



Compulsory Book Reading at School and Within Leisure

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Received: 05.05.2015; Accepted: 30.10.2015

Abstract: *This paper deals with attitudes of secondary school pupils towards compulsory book reading at school, being the integral part of the subject Croat language and literature teaching subject, and its possible impact on their book (not-)reading in their leisure time. It is based on the research carried out through five-point Likert-type scale in secondary schools in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina), in the second half of 2014.*

The research was conducted on the convenience, stratified sample consisted of 260 secondary school pupils, attending the final class of grammar (130) and vocational (130) school. The results obtained could give an insight into the book reading culture of secondary school pupils within their leisure related to their experience of compulsory book reading at school. It results that compulsory book reading has still been an uninteresting school task for both the strata of the research sample. Moreover, it results that compulsory book reading at school has a certain influence on book reading decrease in both sample strata's leisure time.

However, some guidelines how to increase the students' interest in compulsory book reading at (secondary) school as well as in book culture within their leisure time are given in this paper.

Keywords: compulsory book reading, secondary school, students, leisure, book culture

Introduction

Books used to be and still should be the integral part of culture, education, personal development, free time, etc. They should and could contribute to many aspects of personal as well as society's progress in general. This paper deals with two aspects of book reading, i.e. within the mother tongue subject in school and in secondary school graduates' leisure.

Curriculum says...

The new, revised *Curriculum in the Croat language for grammar schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Povjerenstvo..., 2013) was approved in 2013. Since this paper deals with the issue directly related to the literature as an integral part of the Croat language and literature teaching subject, hereby are presented some parts of its programme within the mentioned curriculum.

As a teaching subject, the Croat language and literature, together with foreign languages, belongs to the *Language-communication area* of the high school curriculum. One of the main purposes, amidst many of them, of the mentioned learning area is “...to develop the reading interests, need for book reading, and the ability of critical approach to different media and their contents” (Povjerenstvo..., 2013:29).

Within the content of the Croat language and literature subject it is explicitly said that “the acquisition of mother tongue is a prerequisite to acquire competences for quality lifelong learning” (Povjerenstvo..., 2013:29). Furthermore, it is also pointed out that the language and culture acquiring within the language subjects helps pupil’s personal development, and progress in personal and social life as well as responsibility towards society and nature in general.

The learning outcomes still have been neither clearly understood nor distinguished in the current high school curriculum. However, they are divided into five sections: *Listening; Speaking; Reading; Writing, and Content and implementation guidelines* (?!). It is emphasized that the related outcomes will be reached “...on the basis of non-literary and literary-artistic texts, given or independently chosen” (Povjerenstvo..., 2013:31). Since this paper deals with book reading, the section *Reading* is analyzed here.

It consists of five sections: Preparing for reading; Applying the reading strategies; Understanding different kinds of texts (conventional and/or e-forms); Reading from the need, with interest and with pleasure; and Acquaintance with and respect of Croat, other nations, ethnicities and national minorities’ cultures in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as other cultures in general. Moreover, in the section *Preparing for reading*, it is explicitly stated: “Pupils will choose topic, form, sources and purpose for reading the required and independently chosen non-literary and literary-artistic texts of different levels of complexity” (Povjerenstvo..., 2013:32). And it goes on “...with the purpose for their own interest, and according to the needs in their everyday life” (Povjerenstvo..., 2013:32). It directly points out the importance of reading for life itself.

In the part *Reading from the need, with interest and with pleasure*, it is said:

“Pupils will: develop the interest and positive attitude to reading in different situations, and in relation to educational goals; acquire the book reading culture, in relation to educational goals, as well; argument their choice of texts and reasons related to pleasure resulted from their reading, including those reasons associated to reading itself in general.” (Povjerenstvo..., 2013:32).

It may result from the paragraphs listed here that pupils' voice has been included in the curriculum, at least in its formal text, and that they themselves can decide upon the compulsory books to be read in school within the language and literature subject. It will be interesting to see, later in this paper, pupils' opinion about their involvement in compulsory book reading choice.

Helping them to fall in love with literature...¹

Cremin (2007), wondering "To what extent do children in the early 21st century choose to read for pleasure, for leisure and for enjoyment?" (Cremin, 2007:166) reflects upon different issues related to reading, and listing its potential benefits: influence on academic success, self confidence, general knowledge, future pleasure in reading, etc. Hence, the same author takes in consideration the issue of motivation for reading, in particular intrinsic one. Concerning the school setting, Cremin emphasizes the importance of children's own choice of texts since it can contribute to their motivation and self determination. One could ask here whether the previously analyzed language and literature programme does contribute to pupils' motivation and self determination to read for pleasure, for leisure and for enjoyment, to paraphrase Cremin's words, and thus to creating the reading habits in their lives.

A research conducted by *Hendel and Harrold* (2004) among the students' population in the United States of America found that there was a decrease of their interest in book reading when compared to previous generations. Another research on the Oregon primary school pupils' free time preferences indicated the book reading as moderately popular activity (Nippold, Duthie & Larsen, 2005). Moreover, negative attitude towards book reading as a satisfying leisure activity was more pronounced in boys than girls.

It is well-known that there is no singular definition of leisure and free time due to its many special features. Free time is often seen through the prism of its functions: relaxation and recreation, fun, and personal development. Since this paper deals with the book, more precisely - reading books in youth leisure, it can be said that this activity implies all three above-mentioned roles.

Irby and Tolman (2004) reflect on free time as "a space in which young people express themselves creatively, take part in arts and cultural activities, and develop as individuals" (Irby & Tolman, 2004:222). The same authors regard free time as a *developmental opportunity*. Free time as something that "ensures the individual a substantial freedom to choose and to plan, to create and to find a sense in life" (Haralambos & Heald, 2004:255).

In that context, Kelly's view on leisure (which used to be considered separately from free time) gives it a new sense, i.e. it becomes the path to

¹ These words of A. Kohn (2010) could describe the task of all the relevant educational and social subjects to do their best in order to give the book culture the place it deserves in human and societal development.

fulfil one's ideals: contemplation and soul sophistication. Leisure thus takes over two dimensions: religious and transcendental, respectively.

Pieper (2012) goes further introducing the syntagm *ability for leisure* as “one of the basic powers of the soul... a power that, exceeding the world of work, comes into touch with superhuman forces which give the life special gift, which then leave us, being strengthened and refreshed, to a working day” (Pieper, 2012:68).

Apparently, recent views on leisure² bring it closer to free time purpose analyzed through its above-mentioned functions, emphasizing human development in a broader sense of that word. It is the context in which book reading can be observed and reflected upon, as one of various ways of spending leisure, in this particular case, of the high school pupils.

Kohn (2010) reflects on (especially intrinsic) motivation stating that teachers create non-readers doing nothing for pupils' motivation and “it's taking place right this minute in too many classrooms to count” (para. 4). His motto is “Let the student decide except when there's a good reason why we have to decide for them” (Kohn, 2010:38). It is one of possible solutions for helping students to love literature, and thus reading.

A good example that connects book reading in school and within leisure is the project of reading culture of boys in higher classes of a school in Lancaster (South Carolina), developed by Carroway (2009), who examined their satisfaction with the English language lessons and analyzed their favourite books and authors³. Afterwards he created “Guys Read” reading club where his pupils took an active part through discussions, book reading in school and at home, book exchange, updating of the favourite books lists, participation of other pupils, teachers, parents as well as the pupils' proposals being included into the school programme of compulsory book reading.

“In creating a reading culture which fuels delight and fosters desire, teachers will be supporting the development of life-long readers, readers who find both purpose and pleasure in reading” (Cremin, 2010:176). Teachers, educators in general, but also families, cultural associations and community itself could pay more attention to this issue, as well.

Research methodology

The aim of survey-research conducted through five-point Likert scale, in the second half of 2014, was to examine the attitudes of the secondary school pupils towards compulsory book reading at school within subject *Croat language and literature*, and its possible influence on the book reading in their leisure time.

The research convenience, stratified sample consisted of 260 secondary school pupils (further in this paper: graduates) attending the final class of grammar (130) and vocational (130) school in Mostar, respectively.

² Therefore the author of this paper uses leisure and free time in the same context.

³ Obviously, the same author listened to and heard 'pupils' voice' (Lukenda, 2011; Pavlović, 2011).

The results⁴ of the research, hereby presented at descriptive level, could serve as a kind of indicator for further, deeper research of this complex issue. Grammar and vocational school graduates' attitudes towards book reading

Table 1. Grammar (G) and vocational (V) school graduates' attitude towards compulsory book reading at school

		Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
I do not like reading compulsory book reading because I find it boring.	G	14	10,76	18	13,84	40	30,76	43	33,07	15	11,53
	V	12	9,23	17	13,07	25	19,23	53	40,76	23	17,69
I perceive compulsory book reading as something that has a great influence on my grades, and so it must be done.	G	9	6,92	25	19,23	27	20,76	59	45,38	10	7,69
	V	3	2,30	15	11,53	35	26,92	60	46,15	17	13,07
Compulsory school book reading takes me a lot of my free time.	G	13	10,00	26	20,00	33	25,38	40	30,76	18	13,84
	V	8	6,15	14	10,76	36	27,69	51	39,23	21	16,15
I regard compulsory books at school too difficult for understanding.	G	6	4,61	18	13,84	54	41,53	29	22,30	23	17,69
	V	8	6,15	23	17,69	35	26,92	45	34,61	19	14,61
I do not think that school encourages students to read books except for compulsory book- reading.	G	16	12,30	14	10,76	24	18,46	44	33,84	32	24,61
	V	1	0,76	11	8,46	38	29,23	62	47,69	18	13,84
No-one asks students' opinion about the choice of compulsory book reading.	G	-	0,00	9	6,92	17	13,07	53	40,76	51	39,23
	V	-	0,00	5	3,84	21	16,15	61	46,92	53	40,76

⁴ Due to the length of this paper, the author presented only the main points obtained by examining secondary school pupils' attitudes towards book reading, and analyzed only from the point of school-type variable.

See Table 1: Almost a half of grammar school graduates and more than a half of vocational ones find compulsory book reading boring⁵, and therefore do not like it.

There is no wonder that more than a half of both sample strata graduates read books required within the language and literature subject for the purpose of their assessment and academic success. The question could be posed: What about school's favouring interest in reading and reading for pleasure?

It is indicative that compulsory books to be read within the language and literature area are difficult for understanding for almost 40% of grammar school graduates and more than a half of the vocational ones⁶. On the other hand, such an attitude is more pronounced in vocational graduates since one fourth of them still doubts upon this issue unlike more than 40% of grammar school graduates. So, there is no wonder that compulsory book reading takes a lot of free time to more than 40% of grammar and to more than a half of vocational school graduates. The school should pay more attention right to those two thirds of pupils included in both the sample strata whose attitude still has not been differentiated, and in appropriate ways (discussions, huger involvement of pupils into book choice; workshops/debates/round tables on /compulsory/ book reading; book clubs, etc.) attract them to book reading in general, working together with them, and pointing to this issue not only in school but in their leisure, as well, through extracurricular activities, for example.

It is indicative that more than a half of grammar school graduates and even two thirds of vocational ones claim that school does not perform the role it should do, i.e. does not encourage them to read books beyond those required within the language and literature subject. The language and literature programme emphasises the importance of book culture, reading for pleasure and for pupils' own interests and purposes. Is it the case in the school's reality? Any comment would be unnecessary.

It is also indicative that more than three fourths of grammar school graduates and even more than 85% of vocational ones claim to be neglected in compulsory books choice⁷. None of the pupils in both research strata disagreed with it. Any further comment would be unnecessary.

⁵ "Compulsory book reading... quite a boring school duty", said one of the pupils and another one: "... too boring, too demanding, and too aimless". And another pupils suggested: "I think that teachers should find some more interesting ways in presenting and analyzing compulsory books in the Croat language and literature subject. Instead of punishing us with bad marks if we don't understand the book message or topic, teachers should find out the reason for our not understanding the plot in the books and help us if they are able to."

⁶ "No-one pays attention to me and none of teachers helps me to understand the compulsory book requirements."; "Give us easier and more understandable books for compulsory reading." said pupils who participated in this research.

⁷ "Pupils can't suggest anything in school, at all."; "Our opinion should be taken into account and it hasn't been so far."; "No-one pays attention to our opinion."; "I wish we could say to our teachers what we would like to change in the compulsory book choice and reading." these are some of the grammar and vocational school graduates' comments.

Table 2. Grammar (G) and vocational (V) school graduates' attitude towards book reading within their leisure time

		Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
I do not have the habit of book-reading in my free time.	G	28	21,53	18	13,84	34	26,15	30	23,07	20	15,38
	V	4	3,07	17	13,07	32	24,61	43	33,07	34	26,15
I read the books in my free time because I have to read them for compulsory book reading at school.	G	17	13,07	15	11,53	36	27,69	38	29,23	24	18,46
	V	2	1,53	15	11,53	49	37,69	53	40,76	11	8,46
Compulsory school book reading takes me a lot of free time.	G	13	10,0	26	20,00	33	25,38	40	30,76	18	13,84
	V	8	6,15	14	10,76	36	27,69	51	39,23	21	16,15
I cannot read books regularly because I am overloaded with my school duties.	G	-	0,0	7	5,38	23	17,69	52	40,00	48	36,92
	V	6	4,61	21	16,15	22	16,92	49	37,69	32	24,61
I read books in my free time because I just like reading them.	G	23	17,69	26	20,00	34	26,15	32	24,61	15	11,53
	V	17	13,07	25	19,23	32	24,61	43	33,07	13	10,00

See Table 2: Both sample strata are overloaded with school requirements. However, it is somewhat more pronounced in grammar school graduates where slightly more than three thirds of them confirm this statement, and among them more than one third strongly agrees with it. The grammar school curriculum is too broad, complex, difficult, and specific, in general, teachers and pedagogues agree, too. On the other hand, it can be noted that more than 60% of vocational school graduates share the opinion of their grammar school colleagues. Their school curriculum is, as experts claim, somewhat less difficult and focused on their practical subjects as the opposite to theoretical (social, humanistic and science) subjects, they are overloaded too and all of them are under academic success pressure as the pathway to bring them to the higher school education.

Although the grammar school graduates expressed almost the same attitude distribution about their habit of reading and not reading books in their leisure, it is evident that a negative attitude is somewhat more pronounced in more than one third of them. It could result from their

being overloaded with school duties, compulsory book reading within the language and literature subject⁸, etc.

In the end, there is no wonder the pupils in both strata of our research do not have the habit of book reading in their leisure which is particularly evident in almost 60% of vocational school graduates. It seems that school still does not do anything to handle with this issue.

Discussion

Going back to a question whether children are 'reading for themselves, or for their teachers, and the assessment, system?' (Cremin, 2010:166), it could be said that high school graduates who participated in this research read for the assessment system and for school duties. Instead of encouraging intrinsic motivation as the pathway towards book culture in leisure the school continuously favours extrinsic one through compulsory book reading requirements in school.

Secondary school pupils are overloaded with school duties. It is obvious in both research sample strata. Curricula makers should and could pay more attention to each single subject programme, not only the language and literature one, making them more appropriate, more reasonable, more useful to real life and pupils' (and community's) real needs and their future learning throughout the life. However, it would be interesting to see teachers' and opinion of the curricula makers on this issue.

Apparently, secondary school pupils (both strata) who participated in this research have showed so far the negative attitude about book reading in school and in their leisure⁹. Furthermore, both sample strata do not have the habit of book reading in their leisure which is somewhat more evident in vocational school graduates. There are a number of reasons for the lack of their reading habit, and some of them resulted in this research: their being overloaded with school requirements, too broad and demanding language and literature programme for which compulsory book reading takes them a lot of their leisure time, etc.

However, slightly more than one third of the total sample read book simply because they like it. If we add to them slightly more than one fourth of those who still do not have clear opinion about it, there is a cohort on which teachers and relevant subject, in this concrete case, could count to promote book culture both in school and in pupils' leisure.

In the end, there is no wonder about the results presented here when compared with the pupils' statement evident in both research strata that no one asks their opinion¹⁰ about choice of compulsory books within the language and literature subject, the whole picture becomes clearer.

The Croat language and literature programme points out the importance of favouring book culture, reading for pleasure and for personal development, etc. as previously said. In that context, there are

⁸ "It is too extensive, too demanding", said some pupils.

⁹ An earlier research (Pavlović, 2013) found that book reading was amidst lower-ranked leisure activities of primary and secondary school pupils in Mostar, together with voluntary work.

¹⁰ "I suggest literary projects to be carried out together with us, pupils.", "Let's organise book debates or extracurricular book activities." suggested pupils.

questions to be posed: What does school really do to promote reading for pleasure and for personal development? Does it exist *pro forma* or in school everyday life? And what about pupils' involvement and their choice of compulsory books and texts strongly pointed out within the language and literature programme in the high school curricula? What about partnership within school, i.e. teachers, pupils, as well as professional school services and curricula makers?! Further similar research could give an answer¹¹.

However, to avoid that "the public stopped reading of its own accord" (Bradbury, 1997:88), school and teachers, in particular, as well as curriculum and educational policy creators should pay more attention to more adequate language and literary programme(s), more supportive classroom and school environment as a whole¹², encouraging pupils' intrinsic motivation as much as possible, more pupils' involvement in reading and (extra)curricular activities choice, thus favouring pupils' positive attitudes towards book culture in general.

Towards conclusion

It seems that high school pupils' decrease in reading books results from the inappropriate curricula approach, where their involvement and interests have been neglected. Teachers and curricula makers should pay attention to this. However, "caught in a chill autonomy, they are excluded from the kind of dialogue that brings human beings in touch with one another and opens the way to the making of meanings" (Greene, 2008:18). In brief, let us move from, what Kohn (2010) calls, a "doing to" approach to a "working with" approach. It is the least we could and should do for the pupils in our families, in our schools, in our community, in general.

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¹¹ Further research, however, should take into consideration this issue from the aspects of pupils' gender, family background, etc.

¹² As one of the pupils in this research exclaimed: "Let's modernize the school itself."

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