

# Teenagers and books – from daily reading to avoidance

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This paper reports a survey conducted in May 2010 on a nationally representative sample of fifteen-year-olds from 70 lower secondary schools. The general research question concerned the prevalence of Polish adolescents who did not read books after completing the phase of compulsory education. The aim of this study was to describe the place of books in teenage everyday life in terms of their reading for school, leisure, spontaneous choice of reading matter, their favourites, books they recommended, value placed on enjoyable reading and their social circle of readers. Gender was found to be a differentiating factor in the reading habits of these young people which the paper broadly describes.

KEYWORDS: readership, lower secondary school, youth literature, popular culture, sociology of youth.

International surveys such as PISA, PIRLS (OECD, 2010; Mullis, Martin, Kennedy and Foy, 2007) which include reading comprehension and others dedicated to literacy skills or the basics and practices of reading (NAEP, 2011), indicate that students who read often, willingly and with interest, who additionally have a positive attitude to reading, achieve above-average results in reading comprehension tests and can overcome the negative impact of low socio-economic position of their families of origin. Empirical surveys also prove that only reading as a pleasure competes with alternative entertainment. The precondition is of course reading proficiency. Independent choice of books is strongly dependent on intrinsic motivation (Brophy, 2004; Guthrie

and Wigfield, 2000), which results from perception of reading as an important activity, valuable in its own right.

The international surveys mentioned, PISA and PIRLS, are also evidence of significant differences in reading competence and practice. Similar conclusions from the analysis of the humanities component of the lower secondary school exam (CKE, 2010; 2011) could be drawn: the highest results were those from students in large cities, while the poorest were from rural schools; even greater gender differences have been observed. The 2003 Polish nationwide lower secondary school survey on reading (Zasacka, 2008), in addition to various other surveys monitoring forms of literacy in children and teenagers (Clark, Torsi and Strong, 2005; Clark and Douglas 2011; Love and Hamston, 2003; OECD, 2010) confirmed social conditioning and the gender advantage of girls in actual reading and positive attitude. Girls performed better in reading comprehension tasks and more reported enjoyment from

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reading. Love and Hamston (2007) also found that boys read less for pleasure, that is without the stimulus of any other practical purpose, in or out of school.

### Theoretical contexts

Reading is a literacy skill subject to multiple definition and examination from various perspectives. In the most general but concise terms, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write. A broader approach is applied in this article to account for social and cultural contexts. From this perspective, literacy is perceived as a set of social practices which permit use, creation and dissemination of symbolic contents. Literacy does not exclusively imply the ability to read and write, but also the application of this ability to specific purposes in certain contexts (Christenbury, Bomer and Smagorinsky, 2006, p. 8). This approach focuses on the circumstances of those practices, accounting for their situational and functional variability (Burton and Hamilton, 2000). As viewed by cultural anthropology and sociology, literacy is also a type of related *habitus*, an internalised universe of cultural experiences attributed to those skills.

In the research of the Institute of the Book and Reading of the National Library (*Instytut Książki i Czytelnictwa Biblioteki Narodowej*), reading is defined as a social practice combined with the cultural standards, patterns and social roles of those engaged with it, binding it in a given place and time (Wolff, 2009). The particular object of study is the specific social function of symbolic communication in reading books (Kłoskowska, 1981; Kostecki, 1978).

The approach adopted here refers to the social and cultural theories of reception, framing reading as an effect of transaction between the text and the reader, who relies on their own life experience and on the knowledge of literary codes, conventions and reading experiences shaping expectations

about a given text, to allow understanding of the message (Barker, 2005; Martin, 1986). The reader starts reading at a specific time, with certain resources of knowledge and life experience. Such an approach to the text underlines the reader's active attitude. The reader, taking up the game started by the author, seeks personally relevant references and guidelines in the text, processing and adapting what they find to their own needs. The active reader, as referred to by de Certeau (2008), poaches from the text, "constructing meanings" on expectation or anticipation of what they may or hope to find. This follows Fiske's theories about popular culture concerning the ways in which readers "use" texts and transform them into a source for pleasure (Fiske, 2010; Gray, 2003).

### Reading during adolescence

In the observation of teenage readers it should be remembered that they are at a stage of intensive growth, full of tension and multi-level development. The age of fifteen occurs during lower secondary school, early adolescence (Harwas-Napierała and Trempała, 2006), which is the time of moratorium for the psychosocial "period of sexual and cognitive maturation and at the same time a postponement of eventual engagement with life" (Erikson, 1997, p. 94). This is the time for self-identification, looking for answers to such questions as: "Who am I?", "Who will I become?", "What is my place in the surrounding world?", "Who do I want to be, and who am I like?" and "Who is close to me?" The social planes of reference, which include membership of social groups and the recognised authorities, which are continuously formed during socialisation by institutions which are continuously being redefined. Literacy of adolescents, their principles of selection and the ways in which they handle texts are the tools for creation of their own individual and social identity, communicating with the social world and

learning about it (Lewis and Fabos, 2005; Neilsen, 2006; Pecora, 1999). Young readers, interpreting reading matter, look for representation of social roles and their expectations related to gender (Marsh and Stolle, 2006; Young, 2000). Choice of texts may condition or modify development of social identification.

For mid-teen readers, apart from self-development, books can play an important social role. Reading ceases to be an intimate, solitary activity and becomes the basis for symbolic exchange. It also begins to play roles in social interaction. When books and their selection are the subject of group discourse, there is social (re)interpretation of the texts with the finding of new meanings and function. An important issue in the research of teenager reading patterns concerns how everyday literacy, the use of media, free choice of reading material, elective reading and its applications, reflect on academic literacy, as well as the nature of the mutual relations of the phenomena (Kress, 2003). How does participation – to use the term of James Gee (1996) – in various informal discussions, shape expectations about text and cognitive skills and how could it be exploited in education (Simon, 2012; West, 2008)?

### Method

In order to characterise the social scope of Polish teenagers' reading habits and its socio-demographic differentiation during school and leisure time, a nationwide survey of a representative sample of fifteen-year-olds from 70 lower secondary schools across Poland was carried out in May 2010. The sampling frame covered all public and non-public lower secondary schools in Poland. The country was divided into 4 regions covering three to five neighbouring provinces. Schools in each region were categorised into four groups according to population of the locality. The population of lower secondary schools was divided into 16 strata.

Sampling in the strata was not proportional to the number of urban and rural schools in the population. The research assumptions and the structure of the population, schools, classes and students provided the necessary rationale.

Although urban schools account for 47.6% of lower secondary schools in Poland, students attending urban schools account for around 63.2% of this age group. The schools and classes in urban schools generally educate more students (per unit) than rural schools. Allowing for the existing disproportion, a total of 40 urban and 30 rural schools in accordance with the proportions in the regions were sampled. In each sampled school, one third grade class of at least 17 students was selected. If the condition could not be met, a school from the reserve list was selected (9 schools) or students from parallel classes were additionally sampled (13 schools).

An auditorium questionnaire was administered to all students of one third grade class at each school in the sample. Statistical calculations were performed in cooperation with *Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej* (The Public Opinion Research Centre). In total, the questionnaire was completed by 1472 students. Of the respondents, 51% were boys and 49% girls; 40.4% of students lived in rural areas, 59.6% in cities<sup>1</sup>; 27.4% of respondents resided in an area away from the school. Almost all students lived with their parents during the school year (98%), 1.1% with relatives and a few in rented accommodation or dormitories.

Since the goal of the survey was to learn about the reading habits of young people about to complete compulsory education, the questionnaire targeted attitudes of lower secondary school students about reading books, the number of books read, choice

<sup>1</sup> Of which: 17.4% in towns under 20 000; 18.9% in cities with population between 20 000 and 100 000; 17.9% between 100 000 and 500 000 and 5.5% above 500 000.

of books at school or for pleasure, preferred books, the value placed on books that were enjoyed, reading related to the internet, sources for books (with special attention to public and school libraries), as well as the social circulation of books. Survey results included independent variables: gender, residence, population of the school catchment area, education and social, and professional position of parents. The results of the analysis addressed the research questions:

- What is the position taken by reading books among leisure activities?
- What proportion of Polish adolescents who complete the compulsory stage of school education do not read books?
- What are the socio-demographic characteristics of students who read and those who do not?
- How numerous and how spontaneous are the book choices and books for third grade of lower secondary school?
- Which books are valued?
- What value is placed on reading a satisfactory book?
- How many and what type of texts do lower secondary school students read online?
- How are books obtained, with special attention paid to libraries and the social circulation of books?

This information was used in the next stage of the survey to construct “profiles” for teenage reading. An analysis of spontaneous book choices and required books allowed description of a common area of symbolic experience for contemporary lower secondary school students through similar choices of books. The books mentioned were classified according to past research on adolescent reading. Books were categorised according to literary criteria and those corresponding to readers’ images of the books. This article describes trends in adolescent reading following comparison with an analogous survey of lower secondary school students in 2003 (Zasacka, 2008).

## Results

### Mid-teen reading habits

The attitudes of lower secondary school students to reading were quite varied; some did not read books at all, while intensive readers read more than two books per month. For these young readers, it was part of their lifestyle, they had their favourite books and clear expectations. Gender, place of residence, type of area of their school and the social and professional position of their parents were predictors for the attitudes of teenagers to school required reading.

Lower secondary school students covered by the survey were asked about frequency of various spare time activities. The most common was listening to music: on the radio, the computer, MP3 player, and which probably accompanied other activities. Watching television was similar, close to all combined use of computers (Zasacka, 2011b). Young people liked spending time with their friends and the vast majority (78%) regularly (at least once per week) spent time on their hobbies or sport (79%).

Gender is an important predictor for reading as a form of leisure: every second girl reported reading regularly (at least once per week) and every sixth – daily. For these, reading a book was an everyday and obvious activity. There were far fewer boys who read regularly (25%), frequent male readers accounted for only 6%. One girl in five and as many as 44% of boys never reached for a book in their spare time or did so sporadically (Table 1). Correlation between gender and inclination to reading as a spending leisure time activity proved statistically significant ( $\chi^2$  correlation,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The young people surveyed listed their interests (Table 2). Gender clearly differentiated how fifteen-year-olds spent their spare time. Reading was a regular habit for every tenth girl – one of the four most popular activities. Only very few boys mentioned reading as a hobby, while their most

Table 1

*Gender and reading books in the leisure time budget of teenagers. Breakdown of replies to the question: How often, in your time free of school and house duties, do you perform the following activities? (in %, N = 1461)*

Gender	Every day	Several times per week	Once per week	Several times per month	Once per month	Several times per year	Less than once year or never
Boys	8	12	6	13	17	25	19
Girls	16	24	9	17	14	15	6
Total	12	18	7	15	16	20	13

popular choices were sport and with their computers.

### **Social scope of book among fifteen-year-olds**

Reading by lower secondary school students was assessed on the basis of reading: books in leisure time and that required at school<sup>2</sup>. The attitude towards school required reading differed most according to gender – as many as 23% of boys (only 4% of girls) did not open either a required book or a book of their own choice during the third year of lower secondary school (correlation between the gender and attitude to reading was significant, the value  $p < 0.001$ ). This group, during preparation for the lower secondary school examination avoided compulsory reading and otherwise showed no interest in reading. They found themselves within the zone of cultural exclusion extending to most dominant culture, the canon of high culture, as delivered by school.

After preparation for the school leaving exam and immediately after the exam, 75% of Polish students declared that they had read the required books during third grade. Girls

were more dutiful – 85% claimed to have read at least one required book. Such declarations on the part of boys were less frequent – up to 21 percentage points (Table 3). A quarter of students had avoided the obligation – the group included twice as many boys as girls (36 and 15% respectively) and as many as 40% of those who planned to study at basic vocational school and 16% of those intending to attend general secondary schools.

In the study period, 68% indicated that they read books of their own choosing – 81% of which were girls and only 56% boys. Of the respondents, there was a category of active readers, who read books in both reading contexts. They accounted for only 57% of the total number, in which girls lead boys by 27 percentage points.

### **Pleasure from reading**

If pleasure can be derived from reading, this proves the internal motivation experienced by the reader (Brophy, 2004; Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000). This pleasure also contributes to books becoming a more frequent and obvious way of spending one's spare time – it endows reading with a recognised value, readily acted upon. In the survey, 46% teenagers admitted that they liked reading books, while there were twice as many girls as boys among them (63 and 30%, respectively). The result is worrying, as 23% of fifteen-year-olds do not like reading (including 11% of girls) and as many as one in three boys even admitted unwillingness to read books.

<sup>2</sup> The surveyed teenagers were asked two questions: "During the last 8 months (i.e. from the beginning of the school year) have you read books outside school and without a teacher's recommendation? We are interested in all kinds of book (also electronic versions), including comic books, atlases, dictionaries and encyclopaedias." and "During that time (i.e. from September 2009), have you read any school required books and other books recommended by a teacher (excluding textbooks)?"

Table 2  
*Gender and hobby pursued by lower secondary school students (in %, N = 1312)*

Hobby	Boys	Girls	Total
Sport (swimming, football, jogging, cycling, body building, etc.)	21	12	17
Computers, IT, games, websites, the internet, computer graphics	22	4	13
Listening to music, music	8	18	13
Music hobby (singing, playing instruments, creating music)	5	11	8
Reading (books, magazines, manga, poetry, literature)	3	10	6
Motoring hobby (including motorcycling, tuning, cars)	11	1	6
Drawing, art classes, painting	2	8	5
Dancing	1	8	4
Hobby related to animals (horses, fishing and fish keeping, dogs)	5	4	4
Collecting hobby (stamps, bottle caps, photos of actors, numismatics)	6	2	4
Photography	1	6	3
Model making, DIY, crafts, weaving	4	2	3
Subject-related: biology, geography, mathematics, design and technology	3	3	3
Film, watching films	1	2	1
Meetings with friends, "playing outside"	1	2	1
House-related: cooking	1	2	1
Other	7	7	7
Total*	100	100	100

\*Respondents mentioned more than one hobby, the table presents their first mentioned.

Table 3  
*Gender of respondents and reading books of one's own choice and reading school required books in third grade of lower secondary school (in %, N = 1462)*

Gender	Students reading no books*	Students reading books outside of compulsory reading	Students reading required books	Active readers**
Boys	23	56	64	44
Girls	4	81	85	71
Total	14	68	75	57

\*Students who do not read books: did not read required books during 8 months – from September to May (in the last class of lower secondary school) nor any book read in leisure time at that same time.

\*\* Active readers read required books and read books in their leisure time.

### Books read for pleasure time in social circulation

Cultural reading patterns are also shaped by peer groups, which are increasingly the plane of reference for young people. The content

may become the basis for symbolic exchange – to coalesce the group, if reading is a recognised and acted upon as a peer group value (Table 4). Participation in the exchange and the role of the leader, may then bestow prestige

Table 4

*Lower secondary school students who discuss books with friends, peers (in %, N = 1440)*

Gender	At least once a week	At least once a month	Several times a year	Less than once a year or never	Total
Boys	15	30	27	29	100
Girls	34	41	19	7	100
Total	24	35	23	18	100

and become a source for social motivation to strive for status (status-based motivation, Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998). In these circumstances, shared tastes and preferences related to reading may improve group cohesion.

Peer groups membership, a reference for the adolescent reader, also imposes an interpretative framework on some texts. If they are read together and discussed, common codes for interpretation and ways to reconstruct text may develop within the group.

In the shaping and maintenance of reading as an activity, especially spontaneous reading, a significant role is played by social relations. This age group's motivation for reading may also coincide with the need to cultivate social relations (Knoester, 2009). The importance of this is to the social circulation of books: talking about books, recommending them, looking for information about them and finding them. The reading habits of girls are placed in the same social contexts but to a greater extent than for boys. For lower secondary school students, reading outside school is not only an intimate solitary activity. The social milieu: the family, but most of all, peer circles, provide most with inspiration and the motivation to read, offering topics for conversation about books, availing them to direct social communication. It was in their peer circles that girls were most likely to talk about books they were reading (correlation between gender and frequency of talking about books with peers was significant:  $p < 0.001$ ), at least once a month by up to 76% of teenage girls and every second boy. Girls also mentioned more sources for books to read, which, after public

libraries, included borrowing from peers and friends. 60% of girl students and only 27% of boys had access to the book collections of their peers. They were also more likely to identify books worth recommending to their peers: 65% of the surveyed girls mentioned this, but only 43% of boys<sup>3</sup>.

### Reading on the internet

The teenagers surveyed have grown up during the intensive development of the internet, the loss of the monopoly by publishers for communication of the many messages which now permeate the virtual network in various forms. Over the last few years, an electronic form of book, the e-book, has become widespread (Gwóźdź, 2008). An internet user has access to various book alternatives. Reading on the internet requires new skills, transforming the skills for literacy (Kress, 2003). Trying to establish the degree to which the internet substitutes or supplements reading traditional books for lower secondary school students, they were asked about using the internet. Of websites visited, viewed and read, the most popular were those offering music and portals enabling communication with others, websites with e-mail. The pages requiring literacy skills (longer texts) included those containing blogs, electronic papers and discussion fora. Girls using the internet were more likely to contribute to blogs and

<sup>3</sup> An analysis based on the  $\chi^2$  test revealed a statistical correlation of  $p < 0.001$  between gender and frequency of talking about books with peers, borrowing books from others and the ability to recommend a book worth reading to a friend.

Table 5  
*Types of books read in leisure time (in %, N = 1467)\**

Types of books	Boys	Girls	Total
Young adult fantasy	17	40	28
Young adult fiction	2	38	20
Fantasy	19	14	16
Foreign and Polish high-art fiction, poetry	5	22	14
Popular scientific, hobbies, guidebooks, curiosities	9	8	9
Thrillers, detective stories	9	11	10
Popular fiction, foreign and Polish, romances	1	15	8
Documentary, diaries	6	10	8
Adventure books, for children	6	5	5
Comic books	4	3	3
Religion	2	2	2
Encyclopaedia, dictionaries	4	4	4
Fiction	8	16	12
Non-fiction	3	4	3
Other, not classified	4	4	4
Not applicable	48	20	34

\*Books of types 1–12 are distinguished on the basis of the titles and/or authors identified by the readers, types 13–14 – based on the features describing the books mentioned by the respondents.

social-networking websites than boys who preferentially contributed more to fora (Zasacka, 2012). Boys were more eager to play computer games than girls.

Every tenth web user reported reading books online – gender again was the strongest predictor. Girls were more active: 12% of all surveyed, 6% of boys (statistically significant correlation:  $p < 0.001$ ). Of books read on the screen, most respondents read them during leisure time – popular literature.

A much larger group (39%, including 49% of all girls and only 32% boys) declared reading texts which were previously found in books on the web: literary works (fragments of novels, short stories, poetry, required reading), journalism, scientific and popular scientific articles. It should be noted that poetry, almost absent in spontaneous book choices, found readers on the internet.

Every tenth respondent who read literature on the web chose poetry, including “love poems” and “poems written by teenagers”. For some students (10%), the internet is a source for books required by school, and every twentieth – book summaries.

The internet not only provides substitutes for printed books that are sought-after, unique and unavailable in “reality” but also many types of text available in printed form, now easily available on web pages.

### **Boys and girls – common and distinct reading habits**

Looking for similarities and common features for fifteen-year-olds’ leisure time reading, the most important syndrome associated with reading preferences is characterised by the following features: adventure, topics relevant to the young, young main

character, action and mystery<sup>4</sup>. Common to both groups (Zasacka, 2011c) are tendencies for reading for entertainment; escaping into the world of the imagination, fantasy, rapid and engrossing action, tension, dangers experienced by the main character, suspense, mystery and riddle but also humour and even satire – as offered by fantasy literature. All – those with lower and higher reading competence – readily accepted and read young adult fantasy literature (Table 5).

Adventure fantasy books formed the largest common area in the reading of teenagers (Zasacka, 2011a), the most popular still include the series of the adventures of Harry Potter (7% of all respondents indicated one from the series).

This type of literature for younger teenagers read by respondents also included books by Lemony Snicket, Roderick Gordon and Brian Williams (*Tunnels*), Rafał Kosik, the fairy tale classics of C. S. Lewis or the multi-plot novels about dragons written by the teenage author Christopher Paolini (cycle *Inheritance: Eragon, Eldest, Brisinger*), the philosophical *His Dark Materials* by Phillip Pullman, the novels of Cornelia Funke, Dorota Terakowska, Trudi Canavan, *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman, close to a contemporary thriller, and by the same author, *Coraline, Neverwhere* and *Good Omens* written in collaboration with Terry Pratchett.

Girls additionally were likely to choose fantasies from this type of literature, with plots about a difficult romance and a seductive vampire, in vampire novels which have

broken all popularity records, especially the series by Stephenie Meyer, as well as similar novels: *The Mediator*, *Avalon High*, *Ninth Key* by Meg Cabot; *The Morganville Vampires* by Rachel Caine; *The Vampire Diaries* (subsequent books) by Lisa Jane Smith; the cycle of novels *House of Night* by P. C. Cast and Kristin Cast, from the series *The Mortal Instruments* – the novels *City of Bones*, *City of Ashes* by Cassandra Clare, *Hush, Hush* by Becca Fitzpatrick, *Vampire Academy* (subsequent volumes) by Michelle Mead, *Wampir z przypadku* (*Vampire by accident*) by Ksenia Basztowa, *Ever* by Alyson Noël. Table 6 presents the most popular authors among students' own choices for non-school reading.

The more experienced readers, guided by well-developed taste, chose and enjoyed adult fantasy literature. In that group, we there were twice as many girls as boys: 33% of the boys who read for leisure and only 17% of girls (the correlation is significant:  $p < 0.001$ ). This is the only class of literature more eagerly and frequently read by boys (Table 5).

Of the very numerous group of authors of adult fantasy literature, the most popular remained J. R. R. Tolkien – 5% of all teenagers had read his books. Of Polish fantasy authors, the novels of Andrzej Sapkowski were the most popular (Table 6). Other Polish authors were also read, such as Jacek Dukaj, Stanisław Lem, Andrzej Filipiuk. Boys were more likely to read books by Jacek Piekara, Jacek Komuda, Andrzej Ziemiański and Marcin Ciszewski. The thrillers of Stephen King are still popular, 32 of his titles were mentioned, while several dozen foreign authors had been familiar for years (Zasacka, 2008): Terry Pratchett, Robert Anthony Salvatore, Margit Sandemo, Guy N. Smith, Dean Koontz, Frank Herbert, Robin Cook, Graham Masterton and Richard Knaak; there were also many new authors, who emerged from this survey, the most popular included Anna Rice, Dmitry Glukhovskysy (*Metro 2033*), Christopher Moore and Charlaine Harris (including the cycle *Death Until Dark*).

<sup>4</sup> Based on the analysis of results concerning spare time reading habits, the choices of books made outside school required reading, attitude to reading books, descriptions of favourite and recommended books, types of books recommended to peers for reading, the value placed on books and how books were obtained, some trends were discernable in attitudes. The tendencies to reading mean the type of reading activity, specific choices and preferences of books and the related expectations concerning good books, as well as the ways of participation in the social circulation of books.

Table 6  
*Authors most frequently read in leisure time (in %, N = 1472)*

The most widely read authors	Percentage who read beyond school required reading
Stephenie Meyer	14.7
Joanne K. Rowling	7.3
J.R.R. Tolkien	5.4
Paulo Coelho	4.7
Barbara Rosiek	4.4
Christiane F.	3.8
Andrzej Sapkowski	3.3
Dan Brown	2.2
Meg Cabot	2.0
Anna Onichimowska	1.9
Marta Fox	1.6
Krystyna Siesicka	1.6
Stephen King	1.4
P. C. Cast, Kristina Cast	1.4
Heidi Hassenmuller, Anna Frey	1.3

Boys were slightly more likely than girls to read detective stories and thrillers, especially by authors like: Mario Puzo, Ken Follet, Ian Fleming, Tom Clancy, Harlain Coben and Jeffrey Deaver. Books specifically preferred by boys included literature on historical topics (especially dedicated to World War II), both scholarly and the fiction mentioned previously. Here is an assessment of recommended books, characteristic for this type of reading (Zasacka, 2011c):

*Metro 3033* is excellent sci-fi in a Slavic version, full of deep thoughts and observations. *Samozwaniec [The pretender]* by [Jacek] Komuda conveys the atmosphere of the Polish nobility better than all the history textbooks and written in a fluent language. The cycle *Oko jelenia [The eye of a deer]* by [Jacek] Dukaj is an adventurous mixture of fantasy, sci-fi and history. Light and engrossing.

(a statement by a boy from a large city)

Girls who were more active readers also read more books than boys, they were also characterised by more numerous and more varied choice. Regular, daily girl readers with the greatest reading experience and the most literary competence may, following Peterson and Kern (1996), be called “omnivores.” This category, recognised by scholars examining cultural engagement, identifies readers with the most cultural capital, who are characterised by versatility, as well as greater competence enabling them to navigate more complex cultural texts containing more complicated references and contexts, as well as to transgress into the reception of various cultural levels and cross boundaries both aesthetic and of competence. The readers could access contemporary high-art literature (e.g. Patrick Suskind, Haruki Marukami, Ian McEwan), the best-selling author Carlos Luis Zafón, the classics: Jane Austen or Emily Bronte and novels about vampire families or lighter young adult novels by Meg Cabot,

popular romance or Dan Brown's detective fiction. Here is an exemplary reply made by a girl to the question about books she liked to read: "I enjoy reading fantasy books most (Pilipiuk, Sapkowski), but when I am in the right mood, I like to read a women's books like *The Devil Wears Prada* or *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding."

Girls are diverse and can be voracious, resolute readers. These come from various home environments, but least frequently from educated families or families at the bottom of the stratification ladder – most frequently they are from working families living in small towns or villages with parents educated to basic or secondary level. Their selected pattern for reading corresponded mostly to choices of books covering real problems and offering a source of knowledge with a moral message. The girls were most likely to choose traditional novels about growing up, family relationships, first love, peer friendship, social problems and the threats of addiction. They appreciated books more in terms of their ethical and moral message. They enjoyed young adult novels about problems and difficulties which they might encounter (bulimia, drug addiction, loneliness in the family). Without change over the years (as proved by the results of the reading survey of 2003, c.f. Zasacka, 2008), the most popular was the group of novels on the lives of teenage drug addicts. Christiane F. (*We, Children from Bahnhof ZOO*) and Barbara Rosiek (*Pamiętnik narkomanki* [*The diary of a drug addict*]) are still the most popular on the topic (Zasacka, 2011a). However, new authors emerged, including Anna Onichimowska, who enjoyed the largest readership (1.9% of all surveyed lower secondary school students had read the novel *Hera, moja miłość* [*Heroine, my love*]) and Jan Paweł Krasnodębski (*Stokrotka* [*Daisy*], *Z życia narkomanki* [*The life of a drug addict*]), the series of novels of the Ossolineum Publishing House, the most popular of which were two authors: Heidi Hassenmuller and Jana Frey.

The importance in this reception of literature is in the realistic quality of the history recounted, when difficult real problems are discussed. This reception was considered by Płuciennik (2004), who analysed the problem of empathy in the reception of literature, and identified the phenomenon as:

*sentimentality*, very often occurring in works of popular culture. The so-called true life books, are full of tormented characters and one of characteristic models of reception in popular culture consists in obliteration of the difference between life and art, negation of autonomy of the work. Sometimes, literature is subjected to the so-called true life problems [...] (Płuciennik, 2004, p. 135).

Literature, as a result of this reception, loses autonomy and becomes subjugated to the emotional needs of the reader. The reader's attitude based on their emotions and compassion in the reception of literature lends itself to the erasure of the boundary between the work and reality; between literary and life experience. Schooten and Gloper (2002), in a survey of the reading attitudes of young people, showed that girls were at less of a distance than boys to stories they read and focussed on them more. They were also characterised by more emotional reception of the literature, to which they also directed more empathy – they found it easier to identify themselves with the literary character.

## Conclusions

The attitudes of Polish fifteen-year-olds to reading appear to be considerably varied. Gender is the most critical factor with respect to approach to literature. There are teenagers for whom reading is an everyday leisure activity and those who do not read. There are many more boys at lower secondary school who avoid reading, either as requested by school or according to their own choice – one in five fifteen-year-olds does not read for pleasure. This existence of this situation

recommends close observation of teenage reading needs and interests to develop suitable guidelines for teachers to discourage negative adolescent reading tendencies.

The serious challenge emerges for the teaching of Polish at school, to encourage boys to read books, meet their expectations and feed their interest. It seems that, without intrinsic student motivation, acceptance of reading as an attractive activity, success will be difficult. Learning about student out of school reading interests could be a useful source of information for consideration in school practice. Teachers today have the freedom to choose school reading materials, as enshrined by the core curriculum. It is highly desirable therefore that they should first know student preferences to guide their choices.

Girls, who are more active readers, have more varied preferences for books than boys, and actively participate in the social circulation of books, especially with their peers. Teenage female readers are more likely to find support from their peers for their reading through mutual inspiration; teenage male readers are more often solitary. Common to all these young readers is the need for the entertainment in their reading, which is offered by light fiction, offering lively action, suspense and even horror experienced by a teenage character.

Boys and girls also differ in their preferences for literary genres. Boy readers avoid general fiction, especially if it is intended for young adults. Those who have higher literary competence tend to prefer fantasy literature written for adults. As regards literature of cognitive value, they are most often interested in historical books.

Girls, more active readers of traditional books, are also more active than boys using the internet for literary purposes. It is also an important premise that teaching should activate boys to looking to the web for texts worth reading, both for school purposes and extra-curricular interests.

The findings here encourage a closer qualitative survey, to uncover the nature of gender differences in reading habits and their origins in greater detail. What should be scrutinised are the everyday reading habits of students, especially in the context of the strong competition from the new electronic media. Such analysis could help in identification of educational intervention to integrate students' relationship with the written word, including identified online interactions which take place in leisure time and within the scope of required school reading. The findings from such detailed surveys could guide teacher trainers in Poland and teachers themselves to refine their techniques in the teaching of literacy skills, including developing educational tools. More critically, awareness could provide guidance in the development of suitable assumptions for curricula more conducive to stimulating pleasure from reading. Likewise, trainers of future teachers might gain enlightenment for reorganisation of their work to allow future pupils to be catered for according to their actual reading needs, in a way which will encourage motivation.

### Literature

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