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# **Examining the Beliefs of Secondary School Teachers about Literature Teaching**

Thesis of doctoral (Ph.D.) dissertation

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## **I. The purpose and the structure of the dissertation**

In order to the students' attitudes toward literature become more positive, it is necessary to build a more experimental 21st century literary pedagogy than the present one.

At the same time it is also needed to have a comprehensive understanding of our literature pedagogy, we have to generally know the system basic structure and the Hungarian literature teaching tradition.

Educators play a fundamental role in this process, as this motifs, historical features directly appears through them, like methods, teaching techniques, how they approach to literature, what its goal, and how they maintain it. The students encounter literature with the teacher, this way teachers play a central role in shaping students's attitudes towards it.

Thus, one of the main goals of the research was to determine the beliefs of Hungarian secondary school teachers in the field of literature teaching as accurately as possible, given the scientific results of the last three decades, at the same time, the other aim is to reflect on the most important theoretical frameworks that characterized literature pedagogy after the regime change, and to those tendencies that had played a central role in the educational process during the nearly 150-year history of literature teaching in Hungary.

The structure of the dissertation can be divided into two large units, into a theoretical and an empirical section. The theoretical part consists of five chapters, the empirical one also contains five main chapters, which can be divided into several subchapters.

In the theoretical phase of my dissertation, I revolve around the dilemmas of the post-transition period in the teaching of literature (the situation of human subjects at the turn of the millennium, attitudes, the relationship between students and reading). In a separate chapter, I identify the four areas (classroom management, interpretation, contemporary literature and curriculum organization), and that are important issues in literary education today, and I pay attention to international literature teaching models as well.

In the empirical part of my research, I perform a qualitative document analysis in connection with the Hungarian *National Curriculum 2020*, and I analyze teachers' concept maps and interviews with qualitative analysis, and the data of the questionnaires in a quantitative method.

## II. Theoretical Framework of the Research

### *Dilemmas of Teaching Literature after the Change of Regime*

From the point of view of literary pedagogy today, it was especially important to explore main dilemmas that arise in the field of literature teaching after the change of regime, and which directly or indirectly have an impact on the literature subject to this day. I have highlighted three main dilemmas. The first can be interpreted in a broader context, as the crisis in the field of humanities in the 1990s did not only affect the literature. One of the major questions during this period was how the essence and the authenticity of the human subjects would evolve in the 21st century, and how the essence of the humanities could be grasped and interpreted from the view, especially, of the society.

In education - especially in connection with the subject of Hungarian literature and history - the most prominent problem was the content that human subjects are able to offer to students and how they can maintain their noble status in the system of subjects. From a practical point of view, then, the question has ultimately become how the humanities can be useful after the turn of the millennium. Among the answers, the idea of *Bacsó* (1997) is very characteristic. He said the humanities do not have to compete with the natural sciences, especially in the non-scientific field. The humanities would become anachronistic if they wanted to explain the world in an absolute, holistic way. Rather, their job is to flash up different opportunities to help orient students in a fragmented world, so the world which is technicalized by the natural sciences can feel like home.

The second dilemma was related to the results of *Csapó's* (2000) attitude survey, as the data showed that students' attitudes to Hungarian literature reached never seen lows. All this indicated more and more scientific articles in which researchers and educators expressed their ominous feelings about the subject and the future of it. I also looked at several attitude tests, two need to be highlighted, *Ballér's* (1973) and *Báthory's* (1989) study. If we compare these three – in chronological order – we can see that in 1973 it is a strong positive bond between the students and the subject of Hungarian literature, in 1989 the result deteriorated, and in 2000 the above-mentioned paper pointed out a particularly negative attitude to the subject. Third dilemma is related to reading habits, which included the devaluation of the status of polite literature. After the change of regime, we saw that the role of fiction in people's lives was changing, the expanding market and the appearance of more and more pragmatic texts resulted in a decline in sales numbers (*Kamarás, 2005*). Sociological studies of reading have yielded

devastating results, and these have generated mind-bending vision, namely the end of the *Gutenberg* galaxy. The transformation of reading habits has focused attention on essential motives, such as hypertextuality or the dominance of visual media, which could not be ignored in public education either.

### ***Literature Science and Literature Teaching***

In this chapter, I first sought to answer the question of why the results of literature science schools are hardly and slowly appear in public education, and then I devoted a longer subchapter to presenting the most significant literary paradigms, especially based on *Antal Bókay's* (2006a) and *Kamarás'* (2005) paper. I have dealt most with positivism, structuralism, and hermeneutics, as these discourses have had the greatest impact on teaching the subject in the hungarian public education, based on previous research and my own views. These scientific discourses, as well as the literature teaching paradigms discussed in the next subsection of the dissertation, can be well defined along the three categories of author, literary work and recipient. One of the central purpose to demonstrate the focus between the three main categories and paradigms. I used the model of *Bókay* (2006b), who separted the paradigms of premodern, modern and postmodern literature and literature teaching.

The premodern paradigm focuses on the ethical-moral perspective of the teaching-learning process, and the author's career, the historical context. If the students accabable to position the literary work in a historic context, they finally get the true interpretation. The most important goal of teaching is the transmission of culture, and the elaboration of morally developed identity through national and universal culture. Of the schools of literature, positivism is most closely associated with this paradigm.

In the modern paradigm, the teaching-learning process already has a more aesthetic focus, the focus of the analyzes based on the meaning, connotations. One of most important goals of teaching is to educate the students to become professionally trained individuals by learning different reading and interpretation strategies. The structuralist school can be attached here the most.

In the case of the postmodern paradigm of teaching literature the emphasis is on developing the skills that are essential for the practical success in society. The principles of teaching-learning processes are often determined by global-economic trends. The recipient and the meaning play the greatest role during the interpretation, the major aim is basically the effect, which is provided by the literary work. Of the literary discourses, hermeneutics is close to it,

but in this case not as clear as we have seen with the previous two paradigms. Reception aesthetics, deconstruction, and the various discourses that unfold along cultural theories may also play a significant role.

In the following parts of the chapter I examined the connection points of constructivist pedagogy (*Nahalka, 2002*) with a discourse of literature teaching in the 21st century (*Pethőné, 2005*), and with a modern-postmodern literature teaching system (*Kispál, 2019*).

Then, referring to several previous researches of a historical nature (*Margócsy, 1997; Sipos, 2003*), I searched for the most important historical background factors that contributed to the fact that the school of the positivist literary science remained a long tradition in the education system of Hungary.

### ***Comparative analysis***

I considered it important to get to know the teaching of literature more precisely in an international context, as this allows us to position it in *Hungary*. To reveal its pros and cons, we compare our subject structure, teaching methods, *Natinal Curriculum* etc. with other systems. There has been some larger-scale research in the past (*Purves, 1991; Gordon Győri, 2006*), I have mainly payed attention with education regulatory documents in the four countries included (*United States of America, England, Austria and Germany*).

In terms of educational organization, the English education system is the most centralized, as it has *The National Curriculum*, what contents guidelines apply to state-regulated schools. The German and Austrian systems can be considered to be somewhat more liberal, although these two countries also have a basic education regulatory document (German: *Bildungsstandards im Fach Deutsch für den Mittleren Schulabschluss*; Austrian: *Gesamte Rechtsvorschrift für Lehrpläne der Mittelschulen*), which lay down some rules and some maxims, but some provinces possess full autonomy. In terms of educational governance, the *United States* is the least centralized, although there is also a document that defines core standards. The states, the larger cities or even the counties can decide independently on the curriculum, the most important directions of teaching.

Comparing these systems with the education system of *Hungary*, we see that in all four countries have kind of a pragmatic aspect in the education. One of the main goals is the development of competencies and the promotion of students' social and labor market success. I consider it important to emphasize that during the comparative study I tried to stay objective

throughout, I did not formulate a value judgment for or against a system, as all this would have oversimplified and reduced the possibility of scientificity and objectivity.

### ***Significant Areas of Literature Teaching and Beliefs***

Based on the Hungarian literature and international trends of the last thirty years, I have identified four major areas (classroom management, interpreting, contemporary literature and curriculum organization) that I think are unavoidable in terms of literary pedagogy.

The empirical part of the research also focused mainly on these areas. Before presenting the empirical phase of the study, I listed the different interpretations of the concept of belief (*Pajares, 1992; Calderhead, 1996; Richardson, 1996*) and then operationalized the concept in relation to my research. According to this, views have a kind of ambivalent nature, on the one hand they can be considered as a subjective formation. A belief functions as a kind of filter for the reception of new information or the implementation of our actions. On the other hand, views are also have cognitive feater, from this view it can be characterized as a conventional knowledge system, and interpreted as a psychic component (*Falus, 2001*).

## **III. The empirical phase of research**

### ***Research problems***

P<sub>1</sub>: Which teaching model influences the beliefs of the surveyed teachers the most?

P<sub>2</sub>: To what extent are the results of literature schools used in the methodological culture of the surveyed teachers?

P<sub>3</sub>: What forms of learning organization do Hungarian high school teachers prefer the most?

P<sub>4</sub>: What are the main insights that emerge from the beliefs of Hungarian teachers in relation to the layout of the curriculum?

P<sub>5</sub>: How the teachers think about classical and contemporary literature?

P<sub>6</sub>: Do the ideas of the modernization that have been outlined in *Hungary* in the last three decades appear in the intendment of teachers?

### ***Research hypotheses***

H<sub>1</sub>: The beliefs of teachers on the teaching of literature are based on a mixed model, which focuses on the modern paradigm, but the beliefs also shift towards the premodern and partly the postmodern paradigm of teaching literature.

H<sub>2</sub>: Among the schools of literary theory the structuralism is the most significant school, but also has a significant impact on certain elements of positivism and hermeneutics among the postmodern discourses.

H<sub>3</sub>: Among the forms of classroom management, secondary school teachers mainly prefer frontal teaching, in their views the teacher-centered models are the most decisive.

H<sub>4</sub>: The majority of Hungarian secondary school teachers reject the exclusivity of the chronological arrangement of the curriculum.

H<sub>5</sub>: Literary teachers consider the importance of classical literary works, especially those which have a strong position in the canon of public education, important, but they are not averse to contemporary literature either.

H<sub>6</sub>: A significant proportion of the teachers focus on their own interpretation in school practice.

H<sub>7</sub>: The most important trends, which were outlined in Hungary in the decades following the change of regime, are present among Hungarian teachers.

### ***Phases of empirical research, tools and sample***

#### ***Research phases and tools***

The first phase of the empirical research was a qualitative document analysis focused on the 2020 *National Curriculum*. We considered the analysis important, because the curriculums of each country fundamentally define the most important principles and guidelines of the country's



education. The *National Curriculum* can be considered one of the main structural documents of the Hungarian public education system. The document gives an educational background, it owns a perspective, an educational paradigm, which defines teaching of certain subjects, including the literature. All this obviously provides a framework for the teaching opportunities of teachers.

In the second phase of the research, we made a concept map with teachers who teach in *Nógrád* or *Heves* county and also interviewed them. It was important to create concept maps first, as the interview did not yet affect them, they did not guide their thinking, so they were actually able to communicate their ideas, associations without any kind of influence. Before making the concept map, I give them instructions that had two essential points. One is not to think much about the concepts. This is important because the more time to think, the more consciousnesses can emerge that do not substantially define the actual teacher's beliefs, but which may be thought to sound either modern or either innovative. The other important instruction was to mark the relationship between the concepts that appeared on the map. In addition, there were no restrictions.

After the concept map was prepared, the semi-structured interviews were recorded. We developed a list of questions for the interview, but the nature of the type of interview allowed the educators interviewed to influence the conversation to some extent, allowing them to express their views on topics we did not indicate in the questions but consider them to be particularly important. The interviews were in good spirits, with an average duration of 40 to 50 minutes, the shortest being 35 minutes and the longest being just over 1 hour. Some of them were made with a personal presence, but it was during this period that the epidemic broke out in Europe and in Hungary as well, so we were forced to switch to the online form.

The final phase of the research was a questionnaire survey, which, after an introductory section with basic questions, made statements about the four areas we had already highlighted above. Respondents were able to indicate on a five-point *Likert* scale. The unit focusing on classroom management habits of the questionnaire is based on an internationally used questionnaire, the *ABCC* inventory - *Attitudes and Beliefs on Classroom Control* - (Eveyik, Kurt and Mede, 2009; Martin, Yin and Baldwin, 1998; Ritter and Hancock, 2007). and a version already tested in *Hungary* (Kardos, 2018). Some of this was included in our own questionnaire, and the other sections of the questionnaire were compiled by us. Although the questionnaire could have been edited to be much more extensive and more diverse, it was important to find the temporal limit that educators are still willing to devote of their own time to completing. In our experience, the time to complete our questionnaire is between 20 and 30 minutes. At the

end of each questionnaire, we provided an opportunity for the respondents to express their views on the content in a longer text response, however, the completion of this field was not mandatory.

### *Sample of research*

The study group consisted of Hungarian teachers who teach in a secondary school (grammar school, vocational grammar school / technical school, vocational school / vocational training institution) maintained by a state, church or foundation.

The study was originally designed in *Nógrád* county and *Heves* county, we expect approximately 150 respondent aiming at representative sampling. We made concept maps and interviews with 12 teachers, with 6 teachers from *Nógrád* county (*Balassagyarmat, Salgótarján, Szécsény*) and with 6 teachers from *Heves* county (*Eger, Gyöngyös, Hatvan*).

At the beginning of the surveys, we wanted to everyone have an equal chance in the sample, but this intention of ours was not successful because many schools, many educators do not respond or do not agree to participate. Thus, we started to follow the principle of snowball-like sampling, paying special attention to the fact that the sample from the two counties shows a different picture in terms of cities and institutions, as well as the number of years the teachers have spent on the field.

We also want to carry out the questionnaire survey in the county with the largest possible number of questions, but - as some schools and teachers have to be issued - the small number of responses requests that the survey be extended to the whole country by sending a letter with a questionnaire - for all school principals, we asked them to send the questionnaire to teachers who teaching at the school. We also shared the questionnaire online, the main profile of these groups is teaching literature in secondary school. Finally, the questionnaire count 254 respondents (N = 254).

### ***Qualitative and quantitative data analysis***

From a methodological point of view, our research is based on using mixed methods, in which certain principles of methodological triangulation also appear (*Sántha, 2009*).

In the logical construction of the research, we used *Creswell's* model, including the sequential explanatory design model (*Creswell, 2012; Creswell and Plano, 2011*). In our idea, the qualitative and quantitative parts of the research represent the same priority (QUAL →

QUAN), however, we incorporated into the questionnaire some insights we encountered during the analysis of the concept maps and interviews.

Qualitative content analysis was performed with *MAXQDA*<sup>2022</sup> software. In the process we followed *Sántha's* (2015) findings on personal triangulation in order to eliminate the distorting effects of subjectivity as much as possible. Thus, overall reliability was of paramount importance to us. External reliability was ensured by the professional preparation for the interviews, on the other hand to ensure stress-free environment during the interview was primary.

Internal reliability was given by intracoding, so I recoded the text after some time for reliability. Our coding method's background was the use of *Grounded Theory*, looking for larger content units and main nodes in the typed texts integrated into the. We then looked for subcodes that could be classified under the main codes.

Finally, although many argue that it contradicts the intrinsic nature of qualitative research, we calculated internal reliability to make our research even more accurate (*Sántha*, 2015).

The questionnaire was created on *Google Forms*. After receiving the data, we integrated the elements of the *Excel* spreadsheet automatically generated by *Google* into *SPSS* software. With the help of the software, the data analysis and the calculation of the reliability index were performed.

### ***Analysis of the National Curriculum, the Concept Maps and the Interviews***

In the course of the analysis of the *National Curriculum*, we mainly saw that *Nat* shows a serious duality in relation between the first part – which functions as an introduction – and the part of teaching Hungarian literature, which defines the principles of it. This is because, in terms of uniformity and differentiation, methodological principles, learning environment, personalized learning opportunities and skills development, the first part operates almost exclusively with concepts that point in the direction of building a modern educational structure. We also encounter such concepts and principles in the subject of Hungarian language and literature, but there are several motifs that can be related to a more traditional discourse and premodern in many cases. All this is not seen as a harmonious blend of paradigms, but rather as an insoluble contrast between different narratives.

When analyzing the concept maps, I focused on the concepts highlighted by the teachers, on the other hand, on *Bókay's* literature teaching paradigms, thirdly, on a holistic

approach. All in all, it can be said that the majority of teachers displayed concepts on the maps that are encouraging for the future development of literature pedagogy. The motifs were most in the postmodern in terms of literary teaching paradigms.

Comparing the concept maps and the interviews, we find differences. We may feel that concept maps in many cases contain desires and ideas, while interviews are much more connected to reality, and data can be interpreted much more as representatives of reality. This is because in the interviews often reflect on the problems that teachers have to front with in lessons on a daily basis, such as the lack of motivation and reading, and the predominance of the curriculum. Also in this case, the documents regulating education and the categories of graduation dominate several times, which control the actual reality much more than the ideas of innovation, which in most cases are articulated being only at the level of desires.

### *Analysis of the Questionnaires*

Teachers' teaching practice are divided to teacher-centered and learner-centered trends in classroom management. The teacher-centered trends are often applied in terms of the methods used. This is most evident in the context of interactoins, as the dominance of the teacher is considered to be the controller of the process. In their approach it is important that students memorize the concepts in the lesson as accurately as possible so that they can recall them in certain situations. Well-directed, well-prepared teacher questions are believed to play a key role in the educational goals to be achieved. In addition, the answers show to the active nature of the learning process, the application of the knowledge acquired in the classroom and outside the classroom as well. They share a similar view of the experiential and provocative, so non-template nature of classroom tasks.

In connection with the interpretation of literary work, the teachers considered the primacy of the literary work to be the most important. The interpretation was seen primarily in the exploration of the layers of textual sructures. All this points to the modern paradigm of teaching literature. The motives of the premodern literary teaching paradigm were the most relevant to the indispensability of the career of cult authors from interpretation and to the moral development of students. In particular, many postmodern elements were also present in the views, for instance the important of personal opinion in the analysis, the precognitions of the students or the importance of pop culture and experience.

The connection of teachers to contemporary literature proved to be fundamentally positive. It was believed that contemporary literature was closely related to educating a reader,

and that contemporary literary works also provided an opportunity for the moral development of students. But the contemporary works and authors are not known by the most teachers. They should learn methodological guidance to the process, interpret contemporary literature.

The teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the current curriculum organization, but the possibility of breaking the chronological organisation had already caused uncertainty for the majority. They also agreed on the exaggeration of the curriculum. Because of the size of the curriculum they think that the essence of the subject is relegated to the background.

#### **IV. Summary - Confirmation or rejection of hypotheses**

H1 = ✓

The basis of the literature teaching beliefs of teachers is indeed a mixed model in which the elements of the modern paradigm are dominant, but this is significantly influenced by the fact that interpretations of art are often subordinated to the process of preparing for graduation. Teachers consider it essential that students become familiar with text interpretation techniques that will enable them to achieve good result at graduation. Among the elements of the premodern literature teaching paradigm and the postmodern literature teaching paradigm, the elements of the postmodern discourse appear more, however, they are more present at the level of desires.

H2 = ✓

The school of literature that influences the views of teachers the most is structuralism, most of them prefer text-centered interpretations of literary work, but they also attach great importance to the recipient. In the case of interpretations of works, educators often think in terms of layers of meaning and well-established systems of criteria. Graduation and the *National Curriculum* have a significant impact.

H3 = ✓

The majority of Hungarian teachers think in the form of frontal classroom organization, putting the teacher at the center of learning-teaching process. At the same time, in many cases also as a wish, learner-centered forms appear in a positive way in their views, but their regular application depends on many factors (class composition, curriculum, type of lessons, *National Curriculum* etc.).

H<sub>4</sub> = ✓

A significant proportion of teachers do not agree with the exclusivity of the chronological curriculum organization, believing that the curriculum and chronology often remove students from the literature.

H<sub>5</sub> = ✓

A significant part of the teachers think that it is important to familiarize more contemporary literature with the students because it's grease the skids of reading. In addition, the presence of classical is also considered important, but in order to create an experiential education, many would reduce canonical works from the curriculum or teach classical works together with contemporaries.

H<sub>6</sub> = ✗

Literature teachers focus on the students as the recipients, during the interpretations. Most reject the absolutizable interpretation. In some classes, however, because of passivity, teacher opinions and interpretations are dominant. In addition to their own interpretation, many teacher rely on school books and other interpretations.

H<sub>7</sub> = ✓

The concepts related to educational modernization, and the change of regime have defined the teachers' conceptual systems.

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## **VI. Scientific publications related to the thesis points**

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