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**The Impact of Popular Literary Works on Reading
Attitudes and Subject Knowledge Acquisition in
Secondary School Literature Education**

Thesis of doctoral (Ph.D.) dissertation

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I. Purpose and structure of the dissertation

Surveys of reading habits and attitudes to reading among students over the past decade have shown that reading is steadily losing popularity to the recreational opportunities offered by digital/electronic devices. Literacy education is shifting from the family socialisation arena to the school world to the greatest extent. In the teaching and learning process in schools, however, the teaching of literature is largely determined by a model based on a chronological order, embedded in the history of literature and thus focusing primarily on the processing of canonical, classical texts, to the detriment of teaching practices that focus on the objectives of literacy education and inclusive literacy education and include popular literature texts in the curriculum.

The declared aim of my thesis is to outline, within the common horizon of literature and education, the paradigm-shifting efforts that could lead to a more effective, lexical, learner-centred, reception- and reading-oriented Hungarian language teaching, which is more in line with today's expectations and needs, as opposed to the traditional teaching of literature defined by the classical canon.

My aim is also to explore and reposition the different canons in literary education, taking a stand for the identification of popular culture as an alternative and active canon, against the negative and degrading attitudes that evaluate the register. I will also discuss interpretations of concepts that are problematic in the field. The position and role of the canons will be reconsidered in the context of the documents that define the content and objectives of public education (*National Curriculum, Framework Curricula*). By looking at the most widely known and used literature textbooks on the textbook market, I will try to shed light on the attitudes and professional positions that each textbook family conveys towards popular culture. I will also briefly touch on the most important experiences of the digital home learning period in relation to literary education in the context of literacy education. I will also report on the reading habits of eighth-grade students in the city of *Gödöllő*, also based on the results of a questionnaire survey.

Finally, I argue for the pedagogical benefits of popular literature by presenting a segment of popular literature, the world of youth novels (which can also function as rewritten myths) belonging to the fantasy genre, by offering analytical recommendations for popular literature (and other media) arranged in thematic units, and by evaluating a school experiment in the eighth grade.

II. Theoretical framework of the research

I believe that the rapidly changing technological environment and the digital culture that is developing on the basis of it are bringing about radical changes in almost all areas of pedagogy, including the teaching of literature in schools. "The teacher of Hungarian [...] is confronted with the fact that the social and educational prestige of his subject has been shaken in the last decade(s) [...], when the role of the word, the text, the letter seems to have been strongly valorised in the life of society and in self-expression." (*Fűzfa*, 2016, p. 13) The loss of prestige of the subject of literature and its maladaptive functioning (in relation to the changed and extremely fast changing cultural environment of students) point(s) to systemic problems and dilemmas, and in the teaching of literature this leads(s) to new, as yet unresolved challenges to *old* (permanent, cardinal) educational goals (such as literacy education). According to *Júlia Szekszárdi* (2021), "curriculum orientation, lexical knowledge, and competitive zeal do not allow us to reflect on visible (or invisible) changes." (p. 8). With *Balázs Fűzfa* (2016), we can ask the tantalizingly topical question: 'Is literature [...] suited to meet these challenges?' (p. 13).

The themes of knowledge transfer, chronological curricula, the canon, compulsory reading, popular culture, experientialism and methodological innovation have been a constant theme of professional discussions on literature education for decades. In recent years, the most frequent debates and opinions have focused on the teachability of classical authors, and thus on the canon, but (as *Róbert Milbacher* has pointed out) they have often ignored the non-canonical components of the crisis in the teaching of literature. Thus, it is understandable that "both the crisis and the desperate attempts to rescue literary culture result, among other things, from the exhaustion of the notion of the canon as a list" (*Milbacher*, 2021). If teachers of literature perceive the fulfilment of the curricular obligations imposed on them (i.e. the embracing of the *entire* canon) as a virtually doomed to failure, this may negatively influence their own career evaluation and the perception of the teaching and status of their subject (cf. *Herédi*, 2021; *Kispál*, 2022).

The vehement protests of teachers in the wake of the 2020 amendment of the *National Curriculum*, as well as the often desperate statements that have appeared in various professional media since then, prove that "teachers left to their own devices, clueless, are trying to reach the end of the list, the size and meaning of which no one can see, which leads to frustration and the devaluation of our own professional competence" (*Milbacher*, 2021).

Today, a young teacher of Hungarian starting his career could justifiably assume his apparent incomprehension and ask the question (which is very much to the point of the dilemma) as to what explains the overemphasis on the literary (and national) past and, at the same time, the underrepresentation of popular culture, youth literature or contemporary works in the teaching of literature in secondary schools. One could even go further in asking the question: is it right to spend months on, say, the literature of the Enlightenment, while completely ignoring cultural phenomena such as the popularity of the *Harry Potter series* in the past or the *Percy Jackson* novels today? Is it worth narrowing the horizons of literary education almost exclusively to the literary past, with almost no regard for the cultural products of today? Does the establishment of a national identity necessarily imply such a wide-ranging inclusion of the Hungarian literary past and the imprinting of its lexical knowledge? Can we also consider the workings and patterns of contemporary popular culture as knowledge, literacy and a resource that can help to consolidate students' cultural (and even national) identity? What brings us closer today to achieving our wide-ranging educational and pedagogical objectives?

Today, I see an adaptive way of teaching reading in schools, a way that promises lasting change, in using the products of popular culture. This cultural register not only surrounds but also attracts students, who are consumers and many of them are regular readers of modern popular works. And this is a resource that cannot be excluded from being exploited by the primacy of the transmission of values and canons, and by the teaching of literature, which is rejected for the sake of maintaining a misconceived cultural hegemony, if the aim is still to educate students to become literate readers. In my paper, I will review the most important theoretical findings in the development of this topic, outline the concepts of my teaching unit proposals for popular literature, and interpret their pedagogical utility. In the last chapter of the thesis, Chapter IV, I report on my empirical research on the topic, summarise the results of my local survey on the reading habits and attitudes of eighth-grade students, following the national representative reading surveys, and present a novel, innovative pedagogical experiment, an action research study on the impact of the classroom treatment of a popular novel. At the end of my paper, I will take stock of the methodological and scientific limitations of my own investigations and pedagogical experiment, and conclude by outlining the future directions of the research and the possibilities for further progress.

In chapter I of the dissertation, I present the components of the long-standing crisis of teaching literature, based on a review of the recent and recent professional discourse on the subject, and on the basis of a lively debate that took place in the online space a few years ago,

thus introducing the concepts that define the problematic of the pedagogical practice of the subject, namely *knowledge, literacy, canon, reading and compulsory reading*. I discuss at length the different conceptions of canon in relation to school reading, using cultural-national and overt and counter-canonical approaches to define the canons of education. I then attempt to locate the popular register on the canon map drawn earlier, and then interpret the canon of popular culture as alternative and active, multi- and transmedia canon. In the context of this positioning, I summarize the main results of literary theoretic attempts to contrast high and popular literature on the basis of values, and then I evaluate the role of the popular register in the functioning of postmodern literature.

Then I will examine the canon of secondary school literature teaching by listing it in detail, and I will find that contemporary, popular (and youth) works are not even recommended reading. In order to find out the reasons for this, I have analysed the content of the documents regulating the content of education, the 2012 and 2020 *National Curricula* and the *Framework Curricula*, and have come to the conclusion that the selection criteria of the curricula preclude the inclusion of contemporary and popular works in the school corpus, because they only consider it their task to include works of life and classical works of normative value that can be valued with certainty, but they are unable to orientate the students' admissions to the cultural products of today, and the responsibility for this is entirely placed on the teacher, who can include other works in the curriculum within the limits of the time that can be freely used.

After an overview of the corpus of secondary school literature teaching, I will present two practices as possibilities for the experiential classroom discussion of classical works and works of life. One of these practices is a board game project for students, which offers a methodological solution to overcome the difficulties in teaching the classics and moves the pedagogical process towards gamification, while the other practice is the comparative analysis of a compulsory reading (*Timar's Two Worlds*) with contemporary Hungarian texts, *János Hay's* short stories, which leads to the central structuring principle of the alternative teaching units in later chapters, the complementary and joint discussion of classical and popular literature. In the context of these two practices, I conclude that reading literary works that today seem archaic together with contemporary texts can form a bridge between the work and the recipient, partially dissolving the sense of alienation associated with old works.

The first chapter concludes with a qualitative analysis of the main literature textbooks and digital teaching materials produced for the 2012 and 2020 curricula, focusing on the perspective from which each teaching aid discusses popular culture and whether popular

works are included in the textbook text. At the end of my qualitative analysis, I find that several textbooks interpret and evaluate popular culture in terms of the now outdated and outmoded concept of a value-based distinction between popular literature and popular literature, almost exclusively in terms of its function as entertainment. This understandably leads to the fact that the products of this register are largely not given any role in the teaching process, and textbooks that interpret popular culture in this simplistic way do not build on works popular with students, either in the main text or in the exercises. A refreshing exception to this is the Catholic-affiliated *Literature 9* textbook, which has a separate chapter on popular culture as part of the Ancient Mythology unit. I consider this concept innovative and most forward-looking for my topic.

The short Chapter II of the paper focuses on the digital challenges of teaching literature. In this context, I will discuss the changing concepts of reading and text, the differences between traditional linear reading and reading techniques in the hypertext world, and the archaic nature of literary teaching. I argue that in today's digital environment, effective readers have a wide repertoire of reading strategies, and that only by practising reading different texts can students be prepared for this, without which they will lack the skills to enter the labour market. At the end of this theoretical overview, I conclude that the teaching of literature must partly abandon the exclusive practice of traditional, linear reading and open up to different types of (primarily multimedia) works and textual worlds.

III. Alternative learning units, popular reading lists

In the previous chapters of my thesis, I have already made the revelation that the teaching of literature today needs texts that make reading fun, while preparing the interpretation of classical works that are more difficult to comprehend (cf. *Manxhuka* 2016, 2020, 2022).

The practice of incorporating popular literature into the school canon is prepared and supported in Chapter III of the dissertation. At the beginning, I will describe popular children's and youth literature as texts that provide a reading routine, following *Ágnes Hansági* (2018), which the non-routine reader absolutely needs in order to cope with the more serious pieces of compulsory reading in school. I will then present the design and popular corpus of three self-designed alternative teaching units in which popular novels, film series, comics and video games, linked to the themes of ancient myths and medieval literature, offer experiential learning opportunities by incorporating works that are popular with students, some of which have aesthetic value and a rich intertextual referentiality.

Rewriting Greek mythology in popular culture

The popular unit, designed around the theme of Greek mythology, is based on exploiting the motivic and narrative similarities between mythical stories and contemporary fantasies. Indeed, the world-building of classical and contemporary fantasies (such as those in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*) operates in a similar way to that of ancient mythologies. The *Percy Jackson* series, which is very popular with today's student audiences, uses elements of Greek myth to shape its own story, with its hero as much a figure of myth as the archaic characters we know, and readers of the novel gaining a wealth of mythological knowledge and skills through constant mythical references. These works can lead students to an understanding of the performative function of myth as a genre, which I evaluate as a conceptual shift from the students' perspective within the conceptual framework of constructivist pedagogy (cf. *Nahalka*, 1997). In my unit I explore the known and lesser-known motifs of ancient myths, the myth-making components (mitemes) of the canonized stories, and then I match them with motifs from the selected corpus. Since the publication of *Harry Potter*, arguably the most widely read novel of the early 2000s and still the most widely read to this day, many have sought to understand why it has become a series that has educated generations of readers. The modern myths presented and analysed in this thesis, even if they have not had the same impact as *Rowling's* novels (in terms of making people love to read), are very popular and have a large readership.

As children, as young people, already partly detached from the attraction of fairy tales (also by school), but still with a reading practice ennobled and built on fairy tales, we need and demand works that, like our familiar stories, place us in a disordered world order, to make it harmonious and orderly again with the hero, which make us possessed of abilities and magical powers that we long for, but which only art can give us, and which we can immerse ourselves in reading by temporarily dropping out of our everyday situation, only to return to our own reality by re-enacting the novel. Modern myths seem to allow this reading immersion and, at the same time, give us the pleasure of the *novum*, of being special and unique, while also giving us a sense of familiarity, because of the fairy-tale narrative and the presence of archetypal characters, which we have often followed. The well-known and less well-known motifs of ancient myths, the myths of canonised stories, the famous figures of exciting adventures, the fearsome monsters, the attributes of the mighty Olympian gods, are all presented in a modern guise, in a world of contemporary fantasy novels richly interspersed with linguistic humour and pop-cultural references, which also entice us to adventure and to become involved.

As a school read, *Percy Jackson* can be a bridge between curriculum and experience, ancient and modern, classical and contemporary, inviting playful learning, mobilising and constantly expanding our knowledge of mythology, as we can see in the case of students who have become immersed in and gained a commendable knowledge of Greek mythology as a result of the novel. *Percy Jackson*, then, is a living and rewritable tradition of ancient myths, a way of educating people to be more effective readers, and a way of showing “that not only the classical world literary canon can serve as an archive of knowledge, but also, for a different kind of community, contemporary pop culture” (Keserű, 2021, p. 298).

Popular novels in the service of teaching Homer's epics

In addition to ancient myths, I also recommend popular works of *Homeric* epics, since modern popular genres (fantasy, science fiction) often operate epic narratives, and the characters or themes of the works reflect ancient epics. *Judit Kusper* (2023) approaches the rewriting of ancient texts through the spaces created by the works and through fairy-tale and epic symbols in her exciting and innovative thought experiment. He notes that “the complexity and symbolic power of epic and fairy-tale space has been a leitmotif for the recipient in search of himself for thousands of years: think of Odysseus' proverbial wandering, the experience of the road he has travelled, or the example of Troy, where the struggle is for a walled space” (p. 118). In presenting contemporary works that engage in dialogue with *Homer's* epics, I also look for the place of the texts in education in the relation of the recipient, but primarily along the lines of the duality of myth as a world explanation and performative genre, and the appropriation and transposition of epic heroes and motifs.

This alternative canon includes a multi-volume series of historical novels detailing the history and events of the Trojan War (*David Gemmell: Troy I-III.*), which deconstructs the workings of myth and mythical thinking alongside the narrative plot; a YA fantasy for young people, featuring a special mythological creature as the main character (*Alexandra Christo: To Kill a Kingdom*), which, although not closely linked to the epic world compared to other works, makes excellent use of a number of mythological motifs, and its narrative and exciting plot, typical of adventure novels, make it an easy read; a complex and multifaceted science fiction (*Dan Simmons' Ilion* duology), in which the "Olympian gods" re-enact the Trojan War on the surface of Mars; and the second volume of the world-famous *Percy Jackson* series (*Rick Riordan: The Sea of Monsters*), which retraces the journey of Odysseus with many ingenious ideas and the series' trademark humour.

In this subsection, I therefore analyse an alternative historical novel, a science fiction novel set in the future of humanity and a sequel to the aforementioned *Percy Jackson* series, thus creating a connexion of alternative learning materials. I point out that in recent years there have been a number of works in various popular genres that engage in dialogue with the Homeric epics. These works also enact important canonization procedures, reflecting on the workings of myth and fiction, while constantly dismantling and rebuilding, re- and demythologizing the canon. I believe that the contemporary popular works presented in this chapter are worthy of the attention of teachers of Hungarian, of the whole text or even selected excerpts in the classroom, and of the intertextual potential of the works.

The mediality of the popular register in the teaching of medieval literature

I conclude my series of alternative units with a module on the major theme following antiquity in the ninth grade, which makes the teaching of medieval literature experiential by using multimedia popular works. In this chapter, I make similar recommendations for the next major period of the ninth-grade literature curriculum, medieval literature, which has hitherto received less attention in the methodological discourse, in separate thematic blocks, and in synchronisation with the core literature.

In the teaching of medieval literature - due to its historical nature - the pedagogical potential of the integration of history and literature may seem an obvious solution, but I consider this concept less salutary due to the historical positioning of Hungarian teaching, which was carefully discussed in the first chapter of the thesis, if the aim is still to establish and promote a reading routine, since the primacy of historicity in emphasising the curricular nature of literature can easily work against the experience of reading and encountering texts.

Therefore, following the line of thought of the previous chapters, I compile and recommend a list of works (not exclusively books) for teachers and students of Hungarian that can support the classroom study of the Middle Ages, broadening the scope of the works selected for the core curriculum to include texts that are closer to today's students and more attractive alternatives for them (fairy tales of knights, plague-stricken worlds), popular genres (science fiction, fantasy, crime fiction) and media (film series, video games).

I chose a video game with novel excerpts and a compelling narrative and graphics reminiscent of a medieval codex to introduce monastic culture. The largest part of the unit is devoted to the presentation of modern juvenile chivalric novels chosen for chivalric literature, and the multimedia character is reinforced in this subsection by a film series and a comic strip. In addition, a fantasy novel and a science fiction novel based on the epidemic theme will

be presented. Selected pieces and quoted passages from the unit allow for a variety of subject integration in teaching. I have not sought to achieve equality in the number of works assigned to each theme, but have included more works in the texts where the popularity of the subject has made it possible to do so, and thus, given the current renaissance of chivalric stories, I have included four works in the sub-unit on *chivalric and courtly literature*: Tonke Dragt's novel *Letter to the King* (the oldest of the works, first published in 1962) and its Netflix adaptation, the first volume of John Flanagan's *Ranger's Apprentice* series (*The Ruins of Gorlan*) and George R. R. Martin's comic book set in the world of *Game of Thrones* (*The Hedge Knight*), co-authored with Ben Avery. The theme of *Church Literature* includes some excerpts from Ken Follett's most famous novel, *The Cathedral*, and a computer game *Pentiment*, which offers some very exciting narrative possibilities. For Dante's main work, I chose a fantastic novel by Neil Gaiman (*The Other*), while for a more nuanced and plastic presentation of the medieval world in general, I chose a time-travel science fiction novel with a novel and exciting connection to the epidemic theme, Connie Willis's best-selling novel *Doomsday Book*.

Summarizing the subject of the III. chapter, I present alternative teaching units, based on my own concept, for the larger thematic units of the first years of the four- and six-year high school, for the main periods of art and literary history: Ancient Myths, Homeric Epics and the Middle Ages, and which, through what Ágnes Hansági calls 'immersive texts', open the way for students to engage with literacy and classical texts through simpler language and exciting, adventure novel-like narratives.

In conceptualising these units, the main concern was to select and offer to Hungarian teachers and Hungarian language students works that are already known, i.e. already popular among 14-15 year olds (such as the *Percy Jackson* or *Ranger's Apprentice* series), or that may be attractive as school reading even if unknown, but are not yet widely read (such as Gaiman's novels or George R.R. Martin's comic book based in his well-known world). I have also tried to keep in mind the criteria of teachability and the possibilities of classroom processing, and have therefore selected works that are suitable for joint processing in one or more classrooms, either in their entirety or in selected parts.

I have tried to collect texts (and their adaptations) which, even using excerpts from them, can be used to stimulate the interest of the students and lay the foundations for learning about a period with a primarily classical focus, which is far removed in time from today's readers. My reviews and recommendations, which are primarily literary studies-related, highlight the pedagogical potential of youth fantasies that can be read as rewritten myths or

reflect the romantic ideal of chivalry, while the empirical research discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, Chapter IV, points to the educational value of teaching a selected novel, the first volume of *Percy Jackson*, in the process of teaching to become a reader. In the following, I will summarise the aims and methods of the empirical research, and then present the hypotheses and their fulfilment.

IV. Empirical research

In Chapter IV of the dissertation, I report on the process and results of empirical research related to this topic. In the framework of a local survey, I completed *the Reading Habits Questionnaire* with 316 students in the eighth grade of 6 educational institutions, 3 primary schools and 3 grammar schools with four or six classes in the city of *Gödöllő*, to get an idea of the reading habits, computer and Internet use, views on reading, compulsory reading and literature teaching, attitudes towards reading fiction and compulsory school books of eighth-graders in the city. The local survey confirms the results of the national representative reading surveys, attitudes towards reading fiction are less positive among students, there are many more students who read almost no fiction than those who read it, and students consider most of the reading materials in school to be old and uninteresting. A new element in the responses compared to the representative surveys is that more students would like to read books in school that are more exciting and in today's language, for young people, so that some students are still open to reading, but do not find the selected corpus appropriate. I also completed the reading habits questionnaire with two classes in the secondary school where I work as a teacher of Hungarian and where I also conducted an experiment to investigate the impact of the use of popular literature in the classroom on attitudes towards reading and knowledge acquisition. The theoretical background and the questionnaire survey conducted lead me to the presentation of the research problems and hypotheses.

The research problem can be adequately formulated in the intersection of the following three factors: (1) sociological surveys of reading and research on subject pedagogy in recent years have shown that reading is steadily losing popularity among teenagers, with fewer and fewer of them reading, (2) in this context, there is also a growing trend towards the use of electronic devices, (3) these trends have been reflected in a drastic decline in the attitudes of students towards compulsory reading, reading and literature in Hungarian language teaching and in the popularity of the subject.

The research problem is therefore that literature is less and less able to meet the educational objectives set for it, especially the task of teaching reading, and this calls for methodological, curricular and strategic reforms.

Research questions

From the research problem formulated above, the following questions can be formulated, which have largely helped me from the beginning in the design process and in the choice of the research methods to investigate the research problem.

Q₁ : Can the change in reading habits and the decreasing trend in reading frequency be confirmed in the target population (eighth grade students)?

Q₂ : Is there a difference in attitudes towards reading between eighth-grade students in primary school and those in sixth or eighth grade?

Q₃ : Is the frequency of use of ICT tools (amount of time spent using the tool) related to the frequency of reading (amount of time spent reading literature)?

Q₄ : What is the attitude of eighth-grade students towards reading and books?

Q₅ : Do students really have a negative perception of compulsory reading in school?

Q₆ : Would students change their compulsory reading, and if so, what?

Q₇ : What books do students like to read?

Q₈ : Does the classroom treatment of a popular literary work that is relevant to the subject matter influence students' attitudes towards reading and literature?

Q₉ : Does the classroom processing of a popular work of art that is relevant to the subject matter contribute to the acquisition of subject knowledge and a better understanding of the subject matter?

Some of the research questions were already formulated before the empirical research started, the relevance of the second research question was brought to my attention during a scientific report, while the other questions were added to the existing ones during the data collection. This peculiarity (the continuous expansion of the list of aspects and factors included in the research) is especially inherent in qualitative research, where the "course of the research is not fixed in advance in every moment, it can evolve as it goes along" (*Szokolszky, 2020, p. 96*).

In relation to the research questions, it is important to note the diversity of the questions in terms of the quality of the answers that can and should be given. The majority of the questions are open-ended, but these (e.g. Q₈ and Q₉) also trigger further research questions.

Hypotheses

I have converted the research questions to be answered into the following research hypotheses, which thus express my preliminary assumptions about the research problem:

H₁ : The majority of students in the study population (eighth grade) are those who are less fond of reading literature.

H_{1.1} : The majority of students in the study population (eighth grade) do not read literature at least weekly.

H₂ : Eighth-grade students in sixth and eighth grades read more fiction than their primary school peers.

H₃ : Attitudes towards the use of ICT tools are more positive than attitudes towards reading in the study population (eighth grade).

H₄ : Students in the study population (eighth grade) have a negative perception of compulsory reading in school.

H_{4.1} : The students in the study population (eighth grade) would replace some of the compulsory reading with more modern reading.

H₅ : The processing of a popular literary work that is relevant to the subject matter has a positive impact on students' attitudes towards reading.

H₆ : The processing of a popular literary work that is relevant to the subject matter has a positive impact on students' attitudes towards literature.

H₇ : The processing of a work of popular literature that is relevant to the subject matter will help the student to acquire the knowledge of the subject.

The empirical research is considered developmental, as it aims to demonstrate the positive impact of a popular literary work on attitudes and knowledge, i.e. to show the developmental effect of a variable. "In educational research, the hypothesis is in some way related to personality development [...] in developmental research, the researcher wants to see whether the developmental intervention was effective, i.e. whether some measurable trait has been improved, more developed, more highly developed, etc." (*Stripes*, 2020, p. 22)

In my view, the hypotheses formulated meet most of the key requirements for hypotheses: they build on existing knowledge, characterise the nature of the variables, state the relationship between the variables in the form of a judgment, are simple and concise, can be clearly justified and rejected, and together provide an answer to the research problem (cf. *Kontra*, 2011).

Research strategy, methods

The conceptualisation of the empirical research outlined above and later on of certain elements (the concepts in the hypotheses that needed further explanation) enabled the design and practical implementation. For the investigation of this complex, multi-dimensional research problem, I considered a mixed methodology to be useful, and I was guided by the work of *Kálmán Sántha* designing my qualitative research (cf. *Sántha*, 2014, 2015, 2017).

Based on the methodological guide of *József Kontra* (2010), I organised my empirical research in the spirit of inductive research strategy, because in this case (in contrast to deductive logic) "we start from the pedagogical reality, from the data collected there, and arrive at the theory" (p. 18). Of course, this research is also theory-driven in that the pedagogical challenge underlying the research problem (as I discussed it in detail in Chapter I of this dissertation) has been highlighted by several people in recent years, and has already been present in pedagogical reality, as confirmed by my own practice as a Hungarian teacher. The research strategy can be further refined in the light of the problem statement. Indeed, *Kontra* (2010) divides the inductive research strategy into three further subcategories (descriptive, contextual-exploratory, experimental), also noted that these often characterise research simultaneously, so that these "three research strategies complement each other" (p. 19). For my empirical research, the combination of descriptive and experimental strategies is valid, since it aims both at "characterising the situation in a field of pedagogical reality" (p. 18) and at intervening in the same pedagogical reality by "modifying the independent variables in order to detect causal relationships" (p. 19).

The empirical research focuses on the causal relationship between popular literature and student attitudes. I designed the research design and arranged the research methods in order to confirm the hypothesis that the common classroom processing and curricular integration of popular literature can positively influence students' attitudes towards reading and literature, thus offering a solution to the pedagogical crisis underlying the research problem. "In research, causality is described in terms of variables: a variable causes or influences other variables. It is important to emphasize, however, that it is rarely the case that one variable is certainly and entirely the cause of another" (*Kontra*, 2010, p. 19). I am convinced that the complex nature of pedagogical situations makes it questionable to detect the unique effect of a selected variable. I consider this important also because the school experiment that is the focus of my empirical research can also be seen as a set of complex situations in which the effect of the independent variable alone can only be interpreted with certain simplifications and caution.

Questionnaire survey on reading habits

In the autumn of 2022, I conducted a questionnaire survey with six educational institutions in *Gödöllő* (primary schools, sixth and eighth grade high schools) to map the reading habits of eighth grade students. I used a validated questionnaire, *The Reading Habits Questionnaire*, published by the *University of Szeged* in 2014. The questionnaire provides data not only on reading habits but also on other leisure activities and, more importantly, on ICT device use and internet usage, thus providing a good basis for examining the impact of the digital environment on reading.

In addition to national, representative surveys, I consider it important to conduct local exploratory studies that provide data on a more local scale on a given topic or problem. Learning, education and habits are characteristics that are worth looking at in the micro-environment of the learners.

After cleaning the questionnaires, I digitised the data (in the form of an Excel spreadsheet), treating separately the questions for which text responses were received (content analysis of the data was carried out using the *Maxqda*²⁰²² software) and recording the quantifiable data in a separate table. The qualitative analysis of the textual data of the questionnaire was coded using a categorisation system that decomposes the text, i.e. I did not use a pre-designed coding and categorisation system. On the quantifiable data, I used the *SPSS Statistics* software to carry out the tests and analyses that I considered crucial and decisive in relation to the research problem, in order to answer the research questions and to confirm or refute the hypotheses.

School experiment

This secondary school experiment, conducted in the autumn semester of the 2022/23 academic year (and presented in detail in Chapter IV of this thesis), is based on the use of a central popular work of the Ancient Mythology unit presented earlier, the first volume of the *Percy Jackson* series, as a teaching material. The aim of the experiment, for which I used a varied research methodological palette, was to demonstrate, by evaluating empirical data, that the popular literary works discussed as part of the curriculum contribute to the achievement of the subject objectives, especially literacy education. The practical significance of the experiment, therefore, is that the results and experiences may contribute to the outlining of a curricular structure for a more optimal teaching of literature, overriding the chronological arrangement, while motivating further similar experiments and the development of alternative curricular modules.

A self-controlled field experiment with univariate natural groups (cf. Szokolszky, 2020), was conducted in the eighth grade of the *Reformed Liceum High School in Gödöllő*, where a popular novel, the first volume of the *Percy Jackson* series, was processed by the students for 4 weeks, simultaneously with the myths that formed the curriculum, as part of the Greek mythology unit, to approach the ancient myths through a popular modern work, similar to adventure novels, but with an epic narrative and a modern language that makes it easy to understand.

The experiment was preceded by the above-mentioned questionnaire survey on pupils' reading habits, which also measured attitudes to reading fiction and compulsory school reading. During the experiment, classroom observations and content analysis on students' work were used as inputs, and an attitude questionnaire, a focus group interview with students and a semi-structured teacher interview as outputs, thus quantitative procedures were used alongside a qualitative focus to increase methodological triangulation and reliability.

To confirm or reject hypotheses

In conceptualising the empirical study, I moved from assessing reading habits and attitudes, through the perception of compulsory reading, to examining the impact of popular literature on reading attitudes and learning. Therefore, the first set of hypotheses (H_{1-3}) concerned reading habits and the use of ICT tools.

H_1 ✓

H_1 : The majority of students in the study population (eighth grade) are those who are less fond of reading literature.

The trend in the local questionnaire survey of eighth graders in *Gödöllő* was similar to that of the national representative reading surveys of previous years. In the sample of almost 300 people, the number of those who do not like reading ($n=126$) is higher than the number of those who like reading ($n=96$). Although the difference is not significant (which shows that reading fiction is still a favourite pastime for many people), the number of those who do not like reading is higher, so I consider the hypothesis to be confirmed. Attitudes towards reading fiction are complemented by the question of the amount of time spent reading, as the frequency and regularity of reading is also an essential component of reading habits, and I have therefore assigned the following hypothesis ($H_{1.1}$) to H_1

H_{1.1} ✓

H_{1.1} : The majority of students in the study population (eighth grade) do not read literature at least weekly.

Although there are different approaches to defining a regular reader, I have interpreted the results using reading on a weekly basis as an indicator of whether the activity is a quasi-daily habit in the individual's life. The results of the questionnaire confirmed this hypothesis, as the sample surveyed includes a majority of monthly or less frequent readers (n=155), 35 of whom admit to never reading literature, which is a very worrying figure for literacy education. As I also asked eighth-graders from primary and secondary schools (and as the sample was almost equally represented in both types of school), it was logical to compare the two types of school in terms of the frequency of reading fiction, as shown in the following hypothesis H₂

H₂ ✗

H₂ : Eighth-grade students in sixth and eighth grades read more fiction than their primary school peers.

I had assumed that students in secondary school read more and more often, because of the high school environment, the closer reality of the school-leaving examination or the different curricular structure, but this was not supported by the analysis of the questionnaire survey data. Eighth-graders in secondary school do not read more often than their primary school counterparts, and in fact they read less in the sample surveyed, but they have a slightly more positive perception of fiction and a slightly more positive attitude towards reading. In addition to reading habits, I also collected data to explore attitudes towards the use of ICT tools, my preliminary hypothesis for which is set out in the following hypothesis H₃

H₃ ✓

H₃: Attitudes towards the use of ICT tools are more positive than attitudes towards reading among students in the study population (eighth grade).

The verification of this hypothesis was more predictable than what has been presented so far, since it is well known that attitudes towards the use of smart devices are positive among members of the digital native generation, which is why I thought it important to test this hypothesis against attitudes towards reading. Regarding the use of devices, the questionnaire

asks questions about the preference for internet use and computer games, so in our case the use of ICT devices is the combination of these two. The hypothesis is confirmed, as the majority of the sample prefer playing computer games or surfing the Internet to reading. The next two (subordinate) hypotheses (H_4 and $H_{4.1}$) concerned the perception of compulsory reading in schools and the direction of students' changes in relation to it.

H_4 ✓

H_4 : Students in the study population (eighth grade) have a negative perception of compulsory reading in school.

Although this question seems to be settled in itself (since it is one of the inducing factors in the professional discourse on compulsory reading), the hypothesis has important lessons that go beyond itself. In fact, the hypothesis was clearly confirmed: the vast majority of the students surveyed, almost 200 students ($n=191$), had a negative opinion of compulsory reading in schools. This figure is remarkable because it is much higher, by almost 65, than the number of children who like reading less or not at all ($n=126$), which I cited to support hypothesis H_1 , and which means that even some of the children who like reading have a negative opinion of compulsory reading in school. This is a problem because these are the very existing, still regular readers who may well be alienated from reading by compulsory school books (which seem incapable of attracting new masses of young readers). The subordinate hypothesis ($H_{4.1}$) therefore concerned precisely what students would change about compulsory reading.

$H_{4.1}$ ✓

$H_{4.1}$: The students in the study population (eighth grade) would replace some of the compulsory reading with more modern reading.

The vast majority of the students surveyed ($n=193$) would change some of the compulsory reading, while nearly 50 students ($n=46$) would simply reduce the number of readings and half would not change anything (either because they are satisfied with the current system or because they are indifferent to reading issues, the data presented earlier suggest the latter). The majority of those who also gave a text response ($n=77$) would replace some of the compulsory reading with modern, contemporary works, thus confirming this hypothesis.

The confirmation or rejection of the second set of hypotheses was expected to be based on the interpretation of the experience of the school experiment. Before presenting the results, I must reiterate the limitations of the experiment and thus the narrow range of conclusions and generalisations that can be drawn. Indeed, the experiment, originally designed as a two-group experiment, could only be carried out as a single-group, self-controlled experiment due to external circumstances, which gives less reliable results (cf. Szokolszky, 2020), but can nevertheless provide important data and identify trends along which experiments with higher reliability can be conducted. The size of the research apparatus and the difficulties in conducting the experiment did not allow for the design and conduct of a larger-scale experiment, which I identify as a further direction for the research.

H₅ ✓

H₅ : The processing of a popular literary work that is relevant to the subject matter positively influences / promotes students' attitudes towards reading.

The evaluation of the self-administered attitude questionnaire (which was designed to measure the effects of processing popular fiction) was not in itself conclusive in proving this hypothesis, as more than half of the students in the experiment reported no shift in attitude towards reading. However, during the focus group interview, the predominance of positive effects was clearly evident, so I consider the hypothesis to be confirmed, and the experiment suggests that the classroom processing of popular literature may contribute to improving students' attitudes towards reading and to making them (even if only in the short term) more fond of reading.

H₆ ✓

H₆ : The processing of a popular literary work that is relevant to the subject matter positively influences / promotes students' attitudes towards literature.

The subject of literature has long struggled to (re)position itself in 21st century education, and devaluing lexical knowledge and reading materials that seem outdated to students have done much to damage its popularity. The popular works used in the classroom are also proving useful in changing this, as the attitudes towards literature have improved for the majority of students in the experimental group (n=7), 5 of them to a large extent.

H₇ ✓

H₇ : The processing of a popular literary work that is relevant to the subject matter positively influences / promotes students' acquisition of the subject knowledge.

It would be a great help to break down the degrading stereotypes and outdated value-based approaches surrounding popular literary works, and to reposition the canon of popular culture on the existing canon map, if these works were not only seen as works of entertainment by educational decision-makers and the institutional system that maintains and rewrites the canon, but also as texts that help to achieve a number of educational goals. This is supported by hypothesis H₇, which concerned the effects of *Percy Jackson*, a popular novel on the acquisition of knowledge, which was used to discuss myths. Although there is a wide range of what can be considered as knowledge in the case of the Hungarian literature subject (biography of the author, career, knowledge of genre and genre?), the characters (gods, heroes, mythical beings) and their main motifs in ancient myths, as well as the concept of myth, can still be considered as relevant knowledge. The experiment carried out allowed a performative interpretation of the concept of myth, the possibility of reading fantasy as a myth-making work, which I evaluated as a conceptual shift within the conceptual framework of constructivist pedagogy. Based on the review of the students' essays and the findings of the interview with the teacher who conducted the experiment, it can be stated that the popular novel facilitated the acquisition of subject knowledge (performative concept of myth). In the process of reading and discussion of the novel, the children gained lexical knowledge that they would otherwise have acquired from myths or from the teacher's explanation (or perhaps from a textbook), and they were also enriched with a new understanding of the concept of myth. This effect (and a more positive attitude) was also evident in the next major topic, the Homeric epics, although it began to fade by the second half of the school year.

All this proves that there is a need, a demand and a possibility to introduce popular works into the process of teaching literature, and that well-chosen works of popular literature can be an important tool for educating students to become readers, and that works (trans- and intermediate) that fit the curriculum can offer an experiential processing of literature, thus increasing its popularity and facilitating the acquisition of subject knowledge, thus providing a partial solution to the long-standing crisis in the teaching of literature.

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