

# Reforming the Literature Curriculum from the Perspective of Future Literary Educators

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## **Abstract**

The issue of the literary canon taught in Hungarian elementary and secondary schools has been a hotly debated topic for years in the public eye as well as among teaching experts, parents, and students. More and more people deem it inevitable to rewrite the list of required school readings in order to create an atmosphere of literature teaching that resonates more aptly with the challenges of the modern world. Despite the above view, however, most Hungarian literature classes continue to discuss the same literary works that have been irremovably part of the canon for decades. This tenacious clinging to the “well-tried” reading lists is strongly based on the concept of the literary canon itself, the idea of steadiness and that of solid values, which have become, however, rather doubtful in today’s postmodern era. For a significant change to happen in this field, a major shift of views would be indispensable among Hungarian literary educators. What can we expect from the next generation of teachers? How do prospective teachers of literature in Hungary think about the above issue?

**Key words:** literary canon; literature teaching; literary educator; future literary educator; reading list; popular culture

**Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL:** Social Sciences – Education – School education

In recent years, literary educators, parents, and students have expressed a growing demand for the renewal of the elementary and high school literary canon in order to create an up-to-date atmosphere of literature teaching, which is more in synch with the challenges of today’s postmodern world. Despite the above powerful efforts, however, year to year most Hungarian literature classes still discuss the same literary works that have constituted a deeply anchored part of the canon for decades. The teaching of literature in Hungary currently follows the so-called “pre-modern model of literature teaching” (Bókay 1998), characterized by a chronological approach, with an elevated role for presenting the individual literary epochs, including the relevant authors, their biographies, list of works, etc. This level of perfectionism is unprecedented in comparison to other European literary curricula. The method of teaching literature today overwhelmingly practiced in Hungary is strongly dominated by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century teaching concept that hardly shares any connecting points with today’s postmodern way of thinking. The major problem with this approach to literature is the very fact that is completely ignores the students’

age-specific characteristics (Kerber 2002).

Among the various school subjects, literature is gradually losing its popularity among students. The results of the national surveys of attitude reveal that while earlier literature used to be one of the most popular school subjects, by the millennium it experienced a major setback, with Hungarian language arts becoming outright one of the least preferred school subjects (Csapó 2000). In order for a notable change to occur, there is an indispensable need for a major shift in teachers' attitude, value preferences as well as methodological practice. Literary educators should be familiar with the classical, the modern, and the popular culture and they need to be able to endear their students with reading and educate them to a functional usage of literature.

The National Public Education Institute's Center for Program and Curriculum Design (Országos Közoktatási Intézet Program- és Tantervfejlesztési Központja) carried out a research on the situation of various school subjects in 2002 on elementary school level and in 2003 in secondary education. Both surveys were part of a greater observational research examining the effects of the changes in the 1990s in the field of content regulation and curriculum modernization on the actual teaching methods of the individual subjects as well as the question what further development was necessary concerning the overall system of school subjects in Hungary. The primary goal of the study was to map how literary educators in Hungary evaluate the current situation of teaching and to identify the major difficulties, the potential fields where changes were still needed and the tools helping them possibly the most.

The most important problem turned out to be the fact that students do not read much and in general, do not even like reading. Their spelling leaves much to be desired, their basic reading skills are insufficient, and they lag seriously behind in the field of reading comprehension. At the same time, teachers have to transmit too much knowledge without having the necessary amount of time for it. Nevertheless, when it comes to the issue of narrowing down or extending the curriculum, there are very modest suggestions concerning the topics to be left out, yet very specific ideas as to in which dimensions to expand the existing reading lists. Literature teachers in Hungary would strongly prefer teaching modern literature to the dominance of the literature of earlier eras.

The survey confirmed that the subject of Hungarian language and literature needs modernization. According to the participating teachers, the students are gradually losing interest in the subject. The list of compulsory readings should contain to a greater extent youth literature, which students are genuinely interested in, thus having a chance to bring the understanding and the love of literature closer to them. Teachers and education experts both sense the effects of the changed circumstances, yet could not come up with effective solutions to these problems (Kerber 2004).

These research results were further underpinned by the observational survey that was carried out in 2005, following the studies on the general situation of the various school subjects. The main aim of this survey was to offer insight into the pedagogical practice of Hungarian literary educators, to explore their general value

preferences, methodological patterns as well as their own approach to the subject they were transmitting. The results of the research revealed the slow pace of modernization in present-day teaching practice, which continuously increases the distance between children and their own school's culture. The long-term consequences of this state go beyond the conflicting realm of the school and the world outside the school; these may contribute to the growth of a similarly negative attitude to the concepts of knowledge, work, and culture in general (Gordon Győri 2006).

Students' learning difficulties are often not rooted in their lack of certain basic (learning) skills, but in the immense distance between the knowledge transferred at school and the literacy of those not educated in the mainstream culture (Morrell 2002). Therefore, teachers should take into consideration students' special literacy acquired outside the realm of the school, and find the potential to connect that material with the school curriculum. One such link could be built between the popular culture beloved by the students and the compulsory literature in class. By means of the popular culture it is easier to create a bridge between students' everyday experiences and the school curriculum/literacy. Incorporating popular culture into school literacy offers the possibility to effectively develop critical thinking skills, improve verbal and written analytical skills, to create a real dialog between educators and students as well as to discuss relevant cultural, social, or political questions connected to the texts. Popular culture has the potential to bridge the literacy and cultural gap between students, which may be of especially great importance in a multiethnic school context. Despite the wide range of convincing arguments for the integration of pop culture into the school literacy, the majority of teachers are reluctant to do so as they feel professionally unprepared in this field (Morrell 2002).

Domestic research monitoring Hungarian teachers of literature revealed that the methodological preparedness, the attitude, and the value preference of educators who have been teaching for years change at a slow pace and to a very little extent. A real transition in the field of teaching practice can only be expected from the next generation of teachers, which makes it worthwhile to take a closer look at how prospective teachers of literature think about the above issues. Therefore, I conducted interviews in focus groups with junior-year students majoring in Hungarian language and literature at the Faculty of Humanities of the Eötvös Loránd University Budapest concerning the current situation of teaching literature, the question of compulsory reading lists, and the goals and pursuits for their future work. The survey had fifteen participants of the same age group; eleven female and four male students.

The major point all interviewees agreed on was that literature teaching in Hungary is currently facing serious problems that mainly stem from the school literary canon. The distance between the compulsory reading lists, which have been nearly unchanged for decades, and the students' own everyday reality keeps growing alarmingly, and instead of aiding students in learning to love reading and literature, we rather discourage them. According to one participant, one of the greatest challenges these days is how to get students to choose books as a present for themselves, how to bring them into visiting the library regularly, and to read the

designated works of literature from the reading list. On the other hand, as another interviewee pointed out, the currently prescribed curriculum and the amount of fixed texts to be read and analyzed, completed with embedding the works into a biographical and a (literature and art) historical context set such an extreme pace that makes it nearly impossible to create a teaching context that provides students with hands-on experiences with literature.

A further prospective teacher sees the source of the problem as follows:

In public education, we teach children. We teach the youth. Isn't it ironic that we hardly really teach them actual children and youth literature? This is a definite problem as we leave out the very core of education which is really about them, their own vivid world, thus further widening the gap between the students and literature. We are not building bridges, which is missing most of the time. Therefore, the strategy the current system is operating with is never going to be successful.

Many shared the view that from year to year, generations of literary educators insist on the same fixed reading lists, although today's children are in many respects different from those living in an era decades ago. Based on their own childhood experiences, the interviewees could sense themselves that their generation also grew up amid different circumstances and with different interests, and these changes have been continuing ever since. They asked the rightful question what makes educators think then that the same literary works meant for their parents and grandparents would raise the interest of today's generation of students. They are well aware that they are the educators of the future generations, but also that they need to change themselves and enforce changes in the system in order to reach their aim of successfully transmitting literature to the younger generations.

The participants of the interview could clearly see the difficulties connected to their subject and they supported very articulately the demand for change. There were varying opinions, however, on how to and to what extent they could approve the existing situation. Some reckoned that although the concept of the compulsory curriculum is very dense and most teachers of literature have a hard time transmitting this set amount of knowledge, yet it is crucial to create room for works outside the literary canon, with special attention to popular literature. In the words of one interviewee who stressed the personal responsibility and freedom of literary educators:

Once I start teaching, I definitely plan to integrate popular literature into my curriculum. Children's and youth novels as well as poetry. All kinds of contemporary materials covering the present day and reflecting on all the things students currently see and experience. Also phenomena I see and experience. I want to teach the present, so I will not have any other choice but to extend the possibilities offered by the Hungarian framework curricula. This is my freedom, my time as well as that of the students I teach.

In fact, many of the participants considered the idea of teaching contemporary literature in the school context as the subject matter of these works along with the topicality of their language offers potentials for a more intense connection between the students and the text itself; being involved as a recipient may not simply lead to a greater approach to the given work of literature, topic, or author, but to literature

and reading itself (Szakács 2010). They unanimously reckoned that contemporary literature should also be present in the school curriculum of each grade. They would not implement this practice, however, by the complete exchange of earlier reading lists, but along intertextual linking points between the traditional “textbook” literature and the newer, originally “non-curricular” texts.

There were, however, voices against the above suggestions stating that expanding the current reading lists was not a successful strategy simply out of lack of the necessary time. “I don’t think I am doing any good if I complete the already immense corpus of texts with additional items,” said one of the participants.

On the other hand, a further difficulty arose with regard to processing the newly canonized works of literature as, unlike items on the traditional school literary canon, the teaching of these newer pieces is hardly supported at this point with textbooks and further methodological teaching aids. As one of the prospective teachers explained:

There is not much point in bringing a new literary text into the classroom context if it cannot be thoroughly processed and placed in the students’ system of knowledge. If students had to read a popular youth novel as part of their set reading list, they would certainly be happy about it and read it (though they would read it anyways). But then is there time and room for discussing it in literature class? About which topics? How? Answering these questions is not impossible; yet doing so requires tremendous efforts in today’s teaching context from educators in order to prepare with appropriate lesson plans and worksheets, while at the same time making a not-too-large detour from the original syllabus.

Furthermore, a few participants also emphasized the necessity of a change on system-level. Breaking away from the chronological teaching of literature and the option to discuss the literary texts in topical units instead could be one possible solution. This would make it easier to fit literary works into the curriculum that are closer to the students’ taste. Some of the prospective teachers suggested that the practice of assigning fixed reading lists according to school grades should be done away with; what is more, there should not be a clear-cut dividing line between literary works to be taught in the elementary and secondary school either, thus providing flexibility and an easier transition between the readings (e.g. the novel “*A kőszívű ember fiai*” [*The Heartless Man’s Sons*] by Mór Jókai, which is currently part of the elementary school curriculum, could be transferred to secondary school level).

There was a general agreement among the participants that modifications on this level would necessitate the transformation of the current base and framework curriculum. As one of the interviewees summed up:

For a really effective solution, education policy decision makers should not turn a deaf ear to educators and show more openness toward suggestions to revise the old reading lists. They should make up their mind and decide what the main goal is: to help students learn to love reading or force the traditional old reading lists upon them, even at the price of students’ learning to hate literature.

There also came up, however, the issue of what measures educators can take in order to renew the contents of literature teaching within the frame of the current

system; what is the range of their personal freedom in the field of modifications. Beside the concept of expanding the current reading lists in use with works of contemporary and popular literature, another possibility was to experiment with various different literature teaching models. One of the participants highlighted the advantages of the reader-centered approach to literature teaching, which places the reader into the focus of the interpretation, with the endeavor to turn the text into a personal matter and thus create through diverse connecting points the potential of a deeper involvement and identification for the recipient (Pethőné Nagy 2007). According to the interviewee:

As teachers, we cannot ignore the fact that the students sitting in front of us are adolescents, not adult readers. We have to take the psychological characteristics of adolescents into consideration (e.g. their desire to get to know themselves, their self-centeredness, as well as their enhanced interest for their inner world) and choose texts for them that offer the potential to identify themselves with. We need to feel at home in the realm of contemporary youth literature.

Most participants agreed that the paramount reason for expanding the school literary canon with popular works standing closer to the students is to help them learn to love reading:

Before overwhelming the students with texts that caused difficulties even for us to read back then at school, we should keep in mind to make them learn to enjoy reading. The prerequisite for literary intelligence is the joy of reading. Without vivid reading experiences of their own, all we are trying to teach them is just a bunch of dry facts, which they will most probably forget right away, once they leave school. Literature teaches you about life. And the teacher's job is to help them find the literary works that address them and provide them something special.

As a response to the question about the specific texts they are planning to include in their personal reading list in class, the interviewees came up with multiple literary works from contemporary pop culture. These were characteristically popular books, mainly novels, published in recent years. There was a conspicuously high ratio of science-fiction books (e.g. J. R. R. Tolkien: *The Lord of the Rings*-series, C. S. Lewis: *The Chronicles of Narnia*-series, J. K. Rowling: *Harry Potter*-series, Lois Lowry: *The Giver*, Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games*-series), which was justified by the fact that the participants consider this genre as missing from the school literature classes. There are a number of works in the literary canon where the plot takes place in the past; yet, one can hardly find any texts about the imaginary world of the future. They generally agreed on the point that science-fiction literature would definitely deserve a spot in literature teaching. As one explanation goes:

In the current literary canon, there is hardly any room for texts about imaginary worlds. Students have very few opportunities to encounter literary pieces in which the fictional elements are not part of a fairy tale frame. Speaking from experience, the fantasy world of science fiction books can offer a shelter, breaking you away from everyday life a little bit and providing entertainment. These works may also have a similar moral message as the generally accepted, traditional literary texts on the school reading list.

The second group of works in question is rather from the circle of present-day youth literature dealing with everyday experiences of the students (e.g. Leiner Laura: *Szent Johanna Gimi [The St. Joan High School]*, James Lecesne: *Trevor*, Vámos Miklós: *Kisfiúk és Nagyfiúk [Little Boys and Big Boys]*, Kalapos Éva: *Masza [The Dollop]*, Jeanne Teller: *Intet [Nothing]*). In the case of these works, the prospective teachers of literature highlighted the processing of topics that happen to the children on an everyday basis; issues the young readers experience themselves, are excited or scared about. This feature of the works makes it easier for them to empathize with the characters and awakens the impression that the story is also for them and about them.

Based on the above-mentioned works, it becomes obvious that what is mostly missing from the public school education is literary pieces standing close to the students. They undoubtedly sense a continuously growing gap between the world inside and outside the school, and a strong urge to change this above practice in their future careers in the field of Pedagogy. The interviewees had, however, differing views on how to carry out these changes. The majority represented the opinion that they would be able to individually make an effort out of their own strengths in bringing their class closer to literature and to the love of reading. A few reckoned, though, that a real shift can take place only as a consequence of modifications on the system-level, as the current amount and fixed nature of the literature curriculum make individual innovation over the course of the pedagogical work nearly impossible. As prospective teachers, they are aware of their own personal responsibility; concerning their professional opportunities and freedom, however, they represent differing views. As a further confirmation for research results from earlier years, we can conclude that the future literary educators in Hungary also acknowledge the potential problems concerning their subject, emphasize the need for change, and already have plans and ideas for turning these efforts for change into reality; yet, they are unsure about its exact implementation.

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