Results of a questionnaire survey focused on gender issues in the literature for children and youth and its reflection in pedagogical practice

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Abstract

The paper presents selected results of a research focused on Czech language teachers at lower secondary schools, its main aim is to describe the current state and possibilities of the reflection of gender issues in literary education. By evaluating the results from a non-standardized questionnaire, we obtained answers to five identified research problems. The research is focused on the factors influencing the use of the literary text as a media reflecting the gender order of the society in literary education and the factors related to the formation of teachers' views on gender stereotypes in the current literature for children and youth.

Key words: literary education, teachers, gender, literature for children and youth, research.

Výsledky dotazníkového šetření zaměřeného na genderovou problematiku v literatuře pro děti a mládež a její reflexi v pedagogické praxi

Abstrakt

Príspevok prezentuje vybrané výsledky výzkumu zaměřeného na učitele českého jazyka na 2. stupni základních škol, jehož hlavním cílem bylo popsat aktuální stav a možnosti reflexe genderové problematiky v hodinách literární výchovy. Vyhodnocením výsledků získaných z nestandardizovaného dotazníku jsme získali odpovědi na pět stanovených výzkumných problémů. Výzkum se orientoval na faktory, které ovlivňují využití literárního textu jakožto média odrážejícího genderový řád společnosti v hodinách literární výchovy, a na faktory související s utvářením názorů vyučujících na genderové stereotypy v současné literatuře pro děti a mládež.

Klíčová slova: literární výchova, učitelé, gender, literatura pro děti a mládež, výzkum.

Introduction to the topic

The interest in examining gender issues in various levels of society and individual lives is increasing and this fact is more and more reflected in education. The reflections on the possibilities of applying gender issues in the process of school education are based on the premise that the task of school education is also the formation of pupils' values and attitudes, in this case the values and attitudes corresponding to the definition of the so-called social sex, i.e. gender (Průcha, 2009; , 2001; Smetáčková, 2005). The gender issues in this paper are understood as the issues related to displaying a set of properties and behaviour that are formed by culture and associated with the image of man and woman (Linhart, 1996). In connection with fiction, the image of man and woman is usually presented to the reader through male / boy and female / girl characters. The examination of the gender aspect in the literature for children and youth presents a new challenge not only in the field of literature but also in didactics. The teachers who are qualified to engage in gender topics in literary education are the teachers familiar with the aims, methods and organizational forms of the lesson (Průcha, Walterová & Mareš, 2003) as well as with specific literature suitable for working in this subject.

The term "gender" is not mentioned in the Framework Educational Program for Basic Education (RVP ZV). However, the term covers several sub-themes which are the subject of the RVP ZV, especially in the areas of social and scientific nature. These include, for example, Human Being and Society, where one of the goals is "to create positive relationships to the opposite sex in the school environment and outside school, to

recognize stereotypical views of the position of men and women in family, work and political life, the perceptions of prejudices concerning the role of women in society" (RVP ZV, 2016, p. 52).

By combining the objectives of literary education with the objectives of other educational fields, a variety of topical issues, including gender issues, can be incorporated into literary education. The essence of its reflection through literary texts is the motivation of adolescents to critically assess the role of men and women in society and related gender stereotypes and to help girls and boys develop their own identity.

1 Research tasks

Our research responds to the absence of knowledge demonstrating the current state and possibilities of incorporation of gender issues into literary education classes in the Czech basic school environment. When defining the research tasks, we have also taken into account the results of foreign research according to which books are "structured in the spirit of culturally-based expectations of gender-appropriate behavior" (Renzetti & Curran, 2003, p. 120). Experts focus mainly on gender stereotypes at different levels in fiction. They analyse the frequencies and ways of portraying male and female characters in picture books for the youngest (Williams, Vernon, Williams & Malech, 1987), in fairy tales as well as in stories for adolescents, and assess the progress achieved by children and youth literature in this regard (Jacobs, 2004). Numerous foreign studies also deal with gender analyses of textbooks (Sovič & Hus, 2015).

Taking into account the acquired theoretical knowledge, the main goal of the research was to describe the current state and possibilities of reflection of gender issues in the classes of literary education at lower secondary schools. A partial goal was to find out whether the teachers' other field of study had an impact on the inclusion/exclusion of gender issues in literary education classes. Another partial goal was to find out whether factors such as an interest in gender issues outside school and the didactic skills of teachers influence / do not influence their opinion on the use of literature for children and youth as a tool for reflection on gender issues. The last partial goal was to find out if teachers are familiar with specific fiction with a non-stereotyped heroine and whether they consider the number of such heroines in literature for children and teenagers to be sufficient. Based on these goals, we have identified specific research issues and hypotheses.

2 Description of the research

2.1 Research topics and hypotheses

1. What is the relationship between the other field of study of Czech language teachers and the inclusion of gender issues in literary education?
2. What is the relationship between the declared level of didactic skills of teachers to reflect gender issues in literary education and pupils' interest in gender issues?
3. What is the relationship between the declared level of didactic skills of teachers to reflect gender issues in literary education and their view that literature for children and youth offers many opportunities to consider gender issues?
4. What is the relationship between the teachers' interest in gender issues outside school and their view that the current literature for children and youth does not offer enough literary texts avoiding gender stereotypes?
5. What is the relationship between the opinion of teachers that literature offers enough female figures avoiding gender stereotypes and their knowledge of specific books with such characters?

Following the research topics we have determined the following hypotheses:

- H1: The teachers with the other field of study in humanities include gender issues in literary education more often than other teachers.
- H2: The teachers who judged themselves to be sufficiently prepared to reflect gender issues in literary education have pupils more interested in gender issues than the teachers who do not consider themselves sufficiently prepared.
- H3: The teachers who judge themselves to be sufficiently prepared didactically to reflect gender issues are of the opinion that the literature for children and youth offers many gender issues opportunities more often than the teachers who do not consider themselves to be sufficiently prepared to consider the issues.
- H4: The teachers interested in gender issues outside school find the amount of contemporary literature avoiding gender stereotypes smaller than the teachers without this interest.
- H5: The teachers who believe that contemporary literature depicts plenty of female characters that go beyond gender stereotypes know more specific titles with such characters than the teachers with a different opinion.

2.2 Research tool

A non-standardized questionnaire was used as a research tool. Based on the data obtained from the pre-survey (the electronic questionnaire was filled in by 20 teachers of the Czech language), we adjusted the wording of some items and reduced their

number. The final version of the questionnaire contained 34 items. The questionnaire was divided into four parts. The first two parts of the questionnaire surveyed the views of Czech language teachers on how to integrate gender issues into literary education (the last part was a filter); the third part was filled in only by the teachers experienced with the topic in the classroom. The fourth part concerned the demographics of teachers. In twelve Likert-type scales, teachers expressed the degree of their agreement with the statements on the scale 1 to 5 (1 – I totally agree, 2 – I more agree than disagree, 3 – I have no clear opinion, 4 – I more disagree than agree, 5 – I totally disagree). The remaining items were closed (12), semi-closed (4) and open (6). Some items were also control items. Only some of the scaled and closed items served to verify the research hypotheses; the other items provided answers to supplementary research questions which are not discussed in more detail in this paper.

2.3 Research sample and data collection

Through e-mail, we contacted a total of 516 male and female directors of primary schools in four randomly drawn regions (South Moravian Region, Liberec Region, Vysočina Region and Pilsen Region) and asked them to distribute the electronic version of the questionnaire among Czech language teachers at lower secondary school. The complete research sample consisted of 121 teachers of elementary schools in four Czech regions who taught Czech language and literature at lower secondary level in the school year 2017/2018. The breakdown of the respondents by region is, along with other demographic data, recorded in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of respondents by demographic items

Gender	Frequency	2nd field of study	Frequency	Years as a teacher	Frequency
Men	8	Humanities	63	Less than 10 years	26
Women	113	Other	58	More than 11 years	95
Σ	121	Σ	121	Σ	121
Region					
South Moravia		Liberecký	Vysočina	Plzeňský	Σ
48		27	25	21	121

2.4 Verification of hypotheses and discussion

We validated H1–H5 hypotheses using the chi-square statistical test for the Pivot Table. For each hypothesis we have formulated two statistical hypotheses, the zero one

(the assumption that there is no relation between the observed phenomena) and the alternative (the assumption being that there is a relationship between the observed phenomena). We have decided to accept or reject hypotheses by testing the zero hypothesis (Chráska, 2016).

For hypotheses H1, H2 and H4, the significance level was set at 0.05, for the hypothesis H3 to 0.01 (the risk of unauthorized rejection of the zero hypothesis and incorrect acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (Chráska, 2016) when the required value was lower than 0.05 (0.01) we rejected the zero hypothesis and accepted the alternative hypothesis.

The numbers in the Pivot Tables (Tables 2–6) express the number of teachers who responded in a certain way to the first question and at the same time in a certain way to the second question. The numbers in brackets are the expected frequencies that correspond to the validity of the zero hypothesis (Chráska, 2016). For all scale items, very small frequencies were found at the extreme values (1 and 5), only the scale values of 2, 3 and 4 were used in the compilation of the Pivot Tables.

Gender issues (behaviour, characteristics or the social roles of literary characters with respect to their gender) concerned 95 (78.5%) teachers when working with the literary text. On the basis of this high frequency, it can be stated that the literary text can become a tool for the reflection of the issues, but the question remains how, in what context and with what purpose the teachers work with gender aspects of specific texts.

When formulating the H1 hypothesis, we assumed that the gender aspects of the texts is more frequent in the classes taught by the teachers with a higher interest in social and scientific topics, who had studied humanities (the respondents had degrees in history, civics, pedagogy and special pedagogy). The distribution of the respondents according to their professional orientation is shown in Table 1.

However, the hypothesis H1 did not show a significant level of 0.05 (Pearson's chi-square: 0.057, d.f. = 1, $p = 0.812$). The fact that the teachers of literary education include/exclude gender issues in their teaching is influenced by other factors than is the focus of their fields of study.

Table 2

Pivot Table for H1 Verification

Teacher's experience with gender issues in literary education	The 2nd field of study		
	Other	Humanities	Σ
Ne	13 (12,46)	13 (13,54)	26
Ano	45 (45,54)	50 (49,46)	95
Σ	58	63	121

We also examined what were the most frequent responses the teachers encountered when dealing with these topics. 54 teachers out of 95 checked the answer “there was an evident interest and activity”. For the hypothesis H2, we verified the relationship between this response and the evaluation of the teachers’ own didactic skills concerning gender topics in literary education. Of the 121 respondents, only 36 of them felt they had the skills. A great number (50) chose the option “do not know”. This option has not been flagged in the Pivot Table, but it probably suggests that the teachers have no clear idea of their role when working with this topic.

The H2 hypothesis was demonstrated at the significance level of 0.05 (Pearson’s chi-square: 6.544, d.f. = 2, significance p. = 0.038). There is a statistically significant relationship between the declared didactic skills of the teachers and the pupils’ interest in the subject – see Table 3.

Table 3

Pilot Table for the verification of H2

H2				
Didactic skills of teachers to reflect gender issues in literary education	Interest of pupils in texts on gender issues in literary education			
	Not interested	More interested than not	Interested	Σ
Yes	3 (3,76)	17 (20,08)	12 (8,16)	32
No	3 (2,24)	15 (11,928)	1 (4,48)	19
Σ	6	32	13	51

Another area of our interest was the role of the literature for children and youth in gender issues. In this context, the teachers were presented with the following scale items:

- The literature for children and youth offers many opportunities to reflect gender issues.
- The current literature for children and youth (published after 1989) does not offer enough literary texts that go beyond gender stereotypes.

For the first item, teachers most often chose option 2 “I more agree than disagree” (42 respondents), and 3 “I do not have a clear opinion” (42 respondents). Option 4 “I more disagree than agree” was chosen by 24 respondents only. Average item rating was 2, 77.

In the second item, option 2 “I agree”, 30 respondents, “I do not have a clear opinion” 57 respondents and option 4 “I more disagree than agree” 28 respondents. The average score for the item was 2, 95. Positive and negative responses are very balanced for the second item. There are very contradictory or unclear views among the teachers there.

The validity of the H3 hypothesis was demonstrated at the significance level of 0.01 (Pearson’s chi-square: 10,633 d.f. = 2, significance p. = 0,0001) – see Table 4. The teach-

ers acquainted with various didactic aspects of their work see more opportunities in the literature for children and youth to reflect gender issues than the other teachers.

Table 4

Pivot Table for Verification H

Evaluation of literature for children and youth with regard to its gender reflection possibilities	H3		
	Didactic skills of teachers reflecting gender issues in literary education		
	Yes	No	Σ
2 – many possibilities	21 (12,90)	4 (12,10)	25
3 – no clear opinion	8 (13,42)	18 (12,58)	26
4 – less possibilities	3 (5,68)	8 (5,32)	11
Σ	32	30	62

In compiling the H4 hypothesis, we assumed that the teachers who are interested in gender issues will be more aware of the current discussion of gender stereotypes in literature and will also recognize these stereotypes in literary texts more often. Only 27 of all respondents are willing to engage in gender issues outside school (“I agree” and “I more agree than disagree”). The average rating is 2.95. The fact that these teachers evaluate the contemporary literature for children and youth as predominantly stereotypical, however, has not been proven. The validity of the H4 hypothesis was not demonstrated at the significance level of 0.05 (Pearson’s chi-square: 1.106 d.f. = 4, $p = 0.893$) – see Table 5. In this case, the three-point scales were designed so that the scale value 2 agreement and the value 4 disagreement with the claim.

Table 5

Pivot table for H4 Verification

Teachers’ interest in gender issues outside school	H4			
	Assessment of the volume of gender non-stereotyped literary texts in contemporary literature for children and youth			
	2 deficiency	3	4 sufficient	Σ
2 – interest	6 (4,63)	8 (9,27)	5 (5,10)	19
3 – no clear opinion	7 (8,78)	19 (17,56)	10 (9,66)	36
4 – no interest	7 (6,59)	13 (13,17)	7 (7,24)	27
Σ	20	40	22	82

34 of the 121 interviewed teachers assess the number of gender-based non- stereotypical female heroes in the current literature as satisfactory. A total of 31 respondents

have the opposite view and 56 respondents do not know the answer. It confirms the opinion that gender stereotypes are contradictory and unclear to the teachers. At least one work of fiction with a non-stereotyped heroine is known only to 17 respondents, the remaining 104 respondents did not mention any book. When examining the H5 hypothesis, the relationship between the opinion that the current literature (published after 1989) showed enough female figures outside gender stereotypes and knowledge of specific works with such characters was not shown at the significance level of 0.05 (Pearson's chi-square: 0.015, d.f. = 1, significance $p = 0.901$) – see

Table 6

Pivot table for H5 Verification

The view that contemporary literature for children and youth contains enough non-stereotypical heroes	H5		
	An example of a particular work with a non-stereotypical heroine		
	None	Yes	Σ
Yes	27 (27,20)	7 (6,80)	34
No	25 (24,80)	6 (6,20)	31
Σ	52	13	65

Conclusion

The results of the research have provided partial information which will be followed by further research of the current state and possibilities of the reflection of gender issues in the classes of literary education at the lower secondary school. The data obtained also stress the timeliness and necessity of this research which has also shown that addressed teachers mostly did not consider themselves sufficiently didactically prepared to reflect on gender topics in literary education, although in general, didactic skills of teachers are one of the decisive factors of effective fulfilment of school education objectives. The teachers also do not usually have a clear view of the presence of gender stereotypes in the literature for children and youth. They cannot judge whether the contemporary literature is rather stereotyped or vice versa or whether it offers enough female heroines in non-traditional gender roles. These facts are neither related to the field of their study, nor to their own outside school interests. There is a considerable lack of knowledge of specific non-stereotypical gender fiction. The vast majority of teachers, even those who answered that the present literature for children and youth included enough non-stereotyped female characters did not mention any specific book.

Although our research was only partial in nature and we are aware that there are differences in the knowledge of the subject and its practical (didactic) implementation

among the teachers, these findings lead us to the conclusion that Czech language teachers at lower secondary school work with the gender issues in the lessons of literary education rather randomly and intuitively, without a more pronounced support from the RVP ZV and without relevant methodological recommendations. From the point of view of the needs of a democratic society that accentuates the equality of all its members, the correction of this state is more than desirable.

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