

READING: BETWEEN COMPULSORY READING AND FREE CHOICE

**– On the social and individual aspect of
first literature classes –**

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ABSTRACT: *Education is the most important activity for the development of a society, the identity and survival of a certain nation. Mother tongue and literature is, in pre-university education, in all education systems, the most important subject. This subject contributes to acquiring the reading habit, it fosters consistency, cultivates taste, develops empathy. Therefore, the organisation of the curriculum for this subject, apart from its narrow specialist meaning, has a wider social significance. The most important segment of teaching mother tongue and literature is reading, which highlights the importance of how much reading students do and what they read, as well as the possibility of their participation in selecting reading materials. This paper deals first with compulsory and optional (additional) literary texts – those which are prescribed curriculum and those which are part of the author's free choice in junior textbooks regarding their availability in the textbooks, and subsequently, it deals with the real use of optional texts in class, as well as the criteria applied when selecting these texts. In this paper, by conducting a survey involving 255 junior teachers, it was examined: a) to what extent teachers rely on the texts that the authors of junior textbooks select for optional reading; b) which criteria they consider to be the most important while they choose additional texts for reading in class; c) which are the main features of the texts they select in the first place. For the purpose of creating a questionnaire, the curriculum for junior classes was analysed, and so was the content of all the approved reading textbooks for this age in the school year 2017/2018. The results of the survey show that junior teachers use the offered additional texts in junior textbooks to a large degree, that the most important criteria when choosing the additional texts are the students' reception, their interests and sensibilities. The least important criteria are those related to the teacher's reading taste and interpretative skills, or his or her competence to present a text in an adequate way in class, which*

suggests that teachers erroneously exclude themselves as important factors in the selection of texts. When introducing texts independently, teachers have similar expectations to those regarding the texts which are the prescribed curriculum.

KEY WORDS: *education; society; teacher; teaching of literature; school curriculum; the reading list; textbook; additional texts; free choice;*

Preliminary considerations

Native language and literature teaching has a wider social significance. It strengthens the national and cultural identity of students by providing knowledge of their own literature and culture, as well as the literature and culture of other nations. Native language and literature classes help students to develop love towards reading, to discern what is beautiful and valuable, to acquire taste. Reading requires time, consistency and dedication, and nurturing these characteristics is a basis for all further learning. Through reading of high literary value texts and through discussions about them in class, critical thinking is developed, because students need to have opinions regarding the actions and personal traits of the characters and different events in the text. It is of major importance that literature should develop a strong feeling of empathy in children by requiring readers to see things from another's point of view and understand those characters' most diverse personality traits and actions. "Art fosters judgement and sensibility, and these could and should be prominent in the choices that citizens make. This applies to a certain extent to all forms of art. Music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture have all played their role in developing our ability to understand people that surround us. But in a curriculum that is supposed to foster citizenship 'of the world', literature especially provides immense contribution because it depicts specific circumstances and problems of different people" (Nussbaum 2012: 248).²

In teaching literature, namely, in reading high value literary texts in school, both teachers' and students' possibility to make free choices is very important. By selecting their reading material, students develop their personalities and, more importantly, increase the awareness of their own impact on the teaching process. The awareness of having a direct impact on one's own education enhances their sense of dignity and responsibility,

² On the social importance of literature and its role in strengthening a sense of sensitivity and empathy see more in: Nussbaum, Martha (2012). *Cultivating humanity: A Classical Defence of Liberal Education Reform* *Reč*, 82 (28), 247–276. (translated by Slobodanka Glišić)

which has an immeasurable social impact. One of the most important factors in cultivating young readers is, besides the compulsory reading list which is the prescribed curriculum, to provide students and their teachers with the possibility to read and analyse the works of their own choice. The possibility of making a free choice of reading material is of paramount importance, which the researches and opinions of many researchers confirm (Clark and Rumbold 2006; Gambrell 1996; Krashen 1993; Sanacore 1999). It has been demonstrated there is a positive link between a free choice and the affective aspects of reading, such as motivation (Moss and Hendershot 2002; Schrav et al. 1998) or the connection between accomplishment and interesting reading material (Hunt 1970/1997). The role of a teacher in a student's selection process could be crucial (Johns and VanLeirsburg 1994: 96), while a teacher's possibility to make a free choice depends largely on the freedom envisaged by the curriculum and the texts available in junior textbooks. According to some previous researches, junior teachers are inclined to use optional texts in class (Floverday and Schrav 2000), especially those already provided by the textbook authors, which our research will also confirm.

The primary school curriculum that is currently in use in the Republic of Serbia regarding the Serbian language for junior grades of primary school (NP 2004; NP 2005; NP 2006) does not disregard the possibility of a free choice of literature on the part of teachers and students alike.³ The prescribed curriculum includes literature with two types of texts: compulsory (specifically named and divided into literary genres – lyrical, epic and drama) and optional texts comprising two types: guided optional and free choice optional texts. Guided optional texts are those prescribed in accordance with the curriculum and genre or authorship (e.g. “A selection of folk lyrical poems” or “Selected poetry of Duško Radović”), while there is no concrete guidance with regard to free choice texts (complementary or supplementary) in the curriculum, apart from the instructions to carry out the obligation to include a certain number of such texts: *a minimum of two, and a maximum of four* (third grade), i.e. *a minimum of three, a maximum of five* (fourth grade).

In the case of *a free choice*, teachers choose, but their *freedom* is conditioned: first by their knowledge and reading taste, the class composition and the students' reading experience, as well as the number of classes remaining after they finish with compulsory literature and all the other topics related to language teaching. From the students' perspective, this freedom is different: teachers may and should consult them, but after they make a

³ New curricula, for first and second grade of primary school, as well as fifth and sixth, which are still being drafted, should reinforce such aspects of selection.

choice, the works they have chosen become compulsory. However, the possibility of the students choosing their reading material with their teachers should not be underestimated, because it gives them a sense of freedom and self-respect. Despite the abovementioned and other limitations, optional texts that are analysed in class serve as an incentive for searching for further reading material and gaining knowledge of new literary works. It provides a nice opportunity for some significant works which have not been included in the curriculum, but also for valuable, modern, still not canonised literature, for adjusting the offered works to the students' sensibility, and even for possible experiments.

Teachers should be encouraged through various strategies to deal with additional texts in class, first of all to cultivate the students' reading for pleasure. Educational strategies should raise the awareness of teachers as regards the reasons for reading and why reading is so vital for children (Hodges 2010). Through optional texts, teachers, as well as the authors of textbooks, complement or correct the prescribed curriculum, discover the students' interests and, in the most auspicious circumstances, show that classical and contemporary works shed a new light upon one another and give an added meaning. We could also use here the term "balanced literacy approach", which is also important in teaching, according to which a literary text is by no means at the centre of teaching, but also, during the course of selecting optional texts and concerning their connection with the compulsory ones, a great deal of attention is dedicated to the functional connection between all the segments of language and literature teaching (Krashen 1993; Purcell 2001): to a better connection between teaching literature and grammar, to establishing a connection between teaching literature and the students' in-class essay exams (there are many teachers who, during primary school education, never give a single task requiring the interpretation of a literary work or some of its characteristics), familiarising students with figures of speech, as well as phraseologisms which are very suitable for presenting a common denominator for everyday speech, grammar, stylistics and literature.

Applying proper criteria for selecting additional texts contributes to a more varied selection of texts in the syllabus. Diversity of genres and topics, as well as a balanced number of texts from different periods is very important from the earliest school age, ever since the period of literacy and formation of young readers, because they enable them to develop a better perspective of literature and react more adequately to both the form and content of a text (see: But and Svorc 2009: 24).

Adhering to the ratio between compulsory and optional texts, our curriculum suggests texts from the literary canon but, simultaneously, it gives the authors of textbooks and teachers freedom to select works that have

not been canonised yet. That intersection of compulsory and optional texts raises several questions, which is the core subject of our research. It has to be pointed out that this seemingly irrelevant question proves to be very important, because it reflects, to a larger or smaller extent, all the questions related to the literature syllabus – ranging from the school curriculum, through the form and method of teaching practice, to fostering reading habits in the students.

In this paper we focused our attention on certain aspects of the availability of optional texts in the curriculum. The first aspect deals with the number of compulsory and optional texts in junior textbooks. Currently, the ratio is decidedly in favour of compulsory texts, but it is still inconclusive as to what would happen if the ratio were higher in favour of optional texts. The second aspect refers to the methods of choosing these texts for teaching practice and textbooks, as well as the reliance of junior teachers on the already existing selections provided by the authors of junior textbooks. The third aspect refers to the knowledge, willingness and determination of teachers themselves to research a wide field of literature and select specific texts.⁴ If we take into account the inevitable variety and limitations of a junior teacher's knowledge (who teaches five, six or more subjects), then the importance of careful consideration and research regarding the prominence and type of optional texts in the curriculum and teaching practice is even more significant. This is reinforced by the researches (Cremin et al. 2008) conducted in some more developed education systems, in which strategies for improving teacher knowledge in this area were offered and implemented (O'Sullivan and McGonigle 2010).

The efforts aimed at increasing teacher knowledge and competence become even more valuable taking into consideration the increasing number of optional texts in junior textbooks, the textbooks which serve as a primary source of texts for language and literature teaching practice. Possible selection criteria and considerations concerning the functional purpose of

⁴ The literature curriculum for children and youth at the Teacher Education Faculty in Belgrade was modernised eight years ago by the inclusion of numerous new works by national and foreign authors: Dragomir Đorđević, Vladimir Andrić, Vesna Aleksić, Cornelia Funke, Ian McEwan, Ray Bradbury... We believe that some of these works have been included in the prescribed curriculum for 5th to 8th grade of primary school due to this influence. Nevertheless, this was done by university professors and literature experts whose professional obligation requires following literature developments. Are teachers equally capable of doing it in the same manner, and are we not setting the requirements too high for them?

these texts were the starting point of our research. Subsequently, our focus shifted towards the considerations of the teachers themselves on these issues.

Research methodology

The subject of our research comprises teachers' attitudes to optional texts and their use in teaching practice. For this purpose, we have composed a questionnaire containing four questions which coincide with the research goals:

1) to establish the utility of optional texts from junior textbooks in teaching practice;

2) to observe the criteria the teachers apply when they select additional texts and the ranking criteria;

3) to determine the presence of a literary genre in the selection.

By applying the content analysis technique to textbooks for 1st to 4th grade of primary school, we came across the content lists of optional texts in them and the possible criteria applied during the selection process. Our source were the textbooks for the school year 2017/2018 approved by the Ministry of Education. We perused thirty-three textbooks by nine publishing houses: The Institute for Textbook Publishing, Epoha, Eduka, Klett, Kreativni centar, Novi Logos, Nova škola, BIGZ and Innovation Joksimović.⁵

To achieve the abovementioned goal (1) and in order to make the sample, as well as the entire research relevant, we opted for one publishing house and the optional texts in its junior textbooks. This was important so

⁵ The results we obtained will be, on account of their scope, the subject of another paper, but here it is worth mentioning only two to three details. First, in several approved junior textbooks not all the curriculum prescribed texts are included. Furthermore, the number of optional texts and the ratio between optional and compulsory texts varies from one publishing house to another, from one grade to another, and to such an extent that it poses a difficulty to find any consistency in that fluctuation, or discern a clear concept on the part of the author of the textbook or the publisher, even in the case of the same author for different age groups. The number of additional texts in textbooks range from 28 (in one textbook for 3rd grade) to 1 (a textbook for 4th grade). In the case of one publishing house, the largest number of optional texts are in 1st grade, and then the numbers gradually diminish. In the case of another, the situation was reverse, and when it comes to all the others, out of eight of the approved ones, there are no discernible criteria. Not a single textbook contains specifically marked optional texts. The author is not obliged to do so, but it would be very useful for teachers, especially those that use the textbook as a substitute for the curriculum. The textbook by no means limits the teacher in choosing additional texts for teaching, but in practice, teachers do not tend to go beyond the given framework considerably, which will be confirmed by the results in this paper.

that we could be sure that the teachers-respondents were familiar with the concrete optional texts, i.e. that they distinguish them from those which are curriculum prescribed. We selected the textbooks published by Klett for 3rd and 4th grade because of the presence of a large number of optional texts in them and a widespread use of these textbooks in primary schools in the Republic of Serbia. The sample of respondents is limited to the teachers who use or used these junior textbooks in their teaching practice.

As a research instrument, a closed-ended type of survey questions was used, which was supposed to guide the teachers towards concrete optional texts, and then towards ranking the criteria for choosing texts and genres. The survey sample included teachers from primary schools in Serbia, i.e. 255 teachers from 28 primary schools from 12 administrative districts.

Descriptive and analytical statistics methods were used in this paper. Among the descriptive statistics measures for numerical data, the following were used: the central tendency measures (arithmetic mean, median, mode) and variability measures (standard deviation, interval variations), while absolute values and percentages were used for describing attribute data. As regards analytical statistics methods, the ones for investigating the importance of connectedness were used, namely, Spearman's Rank correlation coefficient. The probability value lower than 0.05 was considered statistically significant. The obtained data from the survey questionnaire were processed by the package IBM SPSS 24 Statistics.

Research results and discussion

The utility of optional texts from textbooks in teaching. In the first question, in the table with listed optional texts from the textbooks published by Klett for 3rd and 4th grade, the respondents marked the texts they used in the current school year or before. The table for 3rd grade contained twenty-eight text titles and the authors' names, while there were fourteen of them in the table for 4th grade.⁶ The teachers who opted for these textbooks had the overall number of forty-two additional texts at their disposal in two grades. We notice that the number of texts in these grades is not equal and the principle of sequence is missing. The reasons for this discrepancy, which is

⁶ All the texts which had a clearly marked author or which belonged to folk literature were listed. The extracts and shorter texts which were included in the textbook as parts of a methodological apparatus were not subject to analysis. Within the framework of the methodological apparatus of several textbooks, there are numerous texts without marked authorship, and it could be inferred on the basis of their nature that they are somewhat freer, but very successful stylistic endeavours carried out by the textbooks' authors themselves based on one or several sources. Some of these texts are little gems of encyclopaedic nature.

common in textbooks, may be found in the scope of the prescribed curriculum: “The textbooks’ authors *suffer* under the strain of so many compulsory texts. Some of those texts do not possess such value and significance for the national culture to be compulsory” [Mrkalj and Plut 2007: 56]. However, it may be justified to say that such a huge difference in the number of additional texts, not only in the abovementioned textbooks but in general, indicates there is a lack of reliable criteria or any other kind of proper guidance regarding their selection. Certainly, a lot depends on the very authors of the textbooks, but we cannot put the blame on them if the curriculum offers just general guidelines.

By marking the optional texts in the tables and a statistical analysis of the answers, a quantifiable result about their use in teaching was obtained.

Table 1. The most frequently and the least frequently analysed texts in the chosen grades

		Third grade			Fourth grade		
		text title	frequency	percentage	text title	frequency	percentage
most frequently selected		“Lion and Bull”, Dositej	207	86%	The Poetry of M. Danojlić	184	78%
		Short Folk Creations	195	81%	“Cat”, N.Tesla	180	77%
		“The Giant and the Tailor”, The Brothers Grimm	195	81%	Lyric folk songs	175	74%
		The Poetry of D. Radović	193	80%	<i>Sanja</i> , M. Kapor	165	70%
		Traditional Folk Lyric Songs	187	78%	“I Support Violeta”, N.Popadić	161	68%
		“Snow Is Falling”, V. Bunjac	164	68%	“Lullaby for D”, P. Zubac	156	66%
		“Trinkets”, V. Andrić	162	67%	“At the Request of the Audience”, M. Odalović	154	65%
		“Grey”, S. V. Janković	160	66%	“The Moon Story”, G. Vitez	149	63%
		“What Is the Heart Used for”, N. Popadić	150	62%	“A Goldfish”, D.Trifunović	147	62%
		“Pegasus”, old Greek story	147	61%	“When Grandpa Does Not Know How to Tell Stories”, Đ. Rodari	136	58%
Least frequently selected		<i>Agi and Ema</i> , I.Kolarov	70	29%	“Morning on the Moon”, H.G. Wells	125	53%
		“A Collection of Stamps”, K. Čapek	67	28%	“A Shining Example”, V. Stojiljković	123	52%
		“When I Come to the White World”, D. Brajković	57	24%	“A Legend about a Boy from New York”, D.	106	45%

The results analysis shows that the teachers are willing to use additional texts in teaching and that they often rely on the authors' selections in the textbooks, because it is evident that there is a high number of these texts used. This can be inferred after taking into consideration space for the analysis of additional texts which the annual teacher syllabus enables. After all these topics and teaching units from various language and literature aspects which, according to the curriculum, have to be included in monthly and annual programmes, as well as the exact number of lessons dedicated to them, there is little room left for additional selections of teachers and students. This is why the quantitative instruction is provided for third and fourth grade: *from two to four*, or *from three to five*, which, of course, could be understood within this framework. From the previous table, we can see that the number of texts with a high percentage of usage surpass this instruction. Taking all this into account, it is completely justified to take teachers as respondents, because their role is crucial in determining the qualitative-quantitative attitude to optional texts: the teacher is the one who selects.

We can see that the so-called guided optional texts are most used (from 80% to 74%), regardless of genre characteristics and student interests. Actually, many criteria cease to apply when it comes to the guided programme requirement. This shows that a guided choice has a compulsory status, because freedom of choice is within the limited space of the guided programme instruction: traditional lyric poems, selected poems by Dušan Radović (3rd grade), as well as the selection of poems by Milovan Đanajlić (4th grade) are guided by the basic school document. It is interesting that in 4th grade a selection of folk lyric poetry is made (the programme does not prescribe guided additional selection for this age, but is a completely free choice of the textbook's author, which is used in class to a great extent (as high as 74%).⁷ Not denying the aesthetic value of folk lyric poetry, and taking into account the problems of the reception of this genre and (non) presence of some other genres at some junior school grades levels, it is illogical that certain texts similar in genre are repeated, whereas some are completely excluded from the textbooks. Given that short folk creations are frequently read and interpreted as optional texts (in third grade 81% of the interviewed teachers use them), we can conclude that the purpose of this choice is to establish the position of a genre within the system of a rich genre classification of folk literature.

⁷ In this case, the selection of lyric poetry in fourth grade included new types of poems compared to those given in third grade.

At the very top of the most frequently used texts of free choice, there are some types of literature very close to the students' interests in terms of topics which also have a very prominent didactic-pedagogical function (the fable "The Lion and the Bull" and the fairy tale "The Giant and the Tailor" in third grade, the extract from The Stories about the Childhood of Nikola Tesla – "Cat", in fourth grade).⁸ A well-known author and a school writer are frequently the reasons which are considered valid for the teaching purpose. Even though the presence of the author in optional texts may be only temporary and influenced by certain social circumstances, in this case it has to do with purely literary criteria and values of the texts themselves (e.g. "Grey" by Svetlana Velmar Janković, third grade; "Sanja" by Momo Kapor and "Cat" by Nikola Tesla, 4th grade). It is absolutely possible to assume that these works were selected on account of the authors' significance, but, on the other hand, also because of a wider cultural (literary and scientific) context they imply. That context requires that the teacher should make an additional effort for a proper interpretation, and it raises the question of whether the focus should be on the extract itself or the entire work.⁹

The interviewed teachers frequently opt for the texts which are age appropriate to the students in terms of topics, and especially for those which enable the identification of the students with the heroes when it comes to the first person narrative, as well as for texts which have a distinct pedagogical function or a humorous tone ("Trinkets" by Vladimir Andrić, "What Is the Heart Used for" and "I Support Violeta" by Nedeljko Popadić, "The Lullaby for D." by Pero Zubac). All the aforementioned works belong to lyrical poetry, which does not completely correspond to the likability of the lyrical

⁸ It is easy to notice the correlation between the results in Table 1 and in Table 3 which is presented later in this paper, and in which genres are ranked, and where we see that teachers are most inclined to select fairy tales, fables and stories (short stories) as optional texts.

Furthermore, in the selection of these genres the influence of the prescribed curriculum is irrefutable, which is also reflected in the fact that, even with regard to optional texts, teachers are more inclined to select the genres which are most widespread in the curriculum such as fairy tales, fables, stories, and are considerably less inclined to opt for those that are *marginal* in the curriculum, irrespective of the students' familiarity with some features in them (the old Greek story "Pegasus" in third grade, "The Moon Story" by Grigor Vitez in fourth grade etc.).

⁹ Here we can also note that it is unusual, and for a young reader unnecessary, to analyse one part of a story in one grade (entitled by the author of the textbook as "Grey") which is in the next grade a part of the compulsory curriculum (under the original title "Gold Lamb" by Svetlana Velmar Janković). This could briefly remind one of the concentric circle principle regarding the organization of teaching material, but in teaching literature it is completely impractical to make several small texts out of one literary text.

genre (see Table 3). However, it could be argued that some of the characteristics of this type of lyrical poetry (lexical familiarity, rhythm, regularity of the rhyme, transparent layers of ideas for the reception of a text) boost its presence. Such lyrical poems are generally more suitable for interpretation than poems written in free verse, with no rhyme, with a narrative tone and figurative meanings, rich with stylistic devices, poetic images and motifs.

Texts which could be instrumental in teaching as a complement to a certain theoretical literary notion are of particular value (Janićijević 2016). The text “Snow Is Falling” by Vladimir Bunjc (68% use) is a good example for teaching *description*. A similar function is fulfilled by texts whose titles and content concentrate on a genre and require that the knowledge of literary theory should be increased. Such texts in 4th grade are “The Lullaby for D.” by Pero Zubac (66%), which is not a typical lullaby, and the poem “The Moon Story” by Grigor Vitez (63%). It transpires that in both grades the least used are the extracts from novels and collections of stories (compare grades in Table 1). Moreover, popular contemporary children’s writers (*Agi and Ema*, by Igor Kolarov) do not have a clearly established place in reading classes in junior grades.

At the top of the optional texts which were most frequently used in 3rd grade, there are short artistic texts, but it is interesting that almost at the same level there are folk creations and works of modern (contemporary) poetry. Although it may be assumed that the texts were primarily selected according to their complexity, we are of the opinion that such a selection contributes to a large extent to the development of a child’s literary sensitivity. Similar results were obtained in 4th grade. The texts are shorter, but diverse in terms of themes: from the poetry of Milovan Danojlić (curriculum guided) and lyrical folk songs to extracts from the works by Nikola Tesla *A Childhood Story* and the novel *Sanja* by Momo Kapor. It is interesting that the percentage of the most frequently used texts in both grades ranges from 86 to 70. It can be assumed that this selection was influenced, apart from the teacher’s sensibility, by the experience from the previous school years, agreements with colleagues and professional seminars.

The selection criteria for additional texts. In the questionnaire, we offered to the teachers eight possible criteria for the selection of additional texts, to rank them in order of importance from 1 to 8, where 1 would be the most important and 8 the least important criterion in their opinion when selecting texts:

1) a thematic link between the text and the other curriculum prescribed texts;

- 2) a text as an illustrative example for introducing a theoretical-literary notion;
- 3) a text whose topic is close to the students' interests, age and ability to understand;
- 4) several texts by one author, which contributes to a better understanding of the poetic features of his or her work;
- 5) a teacher's personal affinities and knowledge about the selected text;
- 6) the availability of other sources related to the selected text (preparations, handbooks, scientific, critical and methodological literature);
- 7) a distinct pedagogical function, and
- 8) the fact that the text belongs to a specific genre.¹⁰

For criteria 2, 4 and 7, it may be said that they represent one of the functions of a text in teaching. The criteria 1 and 8 relate to the nature of the text, its content (thematic -1) and formal (related to a genre - 8) characteristics. Criterion 3 refers to the student and his or her characteristics, while criteria 5 and 6 imply that the teacher's role is demanding and specific. Each of the offered criteria is based on some element of the teaching process: the text, the student, the teacher, the compulsory curriculum.

Table 2. The selection criteria for optional texts

criteria	1. thematic link	2. theoretical- literary notion	3. interests and age of the students	4. texts by one author	5. teacher's affinities	6. availability of sources	7. pedagogical function	8. genre
number of respondents	243	243	244	245	243	243	243	246
missing data	12	12	11	10	12	12	12	9
arithmetic mean	2,81	4,21	2,61	5,98	5,88	6,05	3,19	5,10
median	2,00	4,00	2,00	6,00	6,00	7,00	3,00	5,00
mode	1	3	1	7	8	8	2	5
standard deviation	2,039	1,998	1,731	1,643	2,006	1,907	1,782	1,628
variance interval	1-8	1-8	1-8	1-8	1-8	1-8	1-8	1-8

In Table 2, descriptive statistical parameters were shown regarding the criteria the teachers are guided by when choosing optional texts. The

¹⁰ This refers to the assumed most dominant and superimposed criteria which could be taken into consideration on the part of the person selecting a text for the purpose of teaching literature. Possible other criteria may be recognized as belonging to some of the aforementioned ones.

highest ranking ones are: 1) a thematic link between the given text and the other texts which are curriculum prescribed, 3) the text whose topic is close to the students' interests, their age and ability to understand and 7) a distinct pedagogical function of the text. These criteria clearly place the students at the centre and presuppose that the text corresponds to their assumed horizon of expectation. Even though we can rely to a large extent on the teachers' opinion about what kind of literary texts the students read and understand more easily, or rather to which texts they respond more actively while they are being analysed in class, if the stated criteria are dominant, there is a real possibility that those texts the students are only marginally interested in regarding their topics, ideas and style will almost never be chosen as additional texts.

Thus the students' reading experience remains within the boundaries of the teacher's preconceived ideas and convictions concerning what the students can relate to. It is the optional texts that can broaden the students' sensitivity towards various literary and non-literary texts which the students could not discover in the compulsory curriculum. Furthermore, additional selections of the authors of textbooks and teachers offer the possibility to include more texts from contemporary literature (*A Piknik za Irmu* 2017).

Criteria 2, a text as an illustration for introducing a literary-theoretical notion, and 8, the text belonging to a certain genre, were estimated as next in order of importance. These criteria are an inherent part of the text, while the function of a text (in teaching), which stems from the selection of texts, is related to educational, i.e. primary teaching tasks. By such a selection of texts, the teacher reinforces the knowledge of the notions prescribed in the curriculum or of the characteristics of a certain literary genre. Criteria 2 and 8 are still highly ranked, which justifies the research of a genre criterion whose results were presented in Table 3. A high-ranking position of the criteria dealing with the knowledge of literature suggests that the teachers, by these additional texts, make predictions regarding the texts of a compulsory curriculum, i.e. that they expect the texts they can introduce independently to fulfil requirements similar to the ones from the prescribed curriculum.

One of the possible interpretations may be that even the texts included in the compulsory curriculum do not illustrate sufficiently a certain literary-theoretical notion, or that it is necessary to demonstrate to the students, through a larger number of texts, how certain literary-theoretical notions function, either on an implicit level of adopting the notion or explicitly. The function affirmed by criteria 2 and 8 certainly does not have the primary role of additional texts in teaching. Neither would they have been expected to be so highly ranked, however, the result is interesting for several reasons: the teachers obviously have an awareness of a need for clearer examples for a certain notion which is being introduced or practiced,

and they recognize the fact that compulsory literature often fails to recognize the terms which should be illustrated (Janićijević 2016).

Criterion 4, several texts by one author, which contributes to a better understanding of the poetic characteristics of his or her work – is ranked less favourably. This criterion is only partly close to the first one, it does not encompass it completely, and this is the reason why it is separated in this research. It is evident that in the current curriculum this criterion most frequently becomes the most prominent one in guided optional texts (e.g. a selection of the poetry of Ljubivoje Ršumović, Dušan Radović, a selection of Andersen's fairy tales).

The least important criteria, according to the respondents, are those which place the teacher at the centre and his or her reading taste and interpretative skills and competence to analyse a literary text properly in the classroom. These criteria are 5, personal affinities and the teacher's knowledge about the additional text, and 6, the availability of other sources concerning the selected text (preparations, handbooks, scientific, critical and methodological literature). It is obvious that the teachers do not consider such criteria very important for the interpretation of a literary text in class.¹¹ In our research results, the status of criterion 6 corresponds to the conclusions of the other researches: "The data obtained on a sample of primary school students of higher grades, suggest that the teachers rarely use additional sources of information such as books, magazines, encyclopaedia or the Internet. More precisely, only 10% of the students state that their teachers use additional sources in the classroom (Krnjajić et al. 2011: 268–269, according to: Pešić and Stepanović 2004).

Genre identification of optional texts. For the purpose of the realisation of the last goal of the research, in the formulation of the fourth question we singled out seven literary forms which the teachers ranked from 1 to 7 on the basis of their own choice, so that 1 represents the genre they most frequently chosen among the additional texts, whereas 7 stands for the ones most rarely chosen.¹²

¹¹ On the other hand, we dare say that this is the reason why the problems in teaching literature frequently arise due to the abovementioned being ranked among the two lowest criteria. A demanding literary text as regards interpretation is most frequently of high aesthetic and intellectual value. Prioritising students in teaching is not only carried out by the teacher paying attention to the criteria related to the students' characteristics, but is also done by the teacher paying attention to his or her own capabilities, guiding the students towards the goals arising from the inherent nature of the text.

¹² By compiling the questionnaire in this research, we included the genres which are part of the compulsory curriculum. In order for our research to be economical, we pointed out the current and dominant genres in the curriculum. It is certainly worth

As was the case regarding the previous question, the descriptive statistical parameters were shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Genre selection

genre	fairy tale	story/short story	fable	lyrical poem	epic poem	extract from a novel	science fiction work
number of respondents	244	244	244	245	244	244	245
missing data	11	11	11	10	11	11	10
arithmetic mean	2,69	2,54	3,20	4,24	5,32	4,24	5,67
median	2,00	2,00	3,00	4,00	6,00	5,00	7,00
mode	1	1	2	4	6	6	7
standard deviation	1,608	1,691	1,482	1,670	1,441	1,766	1,835
variance interval	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-7

The most frequently chosen genres, unsurprisingly, were the fairy tale, the story (the short story) and the fable. Considerably less frequently chosen genres, whose frequency was described as *sometimes* or *very rarely*, are epic poems, lyrical poems and extracts from novels. Science fiction works were the most rarely chosen genre. Arguably, there is a cause for concern that the genres described as *very rarely* and *the most rarely* used may mean a complete absence of those genres from teaching literature in the optional corpus.

The most favoured genres – fairy tales and fables – in the compulsory curriculum, as well as in the independent choice of teachers, gain a privileged position. It is assumed that the students' familiarity with these genres facilitates their understanding, which is a very important initial motive for the teacher (see Table 2) to choose a text. Between these two genres, there is the story/ the short story, which supports the opinion that fabularity, narration and other characteristics of a narrative are more amenable to students. All three genres (the fairy tale, the fable, the short story), by their genesis, include folk and authorial literature, national and foreign literature, which all increase the corpus of texts to make a selection from. If we compare these results to some other researches (Kovačević Gavrilović and Stevović 2007: 134–147; Mikkonen and Vakkari 2016), there is a consensus regarding the teacher's ability to gauge the students' sensibility, which can certainly be a subject for further analysis.

The students' reception of a lyrical poem, i.e. its teaching interpretation, is made harder by the complexity and multi-layered meanings

considering, for example, whether ancient Greek myths, epic-lyrical forms etc. should find their place in the teaching practice.

of a poetic expression, the richness of thematic-motif layers, the variety of stylistic approaches and an indirect impact of the audio aspect of a poem. As regards an epic poem, it also requires an additional effort, first because of the length of its form, archaisms and less familiar words, the necessary literary and historical localization, the social and ethical image of the epic world, so that the students must wade through different cultural layers. The texts which belong to the most rarely chosen genres are also demanding in terms of the class time management. An extract is not considered to be an adequate substitute for a novel: the question is raised concerning which extract to choose, how to localize it and reach its aesthetic values. The results suggest that optional texts, according to the teachers, should not be extensive. Since there are no novels in the current compulsory literature, at least it is not compulsory to read whole works (which is essentially the consequence of doing away with extensive reading, Mrkalj 2017), it is understandable why an extract from a novel as an optional text has such a status from the teacher's perspective. A science fiction work is a novelty in the national curriculum and therefore it represents an insufficiently acknowledged genre.¹³

The results show that the teacher, when choosing genres, uses the criteria he or she ranked in the previous table, and according to the same or similar principle of importance. The selection of a fairy tale, a fable or a story corresponds to high value criteria such as a thematic link, a pedagogical function, genre characteristics and the introduction of a literary-theoretical notion, the suitability of a genre to the students' age (see Tables 2 and 3). These genres are, regardless of all differences, didactic, thematically linked with the already compulsory texts, and are essential when it comes to acquiring basic knowledge of theory of literature. The students discover these texts very early, so it is assumed that they are very good for students in junior grades. On the other hand, the results show that the bottom levels of both tables correspond to each other: as the teacher, while choosing the criteria for making a selection of additional texts, valued the criteria related to his or her role less, so did he or she value less the genres that require more engagement on the part of the teacher. For instance, in order to analyse an epic poem, an extract from a novel or a science fiction work, a wider knowledge of concrete literary or historical facts is needed, as well as referring the student to the context, which gives rise to a certain correlation.

¹³ It is important to emphasise that we examined the suitability of a genre within the framework of additional texts in teaching. Some other research could show the interests, affinities, the horizon of expectations regarding certain genres, themes, motifs etc. in students nowadays.

Furthermore, during the course of the interpretation of a lyrical poem, the student is most frequently unable to grasp all its layers independently. That is why during text selection the genres which enable the students more independent reading and interpretation are more “amenable”. Nevertheless, in our view in order to form a young reader it is important to know and understand a large number of genres.

While comparing the years of work experience (i.e. age) of the teacher to the selection of a genre, in certain places statistically relevant data were obtained.

Table 4. The ratio between the length of work experience and selection of a genre

genre	statistical parameter	years of work experience	age
fairy tale	correlation coefficient	.206	.179
	significance (p)	0.001	0.005
fable	correlation coefficient	.198	.179
	significance (p)	0.002	0.005
epic poem	correlation coefficient	.018	-.001
	significance (p)	0.779	0.987
lyrical poem	correlation coefficient	.068	.076
	significance (p)	0.289	0.236
extract from a novel	correlation coefficient	-.101	-.077
	significance (p)	0.114	0.234
Story	correlation coefficient	-.174	-.148
	significance (p)	0.007	0.021
science fiction work	correlation coefficient	-.089	-.094
	significance (p)	0.164	0.146

From the results we can see that there is a positive correlation between the length of work experience (i.e. age) of the teacher and the most frequent choice of traditional genres – fairy tales and fables, as additional texts. Also, there is a negative correlation between the length of work experience and the selection of a story. (It is important to emphasise that real comparisons between these categories can be made in genres which are dominant in the teachers’ selections.) We can say that these results are expected because older teachers rely on the literature which was more prevalent in the curricula in previous years. Also, there is a firm belief that the students of junior grades are most likely to read fairy tales and fables, that they understand them well and interpret them more easily. On the other hand, the genre of a story entails various texts in terms of a genre, whose authors are frequently contemporary writers with thematic-motif novelties. All this influences the already difficult reception of this hybrid genre in students, and it requires an additional effort on the part of the teacher.

Conclusion

Our research showed a narrow professional and a wider social significance of the selection of texts in pre-university education, as well as some limitations of that selection. Our research showed that the teachers use to a large extent the already offered optional texts in the textbooks. Also, it shows that the most important criteria for the selection of additional texts are the teacher's focus on the student reception, their interests and sensibilities. The least important criteria refer to the reading habits and interpretative skills of the teacher, the competence to present a text to the students in an adequate way, which suggests that the teachers, without any need, exclude themselves to a great degree as an important factor in the selection of a text.

We conclude that the teachers approach additional texts almost in the same way they do when it comes to compulsory texts, more precisely, they expect the texts they introduce independently to meet similar requirements as those which are specifically prescribed in the curriculum. Within the framework of genre selection, the application of general criteria during the selection of additional texts is important. Based on these and similar findings, a reform of the curriculum should be carried out, and the teachers should change their practice when it comes to optional texts.

In order to achieve an additional selection of a better quality and a more meaningful link between additional and compulsory texts, it may be the best solution to offer a corpus of additionally specifically listed works (different in terms of genres, themes, time of creation, from Serbian and world literature) on the basis of which they could make a choice. That corpus should contain a considerably higher number of titles than the teacher can actually use in class during one school year. That means that the teachers should have at their disposal very good handbooks for optional texts, chrestomathies of texts with corresponding suggestions, comments and interpretations, as well as a certain number of professional seminars. But in order to realize all this, it is necessary that the most important educational institutions recognize both the professional and social significance of this issue, and include the solution to this problem in the education system.

It is important to support the teachers' efforts to cultivate, by combining optional and compulsory texts, the diversity of genres and chronology, suggesting in this way the richness and the complexity of literature. By means of optional texts, the students should be introduced to the world of literature more freely, and that world should become part of their experience. Most of all, optional texts should additionally boost reading in students, especially *reading for pleasure* (which is very important nowadays because of *the reading crisis*), as well as foster their curiosity. Of course, on no account should teachers be deprived of complete freedom,

depending on their literary curiosity and their students' reading needs. Bearing in mind all that has been said, we think that neither a completely free choice of teachers, nor completely barring the possibility of a free choice is the best solution.

To be able to implement a curriculum which provides a completely free choice of literary texts, without any additional guidance or suggestions, the teacher should possess the necessary competence in the field of literature and an exceptional knowledge as regards contemporary and classical literature, to be able to choose the right texts for the students. Besides, the teacher should be an avid reader, and such a task is too formidable for any teacher, because the teacher has the role of five or six teachers who teach only one subject. The teacher needs *help to become creative*. That should be the primary obligation not only of educational, but also of the most important state institutions.

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