take stock of the actors in the educational web and describe the interrelationship between them. In the first chapters of the thesis, I will also address the issue of capacity development, which I will consider through the lens of creativity: here I will summarise domestic and international research and examine at a theoretical level what (classroom) conditions are necessary for capacity development.

In the empirical chapter of the thesis, my primary aim is to investigate the nature of the views mobilised by the students. For example, can it be stated that teachers who create innovative, experiential lessons in their teaching methods are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards literature and reading in their students? For this reason, I have divided the research into two major parts: firstly, I examine students' perceptions of the literature

curriculum, and secondly, I examine reading habits and how these might be related to teachers' beliefs on the teaching of literature. The focus on students' perceptions of the subject of literature is on the methodology of teaching literature and, somewhat related to reading habits, on students' views on compulsory reading and on students' reading habits.

II. The theoretical framework of the dissertation

In the theoretical part of the thesis, I have tried to place the problems of teaching literature and reading in a 21st century context. I have approached the main themes of the thesis from a distance: first, I have grasped the theoretical framework of the traditions that are evident in education, in which the processes of the subject of literature can be more easily understood and then contextualised. Gradually, I moved on to the main areas of the subject of literature, discussing its main categories over several chapters, as well as those areas that have generated debate not only professionally but also more widely.

As one of the most important aspirations and aims of (literature) education is the development of skills, I have devoted a longer chapter to the development of a theoretical framework for skill development. Later on, I wrote about the conditions for the development of ability through a concrete example (creativity) (Guilford, 1950; Fodor, 2007). Apart from the fact that in this chapter I have not yet discussed specifically pedagogical views or teaching methodology, I have already created subsections here that bring these themes into the theoretical plane of the thesis and illustrate findings that are inescapable for the further sections of the dissertation (Runco, 2007; Runco and Jonhson, 2002; Westby and Dawson, 1997). These concepts are discussed in the subsection entitled A theoretical approach to specific skill development and skill enhancement: unfolding forms of creativity in the classroom, where, in addition to methodological considerations and beliefs, I have also written about the classroom climate and the learning environment. Skills development was discussed through two educational concepts (Innovation Strategy for Education and Training, Partnership for 21st Century Learning).

The objectives and areas of development of the teaching of literature section sets out the objectives of the teaching of literature and, not entirely separate from this, also takes account of the areas of development. In the history of the development of (literary) pedagogy, there are timeless educational goals and values, but in the world and in the field of education, there have been several recent changes that have fundamentally altered the focus, methods and objectives of classroom work. After 2000, digitalisation entered our lives as an inescapable fact, and transformed them within moments.

Curriculum design is one of the most debated issues in the teaching of literature. In Hungary, the teaching of literature is basically chronological, for traditional reasons, among others. However, the principle of chronological ordering raises a number of problems from the point of view of teaching literature, but also from the point of view of reading, since it involves features (e.g. temporal distances, archaic language use) which may alienate the student from literature and its activity, reading. In addition to writing about the problems of chronological teaching of literature (Pála, 1993; Arató, 2001; Sipos, 2003) in the chapter on the motifs of curriculum arrangement (Pála, 1993; Arató, 2001; Sipos, 2003), I also list some alternative arrangement principles that could stand alongside or instead of the linear (Bodrogi and Kovács, 2022).

In the chapter Literary Studies, Literature Teaching, I linked the two concepts following Antal Bókay (2006) and János Gordon Győri (2006a): I examined how theoretical approaches to literary studies seep into literature teaching, how they define the basis of literary interpretation and what models they allow to be seen within the subject of literature. The chapter contributed to the success of the sampling process and to the subsequent categorisation of literature teaching.

Some examples of attempts at renewal in the teaching of literature from the change of regime onwards trace the evolutionary history of the teaching of literature, taking stock of the concepts, principles and methodological structures that have encouraged/encouraged the renewal of the subject.

I have detailed all the theoretical approaches to reading (Demeter, 1998; Ropolyi, 2003) in the larger chapter on Reading, and I have also made it my main aim to examine how reading has been transformed in the 21st century. I have written about hypertexts, the changing ways of reading, and the forms of text reading and text retrieval on the internet (Szűts, 2000; Ferenczy, 2011).

Reading is underpinned by elements that are culturally determined activities, determined through socialisation and subjective experiences, and therefore reading habits are influenced by myriad factors. Individuals' perceptions of reading are therefore culturally and socially embedded (Schrag, 1997), i.e. whatever social context is discussed, it is always related to the current state of reading habits. Moreover, the ever-changing nature of the social context describes trends in all our activities and habits. We are able to monitor the changes in this context and to identify trends and turning points and then analyse them. In order to make these trends and turning points transparent, I have summarised empirical research relevant to the topic in the chapter Reading habits, national results (Gereben, 2002, 2017; Erdős and Lak, 2019). In connection with reading activities and curriculum planning, I have discussed at length the problems of canonical literature and the teaching of chronological literature. The compulsory reading list and the teaching of literature are inextricably intertwined. According to György

Fenyő D. (2013), the compulsory reading lists are a representation of the curriculum as a whole, i.e. they represent the phases and periods of the history of ideas and culture to be mastered; they symbolise genres, genres, etc. The compulsory reading lists as parts of the curriculum are prescribed in the documents regulating pedagogical work (basic curriculum, framework curriculum, local curriculum, etc.). In general, there are three categories of compulsory reading: (1) reading materials whose processing is laid down in educational documents for the teacher; (2) materials that the teacher must choose from a list; (3) materials that the teacher chooses to read with the students on the basis of his/her own subjective choice (Gordon Győri, 2009; Bodrogi, 2022).

I concluded my discussion of the teaching of literature with a major analytical work: the chapter entitled The Evolution of the National Core Curriculum in the Light of the Teaching of Literature, which, in twenty pages, analyses the evolution of the educational document from its inception (1995) to its latest edition (2020).

I defined the beliefs of teachers from several aspects (society, expectations, educational tradition), and then I presented the results of empirical research that could be considered relevant to the topic of the thesis. The belief system functions as a filter derived from experience, which is difficult to change. It plays a key role in decision situations in the teaching profession, it determines attitudes towards the teaching process (cf. Falus, 2001 and 2002; Bárdossy and Dudás, 2011). It influences the teacher's preferred teaching methods, his or her attitude towards tradition and innovation, the teacher and student roles in the classroom, and in short, the nature of teaching at the level of practice. If we could get a picture of the complexity of the teacher belief system, i.e. if we could explore the beliefs of the teaching community of a particular subject, we would also learn about (for example) how literature is taught in Hungary today, what the reasons and responses are behind its characteristics at the individual level, and how this individual level is integrated into the educational picture as a whole. Bárdossy and Dudás (2011) distinguish five categories of beliefs of teachers in terms of the areas in which they appear: views about students and learning; teaching; curriculum; learning to teach; and views about the self and the role of the teacher.

III. Empirical research

III.1. The research problems

P1 What do teachers of literature consider to be the purpose of teaching literature?

P2 Based on teachers' beliefs, what factors determine the development of the methodology of teaching literature?

P3 Can a correlation be established between the level of liking of the subject of literature and the love of reading?

P4 Do teachers' preferences for activity-based literature teaching lead to more positive student attitudes towards the subject?

III.2. Hypotheses of the research

H1 The objectives of literature lessons are threefold: literacy development, increasing literary analysis skills, and personal development.

H2 Teachers' beliefs suggest that the development of methodology is strongly influenced by external and internal factors of pedagogical work, and as a result, imitative, analytical and generative elements can be detected in the methodological culture.

H3 There is a correlation between liking literature lessons and the level of liking for reading.

H4 Activity-based literary instruction is more likely to result in positive student attitudes towards the subject matter.

III.3. Phases of the research

The empirical study was divided into four major units, each unit was analysed in detail in order to obtain the most complex picture possible of the area under study. Accordingly, the following results published:

1. Teachers' beliefs on literature teaching models and approaches based on cognitive maps

2. Teachers' beliefs on literature teaching based on interviews

3. A survey of secondary school students' reading habits and their views on certain aspects of literature

4. Correlations between students' perceptions of literature and reading habits and teachers' beliefs

III.4. Description of the sampling procedure

I started the empirical research in 2021. The sampling was carried out in secondary schools in Heves County using the snowball technique, involving a total of 11 teachers and 388 students.

I divided the sampling procedure into two major parts, the first phase using qualitative methods: an unstructured concept map and a semi-structured interview. The main aim of this phase was to explore the beliefs of teachers. In this phase, I was particularly interested in the methods used in the teaching of literature, attitudes towards the teaching of literature, and what teachers perceive as the purpose of teaching literature. In the second phase, I used a quantitative questionnaire method to measure the attitudes of the other participants in the teaching-learning process, the students, towards the subject of literature and reading. There was not much time between the two research phases (exploration of teachers' beliefs and completion of student questionnaires), which I kept in mind because the mechanisms of influence in the relationship between the classes and the teacher teaching them can be immediately detected, and the results of the teacher's view research can be most fully correlated with the current students' views and reading habits. The next stage of the research was to examine the relationship between questionnaires and teacher views: student questionnaires were compared with concept maps and interviews with teachers. Based on *Creswell's* convergent parallel design model, qualitative and quantitative data collection was carried out in parallel and the data were analysed separately. One of the main goals was to create a set of data that is easily comparable (Sántha, 2015).

III.5. Triangulation typologies, reliability

Among the triangulation typologies, the research focused on theoretical triangulation, personal triangulation and triangulation of methods. Prior to the sampling procedure, I undertook a review of the literature on the topic, both domestic and foreign, in order to establish a well-grounded theoretical framework for the theoretical part of the research, and to provide an

excellent basis for the selection and structuring of the research methodological tools. Among Denzin's classical methodological triangulation typologies, the triangulation between methods and Morse's schemes, the qual + quant signal system prevailed (*Sántha*, 2015).

In order to ensure the reliability of the qualitative phase of the research, the documents were coded twice (intracoding). I recoded the document based on the same coding scheme and then compared the previous results with the new results (*Sántha*, 2015).

In addition, for reliability, I calculated a reliability index (k_m) based on *Dafinoiu* and *Lungu*'s formula (*Sántha*, 2012). The reliability index was 0.96 for the concept maps and 0.95 for the interviews.

For the questionnaire survey, I also calculated a reliability index with a value of 0.817 (*Cronbach*'s alpha).

III.6. Results of the concept map analysis

I divided the analysis of the concept maps into three categories (purpose of teaching literature, methodology, teacher attitudes), and classified the teachers into models and approaches. The concepts in the teachers' concept maps reinforce the first and the last approach, which can essentially be interpreted as the starting point and the current end point of literature teaching. The two models and approaches have completely different approaches to teaching situations, contents and teacher roles, so it is surprising that the concepts reinforcing the two opposite poles are the most prominent in teachers' thinking. At the same time, the cognitive maps reveal certain trends about the teaching of literature: there is a general correlation between the categories analysed, i.e. teachers who are more innovative in their methodology move away from the exclusive knowledge transfer function of teaching literature and focus on (for example) the development of emotional intelligence.

The concept maps also include elements that suggest attitudes towards the profession. Two of the cognitive maps reflect negative attitudes towards teaching, and one captures positive attitudes towards the profession. The attitude of a teacher of literature towards the profession is influenced by characteristics that can be interpreted at the individual or school level, such as the workload of the teacher, the motivation of the students in the class or institution to learn, which may influence the teacher's attitude towards the profession.

Teachers' beliefs suggest that the primary aims of teaching literature include the development of skills and emotional intelligence. They attach particular importance to the

ability to understand texts, but the development of literacy skills and logical thinking also appear on cognitive maps as objectives.

The methodology of teaching literature can be described as very mixed, as the concept maps show: there were maps in which teachers wrote down concepts belonging to the premodern model, but there were also a large number of associations with the experiential nature of the teaching-learning process. Those teachers whose cognitive maps were overall closer to the modern or postmodern model, methodologically, attributed to their maps concepts that were closer to active learning (e.g. cooperative techniques, drama games).

Through the concept maps, we manage to gain insights into teachers' beliefs about the teaching of literature. I considered it important to carry out an aggregated analysis of the concept maps in order to get a complex picture of the results they show. I supplemented the analysis of teachers' beliefs with interviews with teachers in order to obtain a more nuanced picture of the views of the teachers in question.

III.7. Results of the teacher interviews

The interviews focused on teachers' organisational strategies and teaching methods, and the pedagogical and subjective considerations behind their use. In the case of the interviews, the former classification process became more complex, and the idealistic literacy teaching practices on the concept maps were given a more realistic picture. The beliefs were typically complemented by imitative elements. Teachers also talked about the difficulties they experience in their everyday teaching practice. The clear conclusion from the responses is that the methodological culture of literature teaching combines the trends and characteristics described by the models. The current stage of the teaching of literature, the expectations and demands of the class, the time allocated to the core material and the lesson, the teacher's training are all factors that determine the methods used. According to the teachers' beliefs, the amount of information in the core material and the time frames fixed by external regulators are factors that often prevent methodological innovation and reinforce the presence of the teacher-centred model of teaching literature in the classroom.

III.8. Students' reading habits and perceptions of literature

The sample size allowed me to create a study summarising the reading habits and perceptions

of secondary school students on the subject of literature. As a result, I have explored in detail the leisure activities of a subset of students in Heves County, their characteristics related to reading, and what/what they prefer in literature classes. The perceptions suggest that literature class is the primary site for literacy development and literary analysis. The results of the questionnaire show not only that students see these as the aims of teaching literature, but also that they have a need for lexical knowledge and meaningful discussions about literary works.

In the questionnaire, I also explored the way in which pupils prefer to work. The results showed that students prefer to work in groups or pairs, but that they have a low preference for individual work.

I also assessed the level of preference not only for the forms of work but also for literary genres using the questionnaire. Among secondary school students, novels are the most preferred literary genre, followed by poems, then dramas and finally short stories. The majority of students expressed a desire to receive stories, but the questionnaire also revealed that the primary medium for receiving stories is no longer reading, but watching films or series. The questionnaire also showed that traditional reading has taken a back seat, replaced by texts on the internet, especially on social networking sites. This, together with the low level of popularity of compulsory reading, calls into question the current position of literature and the subject. Compulsory reading is perceived as boring by pupils, some of whom also attach negative connotations to literature, and often see literature lessons as unnecessary.

For the rank correlation calculation, I compared the answers to the students' questionnaires and highlighted the most significant correlations. Among others, I found a correlation between the level of liking of literature lessons and positive attitudes towards reading.

III.9. Student perceptions of literature and reading habits in relation to teacher

perceptions

Having obtained an overall picture of both teachers' beliefs and pupils' reading habits and beliefs, I proceeded to compare the two databases. I involved three literature teachers and more than 150 pupils in this phase of the study. Here I have examined the concept maps and interviews of the three teachers in more detail, firstly by calculating frequencies to highlight differences between classes.

Comparing the results, it can be seen that high school students prefer to read and tend to associate more positive associations with reading than students in technical schools. In terms of the attitudes associated with reading, no major differences can be found between the two technical schools.

The activity of reading is present among the pupils, but it has very different characteristics from the traditional reading habits. In other words, the traditional reading activity seems to be changing: whatever the type of school and whatever the teacher, there is a tendency for social media to be the primary platform for reading (for example, the daily reading frequency of postings is around 50% in all three schools), which once again calls into question the position of literature itself and the subject, which still adapts its expectations to traditionally understood reading habits and platforms.

Literature lessons with positivist characteristics appear in literature lessons regardless of the type of school and teacher, based on the students' experiences. At the same time, analytical approaches are also present in the students' responses, such as literary interpretation and analysis.

A quarter of I3 respondents read more as a secondary school pupil than as a primary school pupil, the same was 54% for I6 pupils, while only 6 of I7 pupils indicated that they read more as a secondary school pupil than before. There could be many reasons for this, such as a pre-existing disinterest in reading, negative attitudes towards literature and books, etc. It is also striking that when I asked students to associate associations with reading and literature, I7 students assigned far more negative concepts to these words.

Literature lessons were more positively associated by I3 pupils than I7 pupils, with the high school scores being outstanding in this respect.

In conclusion, the learner-centred approach contributes to a positive attitude towards literature, but in order to get a more accurate picture of the subject area, I have added a rank correlation calculation to the research.

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IV. Validation or rejection of hypotheses

H1 = 🗸

The objectives of literature lessons are threefold: literacy development, increasing literary analysis skills, and personal development.

H2 = ✓

According to the beliefs of teachers, the development of methodology is strongly influenced by external and internal factors of pedagogical work, and as a result, imitative, analytical and generative elements can be detected in the methodological culture.

H3 = 🗸

There is a correlation between liking literature lessons and the level of liking for reading.

H4 = \mathbf{X}

Activity-based literature teaching is more likely to result in positive student attitudes towards the subject matter.

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