

Thesis of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**READING CULTURE OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS
IN A BORDERLAND REGION**

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The objective of the thesis, topic definition

The work and the way of life and motivation of kindergarten teachers, lower primary teachers and teachers were continually followed by the professional interest of educational sociologists. The extensive professional literature available suggests that a number of domestic and international research projects were devoted to teachers and students studying to be teachers. These projects primarily focused on career orientation, the role and attitude of teachers, their ideas concerning the education of their students, satisfaction with their job, and plans for the rest of their career.

From a social and cultural point of view, we found the cultural attitude of future teachers and, within that, their reading habits the most interesting. Reading is described by Manguel as a basic human activity, without which it is not possible to understand the world around us, we would not find our way in society and in our entire daily life. Reading and writing are often mentioned together, although from the history of reading it is clear that reading is an older, earlier activity than writing. Reading does not only involve a mere mechanical comprehension of letters, words and texts. Decoding and interpretation of signs was an important part of human activities long before the appearance of literacy.

In our dissertation, we approached reading as a cultural activity, as a means of the acquisition of information and knowledge. We narrowed the concept of reading in the framework of sociology. The examination of reading habits has been determined in accordance with educational aspects in a school environment, as well as education-sociological and culture consumption process. Education for reading is therefore an important element of our observations. Education for reading is discussed in the triangular system of family, school and library. At school, however, reading is an inseparable part of learning, and it is therefore not possible to examine it as culture consumption or as an element of personal lifestyle and attitude.

When we formulated the basic questions of our research, we started from current tendencies well-known to the professionals as well as the general public. The results of the PISA surveys have been a recurrent issue for schoolchildren, students, teachers, parents and professionals dealing with the subject for more than a decade. Functional illiteracy is no longer a problem of schools; it is an increasingly powerful problem in the world of work, too. The emergence of digital reading is a natural part of an information-based society. The concept of reading does not only conjure up the image of a book or a newspaper, but also that of info-communicational devices. E-books and on-line reading is also spreading within the walls of schools, similarly to the entire society.

The reading habits of active teachers have been well researched in the past decades. The cultural behaviour and reading habits of students studying to be teachers have primarily been examined in the course of general surveys among young people and research projects conducted among students. These surveys, however, have not always been narrowed down to a comparative analysis of specific professional groups or subject majors of students. The general surveys have been still highly useful, as they provided a good starting point for our research questions. Our empirical project was often based upon the surveys conducted previously among students at higher education, and we added the findings to the standard, traditional inventory of reading-sociological examinations.

In reading-sociological surveys the function of reading attached to learning usually does not appear as dominantly as we intend to discuss the issue. At the same time, educational research projects that concentrate on the means of learning do not approach the problem from the process of reading, but from the functions of the learning matter, traditional and electronic. We believe that an approach from the aspect of reading sociology may open up new possibilities for interpretation and analysis. In our dissertation, cultural and educational studies are amalgamated and new methods of professional discourse are tested. In the course of preparing for the research project and summing up the theoretical experience, reading sociology emerged within cultural studies, and education to reading within educational studies. We placed our examination dimension within this complementary cluster.

The applied methods

The quantitative research was completed in the spring of 2012. For gathering the data, a self-administered on-line inventory, consisting of 53 questions, was used. When compiling the questionnaire, we used the questions related to background variables, e. g. gender, address, qualifications of the parents, from the lists used in traditional social research inventories. From the traditional questionnaires of culture-sociological surveys, we selected those related to the frequency of attending cultural institutions (movie, theatre, light concerts, classical concerts, museums, exhibitions and library). In connection with reading, we asked questions about the favourite author of the respondent, the book last read, as well as about the frequency of reading. We used two questions without any modification from the sociological research into reading the results of which were published with the title *Minerva papjai* [Minerva's Priests] (Lőrincz-Vidra Szabó, 1994). One of the questions deals with education to reading in childhood (did their parents read tales to them and if yes, from what books). The other question is aimed at the values to be relayed by teachers to future generations. From the questions used in the research we generated dependent and independent variables, and the interrelations between the variables were subjected to a cross-table analysis.

We conducted our research at seven institutions of higher education in six cities¹ of the historical area of Partium, now divided among three countries (Hungary, Romania and the Ukraine). The institutions involved were selected into the sample according to their training profiles. The objective was to find institutions from all three training profiles within and outside Hungary. Thus the University of Debrecen with its four major fields of training (Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Information Studies and Faculty of Music) where postgraduate students who study to be teacher. Similarly, postgraduate students learning to be teachers were interviewed at the Teachers Training Institute of the College of Nyíregyháza. Lower primary teacher training in Hungary was represented by "Ferenc Kölcsey" Teacher Training Institute of the Protestant Theological University of Debrecen. In the Hungarian segment of the Partium, kindergarten teachers are trained in

¹ Locations of the research: Debrecen, Hajdúböszörmény, Nyíregyháza, Nagyvárad [Oradea], Szatmárnémeti [Satu Mare] and Beregszász [Berehovo]

Hajdúböszörmény, where the Youth and Adult Education Centre of the University of Debrecen is located. On the other side of the border, we conducted our research at two locations in Romania. In Nagyvárad [Romanian: Oradea] we interviewed the ethnic Hungarian students of the State University. In Szatmárnémeti [Romanian: Satu Mare] we involved the students of the local faculty of Babeş-Bolyai University.

The survey was conducted in the form of an on-line inventory. The inventory was compiled and edited with the help of *EvaSys 5.0* software system. The questionnaire was sent to the students through the NEPTUN electronic university administration system. 902 students were contacted, and the number of completed and returned questionnaires was 468. The purpose of our qualitative research was learning about the opinion of librarians and the reading tendencies of the students. We chose the method of personal interviews. An advantage of the qualitative approach is that we may find answers for which we did not originally formulate a question. The respondents were highly motivated and committed librarians and teachers, who were pleased to answer our questions, and were ready to put forward their opinion. The personal experience, subjective opinions well complemented the qualitative data. A total of 17 interviews were completed. We wanted to select librarians from grammar schools, vocational secondary schools and elementary schools.

Results of the thesis

We conducted our survey among future teachers from three distinct aspects. First **we aimed at the individual characteristic in the reading culture of students studying to be teachers**. In a professional discourse this reading-sociological approach is of primary importance, often used in both domestic and international literature. We believe this dimension to be the linking element leading to earlier research projects that may even serve as a foundation for comparative analyses in the future. We therefore used several questions from the inventory of traditional reading-sociological examinations. When mapping the dimension of the readers' attitudes, we gathered quantitative data about the frequency of reading. The questions aimed at the means of reading provide data regarding the information collecting practice of the respondents. Getting acquainted with the target groups is by no means restricted to gathering data about the frequency of their reading books. Other written sources, including newspapers, magazines, on-line news portals and community sites are also included in the survey. In order to chart the method of reading in the target group, two further sub-dimensions have been used. One of our objectives here was to carry out a comparative analysis of the traditional and digital means of reading. The interactivity of the reading process was examined according to the passive, receiving use of written materials and the active use (blog keeping, attending forums and community sites).

The second main dimension of our research addressed the **readers' biographies, that is, the manifestations of the reading socialization process**. So as to find data of the informal (family) and formal (school) reading experience of the individuals, we used childhood reading memories and the required readings at school. The individual's own library, as well as their family's library, appeared as inter- and intragenerational indicators in the individual's attitude to reading as such.

Several reading-sociological and reading-educational research projects have dealt with the process of one's becoming a reader. Most of these surveys, however, usually focused on various details of the process, and did not analyse it through the various scenes of socialization. Some researchers concentrated on the role of childhood tales, whereas others dealt with reading at schools (both required and elective readings), or the ways and means of reading in the individual's free time. In our research we made efforts to combine these elements and reveal complex dimensions.

The third major dimension of our research project has been an examination of the **interrelation between reading and studying**. Pre-service "pursue" reading as a basic and indispensable activity during their studies. We examined their methods of learning and preparing for exams from two aspects in our research project. The off-line and on-line sources used by the students studying to be teachers are indicators of the reader's behaviour, whereas the primary sources (original sources) and secondary ones (notes compiled by others, sources from the Internet, or sources of uncertain origin), used to measure the originality of the reading matter, contain indications regarding the quality of the materials used. Learning and education in general are of exceptional importance in the case of students studying to be teachers.

The attitude of students to education to reading contains profession-specific values that are not necessarily analysed in traditional value analyses. In our research we therefore included some anticipative factors that may play a role in the process through which students acquire a general and a career-specific education, and by which it is possible to show the students' conscious commitment to education to reading. We treated these factors as professional and transmissional values.

Dimension 1: The individual dimensions of reading (frequency, method, preferences)

When formulating our research questions we emphasized that reading habits, similarly to other forms of cultural consumption, are socially stratified. In the past two decades the methods of reading have undergone considerable changes. Paper-based reading is on the retreat, and electronic media are spreading. We supposed social differences in the reading habits of students, after the research of Zsuzsa Hunyadi, Edina Gyenes and Iván Vitányi. We also supposed, in accordance with the findings of Attila Nagy and Ferenc Gereben that the methods of reading of students studying to be teachers change during their college and university years.

As for the frequency of reading, we found that the sheer frequency of reading did not change significantly; instead, the ways of reading have undergone a transformation. Paper-based reading matter (e. g. printed books, daily newspapers and magazines) are increasingly replaced by electronic sources. A look into the Internet-using habits of future teachers revealed that the World Wide Web played a dominant role in their lives. It means that using the Internet for reading, information gathering, entertainment, social contacts and communication is typical of the target group, regardless of other variables.

At books the edge of e-reading is not yet tangible, but at daily papers and magazines electronic format prevails. News portals and on-line articles, essays are now very popular among with young people of today. Our data are in correlation with the latest research

findings published in the related literature. We assumed that the role of electronic reading sources is dominant among future teachers. Our assumption was confirmed by both our quantitative and qualitative results. Taking the research findings of Judit Lőrincz and Ferenc Vidra Szabó into account, we may assert that IT has spread in the past twenty years, and has completely transformed reading habits.

Since the early nineties paper-based reading has been dwindling, but it certainly does not mean that the total time devoted to reading has also diminished. Instead, the sources of reading are shifting towards electronic ones. What we have found is therefore not surprising from a reading-sociological point of view. Similar data are characteristic of all social strata. The results of the survey conducted among future teachers contain hints to the changes to come, and we believe that the new differences in the reading habits are noteworthy.

In the course of the statistical analysis we identified four types of activity. Reading books, either paper or electronic, is an isolated category. Within the categories, however, we were unable to arrange students into typical groups according to socio-economic, cultural capital or even gender. It affords the conclusion that students studying to be teachers constitute a more or less homogeneous group, although there are differences among them at the level of preferences and it may serve as a basis of categorization. Future teachers appear to like readings that are generally popular with young people. Romantic stories, fantasy and high adventure are preferred. This interest is probably boosted by teacher education, that is, the interest in the taste and reading habits of the youth. Our target group is not yet very far away from teenagers. Teachers between 25 and 40 years, who have actively worked for a few years, are interested in books different from the readings of teenagers.

Our quantitative data were reinforced and further refined by the interviews we made with the librarians of schools. They report that the contents of reading are only gradually and partly changing. The reason for that is that the required readings and other learning materials at schools are not replaced very rapidly. Certainly it is not as rapid as the technology develops nowadays. It is therefore logical to ask the question how the reading habits have transformed. We believe that technical progress in itself does not directly instigate changes in people's reading habits. Another necessary condition is a series of changes in the attitude of the users of the new devices, in their value systems, orientation, that is, in their entire lifestyle. We may conclude that technological progress, changes in information collecting and attitudes in cultural consumption generate changes in reading habits as well. Our results confirm our assumptions that we formulated according to the findings of nationwide research projects.

Dimension 2: The dimensions of readers' biographies (informal and formal generational effects)

The second group of questions in our research focused on the reading-socialization of students studying to be teachers. The research projects conducted by Bourdieu and Péter Somlai suggest that the main scenes of socialization are the family and the school. In the second empirical part of our work we outlined the functions, traditions and potentials of these scenes in developing people's reading habits, and thus we formulated our examination methods.

We studied the literature related to the process of one's becoming a regular reader. As reading is an organic part of culture and education, sometimes even the foundation of education, we also examined the issue of education to reading. Following the footsteps of Attila Nagy and Rita Péterfi, we pointed out that the secondary scenes of socialization (kindergarten, school) also play a crucial role in education to reading, in addition to the primary scene. The survey conducted with the future teachers and the interviews with the school librarians confirmed our original assumption about the importance of the secondary socialization scene, that is, the kindergarten, library and school. At the beginning we assumed that kindergarten and school, in addition to family, have a determining role in education to reading. The assumption was underpinned by both the qualitative and quantitative data. Tales heard in childhood (the role of the family), followed by school experience and even the required readings may positively influence the individual's attitude to reading. We obtained information regarding the role of the teachers from the interviews with the librarians. Required readings in themselves do not necessarily bring up a young person to be a regularly reading adult, but a carefully selected reading at school, or a teacher who is open to, and experienced in, youth literature, may considerably contribute to the development of the pupils and students.

The data gathered through the inventory suggest that students studying to be teachers do not find it their important responsibility to educate their pupils to reading. It is a major problem, because Attila Nagy and his colleagues (2011) demonstrated the importance of reading at all schools subjects. If future teachers are unaware of the importance of reading in general, they will not be able to hand it down to their pupils and students. Changing this attitude is, in our opinion, not only the responsibility of public education but also that of higher education and, within that, teacher training.

Our original theses regarding the process of education to reading were fully justified and complemented with the role of the library and some other, largely extracurricular activities, such as poetry and prose recital competitions, reading camps etc. Based upon the related literature, we believed that the list of required readings was in need of revision. The quantitative data we obtained only partially confirm that supposition. According to the inventory completed by students studying to be teachers, nearly half of the students consider the required readings as a part of the general basic education of professionals. The students learning to be teachers find it important that there should be a teacher-student interaction in selecting the required readings. The librarians we interviewed, on the other hand, provided a more subtle image of the reading matter that are a part of the curriculum. They pointed out that a certain amount of the items on the list of required readings is to be refreshed. They found it a problem that boys and girls were not given interesting and gender-specific readings, and young teachers are often not familiar with new and attractive pieces of youth literature. Selection, the revision of the list is only possible if the lower primary teachers and teachers are fully aware of what the children are interested in. Without that, it is impossible to make value-based and reliable decisions.

Dimension 3: The interface of reading with learning

The third pillar of our empirical research is the one connected to the role of reading activity in studying. We assumed that new tendencies are expected in learning habits, the methods

of obtaining information and in judging the role of the teacher as well. These theses were based upon the changes of the readers' attitudes, as we found in the first dimension of our research. In order to find answers to the high complex questions, we placed the process of reading into several sub-dimensions, thus attempting to chart the attitude of future teachers to reading in the course of their studies. The first factor we examined was the proportion of the means and assets students use for their studies (books, Internet-based sources and periodicals). In order to assess the quality of learning, we also found it important to analyse the types of sources the students use (primary and secondary). Primary source is an original publication (paper-based or electronic) and the notes students themselves make. We listed notes handed down to them from senior students, Internet-sources of uncertain origin and other such material (Wikipedia, notes produced by other students and placed on the World Wide Web, as they are similar to handwritten notes received from senior students; the only difference is that they are available on-line), were listed under the heading of secondary sources.

At the sources used for reading, we found similar tendencies to those found when we were dealing with the first dimension (individual aspects of reading). We believed that new ways of leaning will lead to new learning techniques. As the process of reading is undergoing changes, electronic information sources will dominate, calling for new competences, teaching and educational attitudes on the side of the teachers. Instead of relaying their knowledge to new generations in the traditional way, teachers will be supposed to assist their students in their orientation in the information jungle and to develop the skills and abilities of the students to select from the abundance of information.

As it is suggested by the results of TERD data base, the primary source of information for students is now the Internet. Students studying to be teachers are no different from the general trend. Traditional (paper-based) books are now largely relegated to the world of entertainment. As the librarians participating in the project reported, fiction and light reading is still preferred in the traditional format. The terrain of learning and information gathering is, however, information technology to an increasing extent. Consequently, not only the role of the teachers but also that of the libraries is in a process of changing.

When dealing with the dimension of reading attached to learning, we examined the anticipative effects of reading. It is important for us to know the opinion of the students, their ideas about what is important in the teaching profession, what they think makes a good teacher. Our objective has been to approach the issue of education to reading from the aspect of the commitment of the teachers, and evaluate it as a transmissional value. It is a general experience that the importance of reading is not fully manifested in the opinion and value system of students learning to be teachers. Our findings indicate that it is necessary to revise the role of education to reading all through kindergarten, school and teacher training.

We believe that a novelty of our research is that by publishing the results we may contribute to the available information about the lifestyle, reading habits and cultural behaviour of young students studying to be teachers. In possession of such information we highlighted some of the changing learning methods and practice of the students in higher education. The changing attitude of the students requires new solutions from the teachers as well. As teachers in the elementary and secondary schools should be familiar with youth

literature, teacher trainers should follow the changing attitudes of the students and their new cultural-educational behaviour.

Typology of the readers: committed readers and consume reader types

Through the three dimensions of our research, we have collected information about the reading habits of future teachers, their attitude to reading and to the teaching profession and the process of their becoming readers, as well as the role of reading in their learning activities. We assumed that although pre-service teachers constitute a largely homogeneous group in terms of social and cultural capital, there are palpable differences within the group. The two Applegates identified two reader attitudes among the teachers, and we also made efforts to find the fault lines that separate sub-groups with certain specific characteristic features within the larger group. To that end, we used the method of cluster analysis. Similarly to the American research, we have been able to identify two sub-categories. We used a statistical method to arrange the students into the two groups; the two categories contained approximately the same number of individuals. It is also important to note that we were unable to enlist 53 students—out of the total sample of 468—into either of the two categories. According to the levels of the significance of the variables, we set up the group of *committed readers* (N=172), and that of the *consume readers* (N=243).

The category of avid readers is characterised by the use of higher quality and more demanding readings (they tend to read quality fiction, historical novels, religious works etc.). The consume readers; on the other hand, tend to use electronic media to a larger extent. The term *consume reader* also refers to the fact that people in this group, in addition to relying more heavily on electronic devices, tend to read lighter fiction (romantic stories, fantasy etc.). As for paper-based readings, there is no significant difference between the two groups, which means that their learning and reading habits are fairly similar. Diversification is experienced in their value systems and preferences. Our observations yielded results similar to the findings of Edina Gyenes, who identified similar categories. Our results, however, further refined the image, and provided some subtle elements.

Such an important detail is the difference between the two genders. Female students are a lot more evenly represented in the two clusters than men. The proportion of men in the consume readers' category is much higher. The students studying to be kindergarten teachers are also characterised by the consume nature of reading to a larger extent than, for instance, the postgraduate students, close to earning their degree. We suppose that the cultural capital brought from the family and the positive attitude to education is behind these phenomena. Avid readers ascribe greater importance to reading and cultural consumption in the teaching career, and they find a higher level of pleasure in reading.

There are no major differences in the education to reading in the phases of family socialization, but the experience attached to the required readings at school largely influence the individuals on their way to becoming committed readers. The inter- and intragenerational effects that we examined according to size of the personal and family libraries, convincingly show the cultural capital of the students, brought from the family home and sustained afterwards. The qualifications of the parents as a powerful part of the cultural capital, contribute to shaping the attitudes of the person concerned to reading. Our data underscored

our preliminary assumption, as students with parents who had higher qualifications became avid readers in higher numbers than others.

Better school results are more characteristic among avid readers. Students in the consume reader category performed somewhat below or around the average. Our findings related to the religious background of the students also confirmed the results of earlier research projects that pointed out the differences between the performances of religious and non-religious students. Committed, avid readers among the future teachers, who choose more sophisticated and demanding texts to read, tend to come from more religious families.

We believe that identifying the types of readers and learning about them provides a large amount of useful information for teacher trainers. As there are powerful connections between reading attitudes and learning methods, the types of avid readers and consume readers are reflected in the general attitudes of the teachers to culture in general and in their views of their own careers.

As a conclusion we may declare that the main merit and positive effect of our research is the independent set of questions that we formulated (based upon earlier research projects and related professional literature), our own empirical data gathering and processing, in the course of which we used statistical methods (cross tables, factor analysis, correlation calculations and cluster analysis) in order to test our original assumptions.

We collected information about the reading attitudes of students studying in higher education, but we do not have any information about their reading abilities and text comprehension competences. We believe that it is absolutely necessary to examine the reading comprehension skills of students, as it is only possible to have a full and complete view of their cultural consumption in possession of those attributes. We also need to take into consideration the fact that young people coming from the secondary schools to colleges and universities—in our case teacher training institutions—often lack the basic competences and skills necessary to select the reading material and find their way in the information jungle.

It is possible to survey students' reading skills and text comprehension abilities with further research projects. A survey into these topics may provide useful data to teacher trainers, and in certain areas it may even lead to changes in the paradigms. Another possible direction of research may be a survey of the structure and contents of teacher training from the aspects of reading, in order to find out how the problems of education to reading, the difficulties arising from the transformation of reading habits, appear in the daily work of teacher training. Is teacher training really successful in preparing the students to bring up children at schools? Is reading given sufficient emphasis, is education to reading an integral part of the curriculum of teacher training? Will the teachers of the future bring up children who read regularly? The changes taking place in the reading habits of people constitute a very interesting issue of our days, especially because of the changes that currently happen in higher education. The necessity of education to reading is to be emphasized amidst these far-reaching changes. Despite the numerous questions arising at the end of the research we believe that the results published in our essay usefully contribute to the progress of education in general, reading-sociology in particular and a better understanding of students studying to be teachers.

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