

BUILDING AN ECOSYSTEM FOR PROMOTING STUDENTS' INDEPENDENT READING SKILLS: THE POTENTIAL OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARY

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Abstract: Nowadays, reading skills have become one of the key factors to promote students' media literacy. Motivating students to read is becoming increasingly important, because reading outcomes in our complex world include not only reader's interest and entertainment, but opportunity to develop critical thinking, tolerance, leadership skills, etc. Scholars emphasize the importance of instructional support to motivate students to read and at the same time the necessity of independent reading skills and a unique and thoughtful readers' identity of each student. The development of students' reading habits and stimulating students' individual interest becomes important prerequisites for literacy. Nowadays school becomes a complex learning organisation, where independent reading moments should be promoted, providing students time to read and opportunity to choose self-selected texts or giving them the opportunity to read about topical issues that are important to them. Thus, school library has become not only a part of the school, but a part of an ecosystem for promoting students' independent reading skills, where the process of shaping young people's attitudes and behaviour occurs.

The aim of this publication is to summarise theoretical findings, updating research on aspects of promoting students' independent reading skills as well as to conduct empirical research on the choice of a reading-enhancing approach during the campaign "Reading against bullying at school".

Keywords: authentic reading experience, book extract about bullying and emotional abuse, independent reading, a student, readers' identity, reading, reading promoting campaign, school library.

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Introduction

Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly important to motivate students to read. One reason for this is the necessity of media literacy - the acquisition, comprehension, analysis and evaluation of information (Klētņieks, 2021). Krieķis (2023) points to the different facets of literacy, which is not only the ability to connect letters into words, but also reader's ability to communicate, to work with a variety of texts, and broadening the reader's experience. Thus, reading outcomes in our complex world include more than just reader's interest and ability to ask. Finding answers to questions becomes essential as the world needs leaders who are able to raise questions, create multiple ideas and find multiple perspectives (Beers, & Probst, 2017, 21). Therefore, questions of how to promote students' reading literacy and what kind of support students need, become important. There are discussions about the importance of instructional support, while, on the one hand, independent reading promotes students' choice, which leads to authentic reading experiences (Miller, 2002). Keene, Duke, Miller, & Moss (2013) highlight that "students learn to read while reading, but not without instructional support" (Keene, Duke, Miller, & Moss, 2013, 1). "To develop identity of thoughtful reader they need tools, which can be provided through instruction. Reading habits should be developed every day" (Keene et al., 2013, 1) as well as encouraging students' individual interest becomes a prerequisite for literacy. Nowadays school becomes a complex learning organisation, constantly adapting to new circumstances, in which all stakeholders work together towards a common goal of students' development (Skola2030, n. d.).

Keene et.al. (2013) emphasize that “independent reading moments should be promoted at school” (Keene et al., 2013, 2) and there is a lot what teacher can do to promote students` independent reading skills, e.g. providing students time to read and opportunity to choose self-selected texts. However, reading volume becomes important as well, as it is one of key contributors to achievement in reading (Allington, McGill-Franzen, Cimilli, Williams, Graff, Zeig, Zmach, & Nowak, 2010).

The aim of this publication is to summarise theoretical findings, updating research on aspects of promoting students' independent reading skills as well as to conduct empirical research on the choice of a reading-enhancing approach during the campaign “*Reading against bullying at school*”.

Methods used in the study are:

- analysis of pedagogical and psychological literature to summarise theoretical findings;
- empirical research methods: student survey, quantitative data processing and analysis methods (graphical representation of data, data analysis, data processing and analysis methods (data analysis using IBM SPSS v.22. predictive analytics and statistical analysis software package, Pearson chi-square test and The Mann-Whitney U Test).

Theoretical aspects of strategies to improve students` independent reading skills and reading comprehension

Reading is a part of the learning process, so it is important to encourage young people to be motivated to read and to foster their interest in reading. However, in Latvia average reading achievement has been falling every year since 2012 (OECD, 2023). In their article, the authors highlight the theoretical and empirical aspects of pupils' interest in reading in grades 5-9, because at this age, interest in reading declines (Geske, Grünfelds, Kangro, Kiseļova, & Stūre, 2020). At the age of 12-16 years, students` motivation to learn is driven by both: the desire to explore personal abilities and by competition (Šteinberga, 2013). Therefore, it is important to involve students in setting own reading goals. Čehlova (2002) emphasises the need for pedagogically well-organised goal-setting. While Rune (2003) stresses the need to respect the self-expressive and creative aspects of the choice of texts, as it is essential to "develop students' ability to express themselves intellectually and emotionally - thoughts, experiences, imaginings. In this way, students acquire the skill of forming their own value system” (Rune, 2003, 198). Reading involves person's affective, cognitive and behavioural attitudes towards an object, event or task related to reading (Hidi, Renninger, & Krapp, 2004). Getting students interested in reading in general is an important prerequisite for promoting reading literacy. Interest in reading is multidimensional. It can be characterised by: feelings (different emotional reactions); cognitive possibilities in reading (values, autonomy, competence, confidence, sense of belonging, etc.); behavioural factors (attention) (Putro & Lee, 2017). Individual`s interest in reading is different, e.g., it expresses itself differently for each person - in joy, excitement, passion and self-regulation of emotions in reading (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012).

Schools have an important role in creating an ecosystem for encouraging reading using the potential of school library. The school library is not only a part of the school, where the process of shaping young people's attitudes and behaviour occurs, it is an important part of the education system, contributing to better educational outcomes (Wojciechowska, 2022). Positive attitudes and good relationships with different school communities have a great impact in school successful school library work. They become “the cornerstone of school libraries today” (Trudeau, 2023, 35).

Azhari & Ramadan (2022) believes that libraries are an undervalued resource for promoting students' independent reading skills, interest in reading as well as strategies to improve students' independent reading skills and reading comprehension. Asking questions, providing background information about the problem, making predictions about events described in the book, having deepened understanding, making connections to personal experiences, can promote independent reading skills and at the same time an instructional support would be provided. It can be done through various activities, including those organised by the school library, for example, the campaign "Reading is cool". This campaign is organised in schools across Latvia. Pupils are also highly motivated by the challenge factor, when they are encouraged to read as much as possible in a given time frame (Mujib & Setyawan, 2022). Creating a "reading corner" in the classroom can also help to boost pupils' interest in reading (Wijaya, Zulela, & Edwita, 2022). Trudeau (2023) defines five areas to create a human-centered library. They are: space, collection, instruction, programming, and self-care (Trudeau, 2023, 37).

An important challenge for schools is to be aware of the prerequisites for promoting reading as a daily habit. Habits are reinforced by systematic repetition. Reinforcement of habits can be carried out in habit-building exercises (Špona, 2001).

The authors of the publication carried out an authentic reading-enhancing approach during the reading promoting campaign "*Reading against bullying at school*" in one of comprehensive schools of Latvia. Within the campaign, it was important:

- to create an environment in which reading is a free choice rather than a forced activity (Pieper, 2017);
- to offer students the books (particular book about problems caused by bullying school);
- that adults set an example for students, thus, fostering respect for other readers (Pieper, 2017);
- that school librarian prepared age-appropriate reading material for students (Rune, 2003).

Analysis of the impact of a reading-enhancing approach to promoting students' independent reading skills

To clarify the impact of carried out authentic reading-enhancing approach during the campaign "*Reading against bullying at school*" on students' independent reading skills the survey was carried out. 292 students (grades 5 to 9 one of comprehensive schools of Latvia) participated in the survey. Survey was carried out from 09/09/2024 till 20/09/2024. All ethical guidelines were followed during the research. As a part of the campaign "*Reading against bullying at school*", students were asked to read a book ("The Battle at Knipska" (1897) by J.Poruks) extract on bullying and emotional abuse at school and could choose to continue reading it at home. The survey was designed to find out what factors contributed to students' willingness to continue reading the book after school. The open-ended and closed-ended questions were included in the questionnaire. They were:

- Did you know what a bullying is before the lesson?
- Did reading and discussion help you to understand more about the signs of bullying?
- After reading the extract, did you feel interested in reading the whole story?
- Did you like the fact that the whole school read the same work about the bullying?

A Pearson chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between female gender and the statement that after reading a part of the book the student was

interested in reading the whole story ($p=0.007$). Gender differences were not researched in depth in the study (see Figure 1).

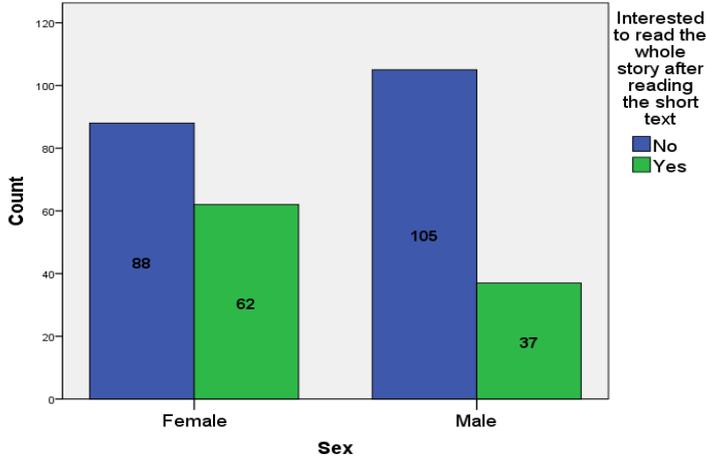


Figure 1 The correlation between female gender and the claim that after reading the book extract, student was interested in reading the whole book ($N=292$)

A Pearson chi-square test revealed a statistically significant correlation between the statement that reading the book extract helped to become aware of bullying and the statement that after reading a part of the book student was interested in reading the whole book ($p<0.001$) (see Figure 2).

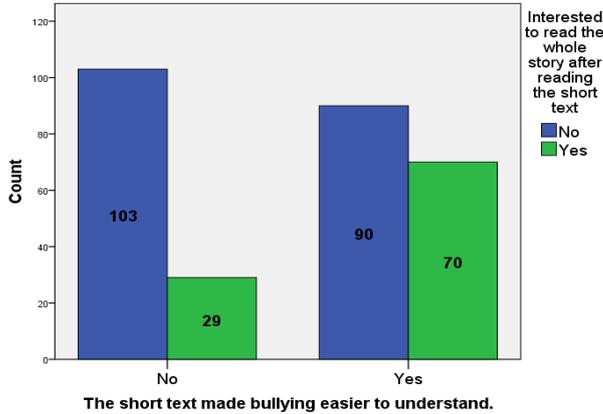


Figure 2 The correlation between the statement that the book extract helped to become aware of bullying and emotional abuse and the statement that after reading it student was interested in reading the whole book ($N=292$)

A Pearson chi-square test revealed a statistically significant correlation between the statement that the respondent liked the fact that the whole school read the same book extract about the bullying and the statement that after reading it the respondent was interested in reading the whole book ($p<0.001$) (see Figure 3).

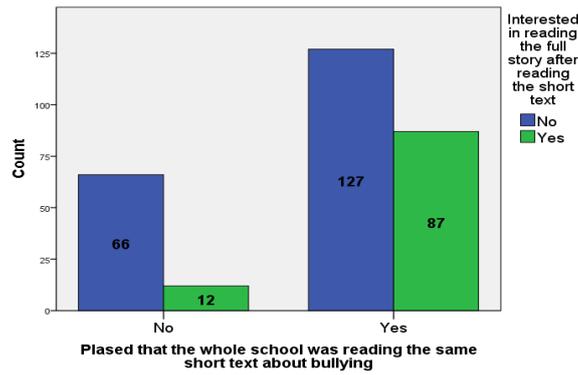


Figure 3 The correlation between the statement that the respondent liked the fact that the whole school was reading the same book extract about bullying and emotional abuse and the statement that after reading it, the respondent was interested in reading the whole story (N=292)

The Mann-Whitney test showed that respondents who agree with the statement that they wanted to read the whole book after reading the book extract have a higher median library use (Median 2, IQR 2) than respondents who disagree with the statement that they wanted to read the whole story after reading the excerpt (Median 1, IQR 2.5, $Z=-2.994$, $p=0.003$) (see Figure 4).

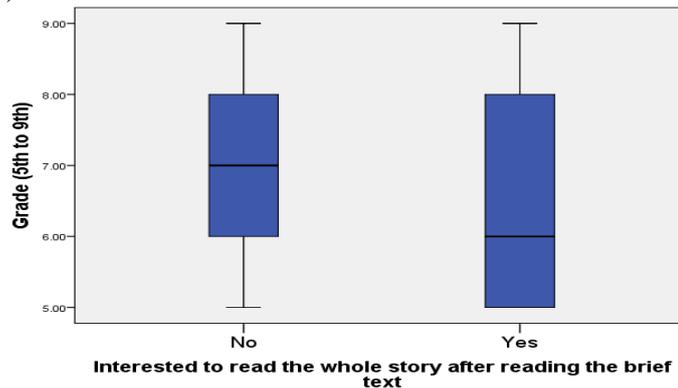


Figure 4 Relationship between frequency of library use and the statement that after reading the book extract student was interested in reading the whole story. (Frequency of library use: 0 - Never; 1 - Once a year; 2 - Once a term; 3 - Once a month; 4 - Once a week; 5 - Three times a week) (N=292)

The Mann-Whitney test revealed that respondents who agree with the statement that after reading the book extract they wanted to read the whole story are in a smaller class (Median 6, IQR 3) than respondents who disagree with the statement that after reading the book extract they wanted to read the whole story (Median 7, IQR 2, $Z=-3.881$, $p<0.001$).

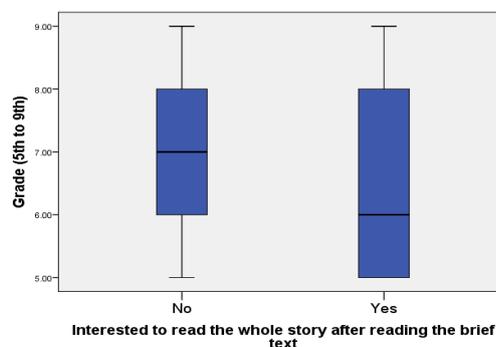


Figure 5 The link between the respondent's class and the statement that after reading the excerpt, they were interested in reading the whole story (N=292)

It can be concluded that after carrying out authentic reading-enhancing approach during the campaign “*Reading against bullying at school*” on students' independent reading skills, where students were offered to read a book extract on emotional abuse at school and could choose to continue reading it at home, the factors which contributed to students' willingness to continue reading the book after school are:

- awareness and understanding of the topic;
- a sense of togetherness in reading (whole school read the same book extract about the bullying);
- school library visits.

Another factor was the age of student: the younger the age of a student is, the more interested in reading he is.

Conclusions

Reading is a part of the learning process, it involves person's affective, cognitive and behavioural attitudes towards an object. The interest in reading is multidimensional. Each person's individual interest in reading expresses differently: through joy, excitement, passion, self-regulation of emotions, etc. Nowadays school becomes a complex learning organisation, constantly adapting to new circumstances and schools have an important role in creating an ecosystem for encouraging reading through using the potential of school library. The school library is not only a part of the school; it can become a part of an ecosystem for promoting students' independent reading skills, where the process of shaping young people's attitudes and behaviour occurs. Students' independent reading skills and reading comprehension can be developed through asking questions, providing background information about the problem, making predictions about events described in the book, having deepened understanding, making connections to personal experiences. But not only promoting independent reading skills becomes important, at the same time an instructional support should be provided. It can be done through various campaigns, e.g. campaign “*Reading against bullying at school*”, which was organised in one of the comprehensive schools of Latvia. The preparation part of the campaign included creating free choice- reading environment and preparing age-appropriate reading material for students. After carrying out authentic reading-enhancing approach during the campaign “*Reading against bullying at school*” on students' independent reading skills, where students were offered to read a book extract on bullying and emotional abuse at school. They could choose to continue reading it at home if they would like to. The empirical research highlighted that factors which contributed to students' willingness to continue reading the book after school were awareness and understanding of the topic; a sense of togetherness in reading (whole school read the same book extract about the bullying) and regular school library visits.

The study also highlights the need to organise reading campaigns for younger students, as respondents who agree with the statement that after reading a passage in a book they wanted to read the whole story, are in a younger age group.

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