READING MOTIVATION AND READING INTERESTS OF PUPILS IN THE FINAL EDUCATIONAL PERIOD

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When it comes to providing motivation for reading, it is important not only to select suitable texts, but also to examine them appropriately at the various levels of school reading: as part of regular literature lessons, required reading, the reading badge or other forms of reading activities. This study focuses on library use and reading of literature in the context of required reading and reading badges among pupils in the final educational period at a selected primary school. The results of the survey will help teachers of the Slovenian language to plan the reading syllabus and motivational reading activities in order to increase interest in literature, and to promote the development of a reading culture.

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BRALNA MOTIVACIJA IN BRALNI INTERESI UČENCEV ZADNJEGA VZGOJNO-IZOBRAŽEVALNEGA OBDOBJA

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Pri motiviranju učencev za branje je poleg ustreznega izbora besedil pomembna tudi njihova ustrezna obravnava na različnih ravneh pouka: znotraj rednih ur književnosti, domačega branja, bralne značke ali drugih oblikah bralnih dejavnosti. Raziskava se posveča obiskovanju knjižnice ter branju leposlovja v sklopu domačega branja in bralne značke med učenci zadnjega vzgojno-izobraževalnega obdobja na izbrani osnovni šoli. Rezultati raziskave bodo pomagali učiteljem slovenščine pri načrtovanju kurikularnega branja in motivacijskih bralnih dejavnosti, s katerim bi povečali zanimanje za književnost in spodbujali razvoj bralne kulture

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1   Introduction

Education plays a key social role in the formation of identities (Apple 2018, p. 31), and because children spend a large part of their time in school, the classroom has lasting effects on the development of attitudes and values in their lives. The goals of modern education are a broad general outlook and open-mindedness, the capacity to evaluate and act (Krek 2011: 27, UN 2018: 72), and there is a strong focus on the development of reading literacy at all levels of education. Due to its educational function, school is an important element in the process of socialisation of the individual, in which collective and individual value systems are built, including the reading culture and literacy. In the teaching of Slovenian, reading culture is developed through the study of literature, which is also the central subject of the didactics of young adult literature.

Reading literacy is a fundamental skill, a capacity that develops throughout life and permeates all human activities (Pečjak et al. 2019). It is a continuously developing ability of an individual, which includes developed reading skills, (critical) comprehension of what was read, conception of reading as a value, and motivation to read (Pečjak 2019: 3, GOV.si). For the development of reading ability and literacy, it is particularly important to systematically develop a culture of reading, i.e. reading as a cultural value (Pečjak 2021). This takes place in a long-term socialisation process within the family, school and society as a whole (Pečjak 2021: 470). Native language classes are primarily about developing literary competence, i.e. the internalized knowledge of the rules of literature (Culler 2008: 37), which enables students to receive and respond to literary texts and is developed through guided processes of literary reading (Grosman 2006, Žbogar 2014: 551). The level of its development also depends on the environment and one's own motivation to read. It is the wish of all those involved in the educational process and working in the field of reading education that pupils read as much as possible in their free time, as there are many proven positive effects of reading in all areas of children's development (cf. Haramija 2017, Kovač 2020).

The revised curriculum for the Slovenian language of 2018 as a core document for planning lessons in language and literature already follows modern guidelines and allows teachers a wide professional autonomy (cf. Ahačič et al. 2022). In line with modern concepts, it does prescribe compulsory authors in the final educational

period, but very few compulsory texts (UN 2018: 47), and provides the teacher with a great deal of freedom in the choice of literary texts to meet the objectives of the lesson. Equally important as the selection of texts is their appropriate guided reading or school interpretation, which should include discussion about what has been read. The criteria for the selection of literary texts are literary quality, appropriateness in terms of the level of personal and reading development of the pupils, an appropriate balance between Slovenian and world literature, a balance between canonical and contemporary literature, and an adequate representation of all three literary genres (UN 2018: 72, Haramija 2017: 24–25). The lessons focus on works of young adult literature, i.e. works intended primarily for readers up to the age of 18 (Saksida 2001: 405, Blažič 2011: 7). The general aims of literature lessons include developing a communicative ability and interest in reading, and the reader's ability to receive and respond to a literary text.

Through appropriate discussion, during which pupils can express their opinions about what they have read, the teacher can help to increase their reading motivation. Motivation is one of the key factors in the learning process and has a strong impact on the acquisition of knowledge and the sustainability of learning outcomes. It is a psychological process that involves the simultaneous action of various components, stimulating the learning process and then guiding it towards the final goal (Jurišević 2006). Although the elements of extrinsic motivation (recognition/achievement, competition with others, social motivation) are important for most pupils, only intrinsic motivation (a sense of reading competence, interest, engagement in reading, belief in the importance of reading) leads to longer-term goals, i.e. more frequent and lifelong reading, and greater reading and learning performance (Pečjak et al. 2006, in: Pečjak 2012). When studying texts, it is essential to begin with the real situation (Grosman 2006: 36). This involves considering the selection of texts – determining which texts are still relevant for today's pupils, or whether there are texts that are more relatable and can achieve the learning objectives. Simultaneously, it is crucial to think about adopting more suitable didactic approaches to enhance motivation for reading.

This does not mean complete freedom in the choice of texts, as teachers are bound by the curriculum, which highlights literature as particularly important in imparting national-cultural values. According to Kovač Šebart and Krek (2009: 76), education in public schools must be grounded in the values and norms of a particular society,

as well as the value base upon which teachers rely. This is also reflected in the literary canon of a particular country. The studying of texts from the literary canon, i.e. Slovenian and foreign literary classics, reinforces cultural, patriotic and civic education, as well as inter-cultural and broader social capacities (UN 2018: 6, cf. Kordigel Aberšek 2008: 19–23). These are texts that are distinguished by their aesthetic value and are important for general education as well as for the recognition of intertextual elements (cf. Haramija, Ivanuš Grmek 2020: 25–26). While opinions vary on the rationale for preserving the texts of the literary canon in literary education, a certain set of representative quality texts, acknowledged as such by society, is necessary. These texts form the framework for the development of literary reading and reception (Krakar Vogel 2001: 127).

From the aspect of taking reading interests into account to increase the motivation to read, it is crucial to be aware of the reader's development (discussed in detail by Appleyard 1991) and literary ability (Krakar Vogel 2020) when selecting appropriate texts. It is essential to take into account the pupil's maturity and cognitive development, while also considering the emotional side of experiencing texts. The latter is linked to the reader's previous experiences that will help them recognise the text as relevant (Kordigel Aberšek 2008: 19–20, cf. Grosman 2006: 96). In this context, Pečjak (2019) highlights the changed social context in which Generation Z is growing up. Personal experience plays a distinctly important role in adolescence (Žbogar 2014: 552), so when exploring texts that have personal value and interest for pupils, it makes sense to adopt an approach that encourages their own response and critical reception of the literary text (Grosman 2006: 33).

In the school context, Krakar Vogel mentions two forms of curricular reading, which are embodied in pedagogical communication: school literary reading in regular literature lessons, which includes required reading in addition to the texts discussed in class, and part-time or motivational reading, which includes reading as part of a reading badge or other reading activities (2016, 2022). While the possibilities for considering pupils' reading preferences in regular literature lessons are limited and meaningful only to a certain extent, the reading badge allows more freedom for pupils in their reading. The reading badge should include an individual discussion in which the pupil can articulate their own experience of what they have read. This is particularly important from the perspective of reception aesthetics and reader-response criticism (see Virk 1999: 215-224), wherein the (literary) text possesses

multiple meanings and only becomes concrete when in contact with the reader. Additionally, from the reading perspective, conversation serves as motivation for further reading. When reading for a reading badge, Grosman (2006: 165) points out that pupils expect enjoyable, interesting and non-committal forms of conversation that does not focus on predefined questions. It is important, especially from the young reader's point of view, that their encounter with a literary text is a pleasant experience (Kordigel Aberšek 2008: 17). However, as this is an optional, non-compulsory activity, which fewer and fewer pupils choose to take part in during their free time towards the end of primary school, we need to think about how to increase the number of participants in terms of motivation for reading – both in the reading badge and in other semi-leisure reading activities. School libraries can also play a major role in this, as places with a wide range of reading materials and activities for young readers (Schultz 2015), especially if there is a proper liaison between the school librarian and the teacher of the Slovenian language.

Although the Slovenian language has proverbially been regarded as an unpopular school subject, Brglez et al. (2008) have refuted this common belief in a study commissioned by the Slovenian Language Division (later renamed into Slovenian Language Service) operating under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia. When it comes to school assignments or ways of assessing knowledge, older primary school pupils prioritise tasks that can be done orally (oral performance) and that can be worked on at home (required reading).

Despite the wealth of research on reading literacy, reading interests and motivation, there is little on the reading badge or other forms of (semi-)selective reading. Apart from small-scale research conducted by individual students as part of their diploma and master's theses, the most relevant research in this area is the three-year study by T. Jamnik et al. (2008) on forms of long-term motivation for reading in the context of the reading badge. Its results reveal different aspects of the reading badge and open up avenues for further research, such as the study presented in this paper.

1.1   Research aim

The main aim of the survey was to obtain the pupils' opinions on all three of these areas of importance in promoting reading, and to assess, based on the results, which activities could serve as examples of good practice. The pupils' responses provide

valuable information for the school staff in further planning of reading activities, while examples of good practice can be used by others in their own work.

The research was carried out in a small rural school and focused on three important aspects of motivation for reading: visiting the school library, participating in the reading badge and pupils' perceptions of required reading. We were interested in the frequency of and reasons for visiting the school library, the reading interests of the pupils and their opinion on the motivational activities carried out in the library. With regard to the reading badge, we were particularly interested in the reasons why pupils either choose to take part in the reading badge or not, and in the ways of checking what they have read. In the section on required reading, the pupils expressed their agreement with statements that related to the pupils' informally expressed views on required reading in previous years. We also wanted to find out which ways of checking what was read as part of required reading were most familiar to pupils, and to get information on which books they would like to read. In all three areas, we were particularly interested in the differences among the pupils in terms of gender and grade.

2   Method

2.1   Participants

The survey was conducted at the Osnovna šola Rovte primary school and involved 91 pupils in the third educational period, of which 52% were girls and 48% boys. Participation in the survey was voluntary, opted for by all pupils (100% response rate), and the questionnaire was administered during regular Slovenian language lessons in January 2024. The questionnaire was designed using the 1ka online tool.

### 2.2   Procedure and research instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions covering three areas in addition to demographic data (gender, grade): school library attendance, reading for the reading badge, and required reading. For questions relating to library use, the pupils selected answers from various options (frequency of visiting, reasons for visiting), expressed agreement or disagreement with statements about the school library, and provided responses to questions regarding what they approve of, what they dislike, and what

suggestions they have. They also selected their preferred types/genres of text to read and expressed their opinion on the existing motivational activities in the library using a three-point scale. Some of the questions on the reading badge were multiple choice (reasons for participation/non-participation, favourite way of checking what they had read), asking respondents to justify their choice. Regarding required reading, pupils expressed agreement or disagreement with statements that represented the most frequent remarks made by pupils about required reading in their school. They then selected from among the available methods of checking and assessing what they have read for required reading, commented on the meaningfulness of required reading, expressed their preferences about the books suggested for reading, and cited the book that had impressed them the most so far in their required reading.

3   Results

According to the responses, approximately the same proportion of pupils visit the library every day (32%), once or twice a week (31%) or less than once a week (37%), but a closer analysis shows that the frequency of visits decreases over the years: while 58% of seventh-graders visit the library every day, only 12% of eighth-graders and 14% of ninth-graders do so. At the same time, 54% of eighth-graders and 64% of ninth-graders visit the library less than once a week. Girls visit the library more often than boys; in the overall sample, 55% of girls and 45% of boys are daily visitors.

As expected, the main reason for visiting the library is to borrow books for required reading and the reading badge (33% of responses), but many pupils also come to socialise with friends and for other reasons (reading magazines, playing board games and relaxing on the sofa).
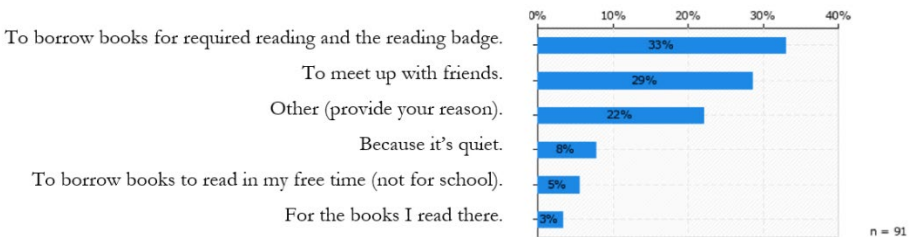
**Graph 1: Reasons for visiting the school library (n = 91)**

Next, the pupils commented on the statements about the school library. As evident from Graph 2, pupils are the least satisfied with the size of the space in which the library is located, while they rate the clarity of the layout of the library materials, the accessibility of the materials (opening hours) and the stock of interesting books as the best among all the variables.
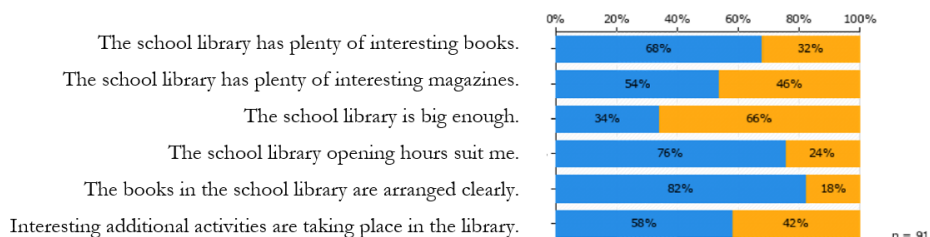
Graph 2: Pupils' agreement/disagreement with the statements about the school library (n = 91)

All of the above was also highlighted as positive later on in the questionnaire, when providing their own responses, which also emphasised the importance of a relaxed atmosphere and an accepting environment, which can be best provided by a librarian. On the other hand, the answers below underlined the need for a larger space that would also enable studying and more quiet. The pupils' suggestions for improving library activities at school included: more copies of books for required reading, additional (prize-winning) activities and a wider selection of books (especially comics and genre literature). It is interesting to note that in all grades, girls expressed a greater need for the library as a quiet space, while only boys wanted computers in the library.

From a gender perspective, the results relating to reading interests are particularly interesting and are depicted in Graph 3. The pupils could choose up to three responses to the question *'Which books do you like to read?'*. Adventure and romance books and comics received the highest number of responses, but the proportions differ slightly by gender.
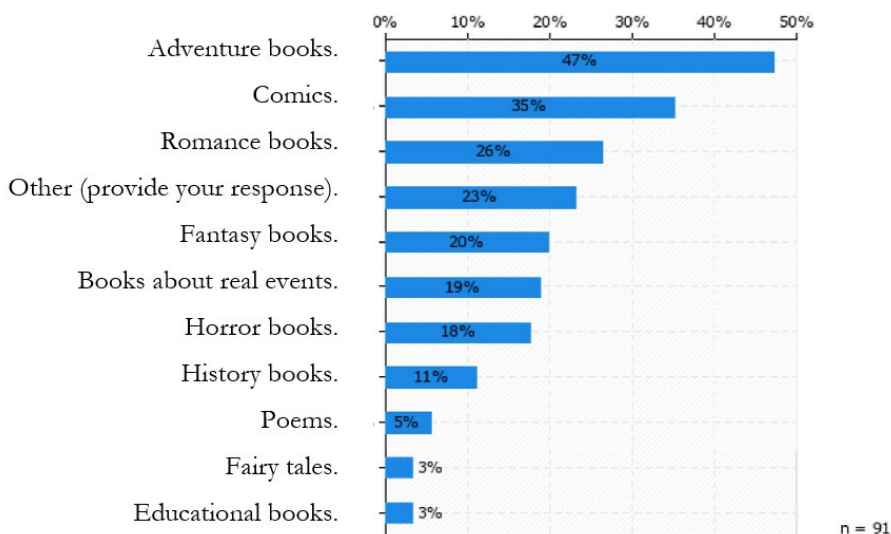
Graph 3: Reading interests of pupils (n = 91)

As the results show, all pupils like adventure books the most, but there is a noticeable gender difference. Girls rank romance books second among their favourite genres, while boys prefer comic books. There is also a difference with fantasy books, which are the third most popular among girls and only the fifth most popular among boys. Boys, however, rank books based on true events higher, whereas they are only sixth in popularity among girls.

Many pupils also choose to visit the school library because of external motivating factors, such as activities organised by the school librarian. Among the activities that take place in the school library in question, the most positively evaluated by pupils are reading to kindergarten children, visiting the book fair, quizzes, and a website where pupils can record their opinions about the books they have read and read the opinions of others. In addition to internal activities, we included a question about the Growing Up with a Book project, a national project of the Slovenian Book Agency aimed at promoting reading culture and reading Slovenian young adult literature, as we were interested in the pupils' opinions on it. It was rated most highly by the seventh-graders who were involved in the project this school year, despite the book being quite challenging in terms of content; only 8% had a negative opinion of it, which proves that the project is worthwhile and should be continued.

In continuation of the survey, we found that 36% of the pupils in the final educational period of the primary school in question read books for their reading badge. The answers do not differ significantly by grade (30% of seventh- and ninth-graders and 40% of eighth-graders are participating in the reading badge), and there is no significant difference by gender: the same number of boys and girls are taking part in the reading badge. Among those who do not take part in the reading badge, the most frequent reason given was that they do not enjoy reading (38%) or they lack time and are too busy with their regular school work (31%). When asked what would persuade the non-readers to read for a reading badge, the most common answer was a reward – either in the form of a grade in the Slovenian language class, a trip, etc. The most frequently chosen answer by pupils participating in the reading badge was that they enjoy reading (33%), but many are also motivated by the opportunity to read books of their own choice (25%). A significant number of pupils (17%) also choose to participate for the reward in the form of a final event organised jointly by schools within the municipality.

With regard to the reading badge, we were also interested in the pupils' opinions on ways of checking what they have read. They chose among the options provided by the teachers at their school, with the most popular choice by far being a discussion with the teacher or librarian. Somewhat surprisingly, the most traditional method was ranked ahead of the otherwise very popular quizzes.
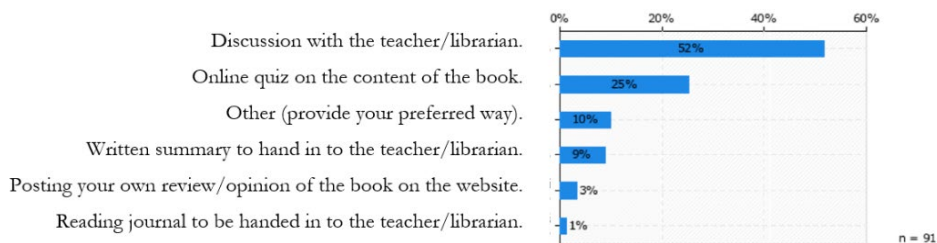
**Graph 4: Preferred ways of checking what was read for the reading badge**

The last set of questions was about required reading. In the final educational period, teachers of the Slovenian language put special emphasis on works by Slovenian authors. They choose classical texts of (mainly) Slovenian literature, which have remained the same for several years, along with works by contemporary Slovenian authors, which vary from year to year based on teachers' discretion and the library's

acquisition possibilities. The selection of texts for the 2023/2024 school year is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Required reading texts for the 2023/24 school year at the OŠ Rovte primary school

7th grade	8th grade	9th grade
A book of choice written by Desa Muck	I. Velikonja: Lestev do neba	I. Velikonja: Leto v znamenju polža / N. K. Lorenzutti: Gremo mi v tri krasne
T. Golob: Zlati zob / N. K. Lorenzutti: Avtobus ob treh / I. Velikonja: Normalna družina, pa kaj še!	R. Murnik: Lepi janičar / J. Jurčič: Jurij Kozjak	F. S. Finžgar: Pod svobodnim soncem / J. Jurčič: Rokovnjači
P. Voranc: Solzice	J. Jalen: Bobri / I. Sivec: Emonska lepotica	I. Cankar: Moje življenje
T. Pavček: Majnice	T. Pavček: Majnice in majnice	N. Grafenauer: Skrivnosti
D. Defoe: Robinson Crusoe	J. Kersnik: Kmetske slike / I. Tavčar: Med gorami / I. Tavčar: Slike iz Loškega pogorja	I. Karlovšek: Matej / I. Sivec: Zadnji mega žur

In the survey, the pupils expressed their agreement or disagreement with the common statements related to the organisation of required reading at their school.
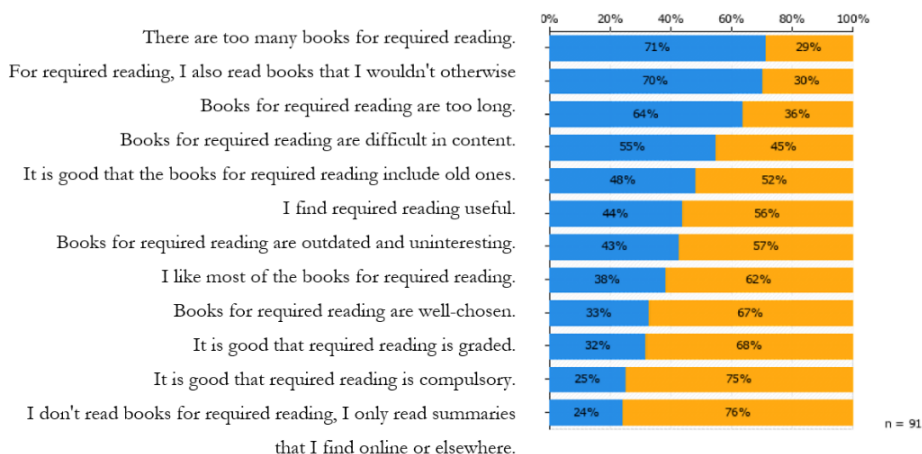
Graph 5: Pupils' opinions on various aspects of required reading (n = 91)

The answers showed that the pupils believe there are too many books (71% of the answers), which are overwhelming in content (64%) and difficult (55%). The majority agree that they also read books that they would not otherwise read as part of their required reading – which is compulsory (70%). Just under half of the pupils think it is good to read old books; a similar proportion of pupils find required reading useful (44%), but rate the books as old and uninteresting (43%). Three quarters of pupils think required reading should not be compulsory.

Among the preferred ways of assessing required reading, the most frequent choices were writing an essay and posting a critique on the library's website (18% of responses each). However, a significant number of pupils (38%) suggested alternative ways of simply checking what they had read. The most common of these were: discussing the book with a teacher or classmates, writing a summary, and checking what was read in the form of answering various questions or participating in a quiz. Many pupils explicitly mentioned that they believed required reading should not be graded.

Despite occasional negative opinions about required reading, almost half of the pupils (47%) find it meaningful. They recognise the importance of reading for learning, cognitive development, vocabulary expansion, etc. Many admit that required reading is precisely what motivates them to read at all.

In the final part of the survey, pupils suggested which books they would like to read as part of their required reading. The responses were (predictably) dominated by contemporary young adult novels, which cover a variety of topics relevant to teenagers, such as love, sexuality, and relationships. Pupils also expressed interest in crime novels, science fiction, fantasy and adventure books, and a desire to explore works of foreign authors, not just Slovenian ones. Additionally, they showed an inclination towards reading interesting educational books. They also want more freedom in their choice of books for required reading. Among the works they have read, the ones that have impressed them the most so far are mainly titles by contemporary young writers (I. Velikonja, N. K. Lorenzutti, I. Sivec). In contrast, only three pupils mentioned older literary works, such as *Pod svobodnim soncem*, *Jurij Kozjak*, and *Lepi janičar*.

4　　　Discussion

The survey results confirm many of the findings of experts in the field of reading literacy, and highlight both shortcomings and good practices in organising the three areas in question at school: library activities, reading badge and required reading.

Pupils' responses indicate a transformed perception of the school library. Over time, in the midst of societal changes, it has evolved from a place primarily for storing materials to an open space for reading, socialising, and accompanying activities. By offering a well-organised layout and engaging biblio-pedagogical activities to promote selected literature, the school librarian can inspire pupils to visit and read. This, in turn, makes a significant contribution to the development of reading literacy, linguistic competence, and critical thinking. While pupils still primarily visit the school library to borrow school materials, an almost equal proportion come to the library to meet friends, play board games, and enjoy the relaxed atmosphere. The results highlight the necessity for additional space where pupils can engage in various activities and feel comfortable. Despite space constraints, a school librarian can significantly contribute to greater well-being and comfort within the existing space by incorporating appropriate equipment such as sofas and seat cushions. As the results show, adventure books are the preferred choice among all pupils. This aligns with Appleyard's definition of the five stages in the development of a reader (Appleyard 1994, 13–15), wherein a child in this age range should assume the role of the reader as the hero and readily identify with literary figures who have similar experiences to themselves in the real world. However, during this period, particularly the more mature pupils have already reached the stage of the reader as a thinker. This results in significant individual differences in reading interests, as demonstrated by the present study, particularly in the comparison between girls and boys. Additional library activities for various groups of children are crucial in motivating pupils to visit the library and to read, and contribute to the diversity of experiences at both the library and school. The survey revealed that pupils have a particularly positive view of intergenerational reading (cooperation between school and kindergarten), as well as online activities (quizzes, a website for exchanging opinions on what they have read). It makes sense to continue with these activities. Online participation could be integrated into the reading badge and required reading to increase the motivation to read.

The results of the reading badge section of the survey confirmed the general observation of a decline in interest in reading in the final educational period. As many pupils cite a lack of time and being overloaded with school work as reasons for non-participation, it would be worth considering a reduction in the number of books pupils are asked to read by their mentor teachers. In the school in question, pupils are required to read five works of prose and learn one poem. According to the pupils' responses, a grade in the Slovenian language class or a school trip, combined with the option to choose their own book, would be sufficiently effective motivations for reading. The most popular way of checking what the pupils have read is to engage in discussions about the book. This aligns with the findings and recommendations of numerous reading and reading literacy researchers. Encouraging pupils to read and talk about what they have read, in addition to frequent reading in the classroom and teaching reading strategies, contributes to increased reading motivation among older primary school pupils. The use of a variety of materials and the possibility of selecting materials of their own choice also play an important role in this age group (Pečjak 2012, cf. Grosman 2006: 129, 163).

The pupils were the most critical when expressing their opinion on the organisation of required reading. When selecting literary works, the Slovenian language teachers follow the Slovenian language curriculum and professional recommendations, but subjective choices also play a significant role in the selection process. Although only part of the required reading is graded during the school year, pupils in the survey expressed their disagreement with any form of grading for their reading. One noteworthy comment came from a pupil who mentioned feeling consistently disappointed because, despite reading a book, he still receives poor grades. Instead of grading, pupils want to discuss the books they have read with the teacher or their classmates, even though they acknowledge that it is often the grade that motivates them to read the prescribed book. The pupils' responses suggest that, in the future, it would be beneficial to alter the organisation of required reading, particularly regarding the number and length of books. Additionally, allowing a bit more choice could be advantageous. It is noteworthy that pupils are well aware of the usefulness of required reading and the importance of familiarising themselves with the literary canon of their nation.

5   Conclusions

Reading is one of the most crucial skills an individual can acquire. Research confirms that well-developed reading skills are associated with better academic performance. These skills begin to develop from an early age, with both families and schools playing a major role in the process. It involves not only reading various texts but also literature, with the choice tailored to the individual's specific needs and interests. This becomes particularly important in the final period of primary education, when interest in reading tends to decline considerably. The school library, as a place of well-being and engaging motivational activities, well-organised required reading and the reading badge can actively contribute to the development of reading motivation. The research has unveiled the current situation in the final educational period of the selected primary school and the possibilities for more effective organisation of reading and other activities. This includes considerations of content (such as the selection of texts) and motivation (examining what practices work in reality).

We acknowledge that the survey sample is significantly too small for the popularisation of good practices and the generalisation of the results, given its limitation to a single primary school. A uniform survey across various areas is challenging because, just as school libraries differ, schools also organise required reading and the reading badge in varying ways. Hence, it makes more sense to focus on micro-levels, improving reading motivation within individual schools or even classrooms, and exploring the most effective ways that work in specific contexts.

The survey identified some areas for improvement, especially in the organisation of required reading and the reading badge, with a focus on the reading interests of adolescents. However, it also revealed activities that are well-received by pupils and make sense to continue.

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