




Article

# Productive Remembering of Childhood: Child–Adult Memory-Work with the School Literary Canon

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**Abstract:** This essay, co-written by adult and child researchers, marks an important shift in the field of children’s literature studies because it promotes an academic practice in which children are actively involved in decision-making. In our polyphonic account of the collaboration, we draw on the ideas of productive remembering, re-memorying, and child-led research to advance a new pedagogical approach to the current, adult-centered literary school canon in Poland, which was compiled in 2017 by a panel of politically appointed experts. We exemplify our proposal by discussing “Staś and Nel in the 21st Century”: Do Long-established School Readings Connect Generations?”, a participatory research project conducted at a primary school in Wrocław, Poland, in spring 2018. As we argue, selected texts from the canon may catalyze memories of childhood from older readers that can be shared with younger readers to develop their own connections with these texts. Such an exchange may open new individual and collective remembering spaces linking intragenerational perspectives with intergenerational meanings and resulting in a school canon that promotes both national cohesion and openness to other cultures. Seen thus, our approach can be adopted in school and other settings to engage children and adults as co-creators of particular memory-work methods. In broader terms, it can promote a critical and action-oriented understanding of the heritage of childhood in Poland and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** productive remembering; literary school canon; participation; child-led research

## 1. Introduction

JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

A survey of policies adopted across Europe to organize literature lessons in primary schools reveals two major approaches to canon formation. While some school systems allow much freedom, leaving the decision of selecting class readings to educators and pupils, others follow the long-established pattern of politicizing the issue by entrusting the task of compiling nationwide lists of prescribed texts almost solely to government stakeholders. Two years ago, following the victory of the right-wing Law and Justice party, Poland rejoined the latter group after almost a decade of pursuing a more relaxed and inclusive policy towards canon-making. As we have argued elsewhere (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki 2018), the new school canon for primary schools, introduced in 2017, is intended to promote nation-shaping practices. It has been criticized as a blatant example of social engineering, nostalgia for “the centralized, rigidly structured past” (Kluzik-Rostkowska 2016) and a failure to recognize young readers’ literary preferences and their diverse experiences. As we have pointed out earlier (2018), it also reinforces gender bias in that it marginalizes the work of female writers and features novels that

perpetuate gender stereotypes. Finally, it falls short of supporting transnational literacy, that is, the attitude of respect for difference and sensitivity to how we interpret the “other” (Bradford 2011). This lack of concern about cultural practices supporting translocal connectivity is especially worrying in light of Poland’s intensifying opening to transnational mobilities.

Symptomatically, Polish teachers and pupils had little if no influence over the shape of the new canon. The fixed list of obligatory and supplemental readings they have to rely on was imposed from above by a panel of politically appointed experts. In an interview meant to explain the rationale behind the proposed reading curriculum, panel leader Andrzej Waśko indicates that all included texts were selected for their cognitive and moral value. Canonical works, as he specifies, should in the first place provoke reflection, contribute to the shaping of national unity and “build an intergenerational bridge of understanding” (Waśko 2016, p. 31, our translation). On the face of it, these criteria are unlikely to cause any controversy. Importantly, however, as we have argued (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki 2018), Waśko fails to mention that the process of establishing such intergenerational dialogue is oftentimes one-directional—from adult cultural authorities to inexperienced child novices who must learn to appreciate texts selected for them by competent grownups. Moreover, as we mention earlier (Chawar et al. 2018), although the most recent publications on both international and Polish canon (e.g., Kümmerling-Meibauer and Müller 2017; Czernow and Michułka 2017) argue for its plural nature, they do not take into account the possibility of children’s intervention in school reading lists. As we have suggested, we can break this pattern by encouraging the programmatic participation of children in the process of canon formation. We have shown that this goal could be achieved through participatory intergenerational research projects enabling children and adults to make joint decisions concerning the research process and practical applications of its results. We have also stressed the need to educate teachers about the importance of facilitating the exchange of ideas among children and of creating an intergenerational dialogue based on compromise and informed decision-making. This, in turn, could result in a consensual list of school readings “satisfying the demand for the school canon, reflecting Polish national cultural heritage, and showing children that a strong sense of national identity can be reconciled with feeling at home in a supranational European, if not global, community” (p. 85).

This article is a continuation of our reflection on children’s and adults’ agency in relation to policies regulating the school canon. Although we realize that, owing to the current political climate in Poland, a widescale intergenerational discussion about Polish school reading lists is not likely to emerge within the current curriculum, we nevertheless argue that the old-new canon may in fact turn out to be a blessing in disguise. As we propose, selected texts may become objects catalyzing memories of childhood from adult readers that can be shared with school-age readers to develop their own connections with these texts, inevitably shaped by children’s immersion in present culture and by the needs of their realities, including the challenge of transnationalism and globalization. Such “kinship readings,” as Clémentine Beauvais points out (Beauvais 2017, p. 268) appropriating Marah Gubar’s kinship model of childhood (Gubar 2013, 2016), are possible if we focus on “multiple existing similarities between adult and child,” their shared emotions and comprehension, rather than on what sets them apart. Encounters between adults reminiscing about their childhood reading and children engaging with the same texts here and now may result in the emergence of intergenerational mutually beneficial exchanges of lived experience, skills, and knowledge, as well as contributing to stronger cultural cohesion.

We build on the ideas of productive remembering and re-remembering to develop a new pedagogical approach to the current literary school canon in Poland. This new approach not only proposes a constructive use of seemingly outdated and irrelevant texts, but also recognizes reading as a social and relational process embedded in specific cultural and material contexts. We substantiate our proposal

by discussing “Staś and Nel<sup>1</sup> in the 21st Century: Do Long-Established School Readings Connect Generations?”, a participatory research project that we co-conducted in 2018 at a primary school in Wrocław, Poland. Although the project is situated within a particular cultural context, we believe that it could be applied across different cultures and age groups to effect cross-age negotiations concerning the school canon.<sup>2</sup> As an attempt at doing justice to the participatory and intergenerational nature of the project, this article brings together child and adult voices of all those involved in the research process. Simultaneously, it provides a sense of order to the messiness of our endeavor (e.g., the struggle with deadlines, the fear of overburdening the children or fluctuating power differentials), including the very process of writing a coherent polyphonic account of our activities.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Literary Canon Formation Practices in Europe

JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

Poland is not the only European country with a centralized and fixed school canon in primary schools. As the informal survey<sup>4</sup> conducted among our colleagues has shown, similar policies are implemented in Hungary and Malta. In Hungary, for instance, teachers are expected to stick to the government’s central list called NAT (Nemzeti Alaptanterv) when selecting national and foreign literary works to be covered in class. As highlighted in the country’s national curriculum, it is essential that primary and secondary schools incorporate the national aspect of Hungarian literature and history into a broader international context. A slightly more liberal approach has been used in Greece, Portugal, and Ukraine, where teachers can extend the fixed selection of diverse texts or excerpts from literary works by adding their own reading choices through class projects. In Ukraine, for example, in line with a recent reform, teachers rely on official textbooks and the list of six authors they have to discuss. However, they are free to choose particular texts by each of the listed authors. They can also select ten additional texts out of 50 listed in a separate document including a large number of contemporary authors writing for children and young adults. The list is a result of nationwide consultations among schools, experts, and parents, and its aim is to encourage pupils to read.

Teachers are fully responsible for primary school reading lists in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the UK. In Italy, there is a curriculum, but teachers are allowed to select books to be used in class. At secondary school, including the secondary school 1st degree (11–13 years), there is only one assigned text, *I promessi sposi* [The Betrothed] (1827), a three-volume historical novel by Alessandro Manzoni.<sup>5</sup> Primary school teachers and pupils in France are given much more freedom, but the number of long texts to be covered in each grade ranges from seven to ten. Rather than imposing any nationwide canon of classics, the existing reading curriculum provides suggestions and guidelines with the aim of shaping pupils’ literary taste and stimulating their engagement and curiosity. In Norway, teachers’ choices of texts should

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<sup>1</sup> The project is named after the young protagonists of *In Desert and Wilderness* (1911), a popular adventure novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz.

<sup>2</sup> We obtained the school’s and the parents’ permission to involve the children in the project. The children’s consent was also secured. We informed them that they could withdraw from the project at any time and without any consequences. The children and Ewa agreed to have their contributions translated into English by us.

<sup>3</sup> We cannot elaborate on the complexities of composing this article due to space limitations and the substantial amount of theory that we think we need to present as a background for the project, but which nonetheless may also be seen as overshadowing the young scholars’ input. However, as we have already published one such article (Chawar et al. 2018), we are now planning to write on co-authoring academic articles with children as outputs of intergenerational research.

<sup>4</sup> We have decided to do this survey as we suspected that most of the scholarship on national canons would be published in languages inaccessible to us. A thorough comparative study of various European practices related to school readings would far exceed the scope of this essay. We wish to express our thanks to Jennifer Aggleton, Sabina Bursy, Marnie Campagnaro, Cristina Corro, Frank Huysmans, Tzina Kalogirou, Kárpáti László, Jana Segi Lukavská, Charles L. Mifsud, Kersti Nillsson, Emilya Ohar, Natalia Paprocka, Ella Paremain, Frauke Pauwels, Ana Margarida Ramos, Hildegunn Støle, and Charlotte van Bergen, who offered their time and energy to elaborate on canon-making practices in their respective countries. We found their detailed descriptions extremely helpful when writing this section of our paper.

<sup>5</sup> At the secondary school 1st degree, pupils read excerpts from Manzoni.

facilitate the development of certain skills and competences, such as the ability to discuss literary characters or express one's opinion about literature, films, or video games. Norwegian teachers are also encouraged to take advantage of book reading programmes, although it is not clear whether they will continue to rely on them once e-tablets are introduced from Grade 1 in many parts of the country. The competence-based approach, including the use of external recommendations, is practiced in the Czech Republic.

In the UK, teachers' choices depend to a large extent on school budgets. Because of time limitations, teachers tend to fall back on the texts they already know, although they try to combine their own choices with pupils' preferences; that is, children can choose their own reading as a way to support reading for pleasure and reader engagement. As recommended by The United Kingdom Literacy Association ([The United Kingdom Literacy Association 2008](#)), children's reading for pleasure should be encouraged as it results in creating lifelong agentic and independent readers capable of critical reflection and of sharing their views productively with other readers. Teachers may contribute to this goal by developing their knowledge of children's literature, helping children form diverse reader identities, and creating social spaces enabling interaction and reciprocity among readers of all ages ([Cremin et al. 2009](#)). Reading for pleasure and children's own choices are also supported in the Netherlands. As we learnt from a young Dutch colleague of ours,

Dutch primary schools often work together with local libraries to get books for the children to read at school, so it would be the libraries that do most of the decision making. At my own primary school, each class had a "library parent" who would go to the library every month to collect a few new books and drop off the ones that the children had already read (my dad has actually done this for quite some time). I don't know if the teachers at primary schools have a lot of say as to which books the children read, because reading literature at primary school isn't really part of a school subject, but is something done for fun. For example, we would always read our books for about 15 minutes before the lessons officially started. When you had finished a task early, you could also continue reading your book. At 10 o'clock (when every Dutch primary school has a little snack break), our teachers would often read a book to us, and it was always one we could choose ourselves.

Limited and provisional as the above survey is, it nevertheless clearly indicates that in most European countries there are no systematic solutions aimed at transforming the school canon into a cross-generational and integrative endeavor that would enable combining specific cultural values, pedagogical goals and responses to challenges of contemporary realities in a way that would satisfy all the stakeholders of school education.

### 3. Re-Memorying and Productive Remembering

JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

Our approach to the canon is informed by the concepts of re-memory work and re-memorying, developed by Alison Waller ([Waller 2017](#), p. 137) as vital elements of "an interpretative phenomenological method of enquiry that acknowledges the lived experience of childhood reading as a continuum, not ending with an initial encounter but enduring as the reader ages." Waller argues that a child's reading act continues into adulthood: even if we do not read a given book again, we continue as its readers through our engagements with particular texts (p. 140). Moreover, even without re-readings, one may continue to respond to a text for a long time after the act of reading itself. As a result, "the full reading act is a diachronic process unbounded by a single moment in time or even a single period of life" (p. 139). Waller also concludes that our childhood interactions with texts become available thanks to "[t]he reconstructive power of memories of the past" (p. 136), wherein remembering is a creative act rather than a cognitive skill only (p. 144). Re-memorying generates a dialogue "between later and earlier reading selves" that centers on the following questions: "what makes books read in childhood meaningful? Can the divide between child and adult reading selves be bridged? How is the category of

children's literature expanded and enriched by the ongoing life of texts in memory?" (p. 136). Our approach posits that these questions are worth asking in connection with those texts from the school canon which have been read across generations. Re-memorying initiated through an encounter between child and adult readers in relation to such shared texts may result in the emergence of broader dialogues about present childhoods and "childhoods of memory," which "inform the types of spaces and places and objects and experiences that are provided or denied to children based on emotional connections to a personal past" (Baxter 2016, p. 234). Such dialogues can in turn be incorporated into the school curriculum as a form of productive remembering channeling the future.

First used by Andreas Huyssen (Huyssen 2000, p. 38) to stress the current need for "[l]ived memory," that is, "active, alive, embodied in the social" and "usable," productive remembering encompasses diverse forms of working with memory oriented towards the future or "bringing memory forward" (Strong-Wilson et al. 2013). Huyssen argues that productive remembering is indispensable in light of the "the surfeit of memory in this media-saturated culture [which] creates such overload that the memory system itself is in constant danger of imploding, thus triggering the fear of forgetting" (p. 28). Strong-Wilson et al. (Strong-Wilson et al. 2013, p. 3) distinguish in particular productive remembering involving belatedness: sometimes, the texts or objects from the past, or indeed their scarcity or absence, reveal stories that can only be told in the present. Belatedness manifests itself especially strongly "through the figure of the listener (the witness of the witness) who is the one who follows after, and is typically situated at the periphery of a narrative" (p. 4). These witnesses, who embody "hope for change by virtue of bending an ear back" (p. 4), include not only researchers or archivists, as Strong-Wilson notes, but also children talking with grownups about shared texts. The productivity of remembering results from "the relationship between the one who tells the story and the one who listens and responds, autobiographically" (p. 4) as the narrative affects their lives.

We see productive remembering as important for one more reason: when combined with participatory approaches, it may counteract an ongoing affliction of the current humanities, diagnosed by Ewa Domańska (Domańska 2014) as the love of trauma. Domańska sees its causes in the loss of the subject's conviction of being able to influence the way of things. As she argues, the promotion of the trauma discourse closes off the possibility of regarding history as a performative creative project of critical hope and promise (pp. 16, 18, 23). Hence, our research needs to strengthen the belief in the productive capabilities of a subject and a community to project and shape their futures. The role of researchers in this endeavor is to facilitate associations among scholars and nonacademic audiences, including, as we show, children. This is the central goal of the rescue humanities; that is, the regenerative, restitutive, supportive, and affirmative humanities, whose function is to generate knowledge about the past along with positive reflection about future possibilities of living together through stressing coexistence, friendship, and collaboration rather than violence, conflict, and exclusion (pp. 13–14, 17–18). Relying on intergenerational exchanges among adult researchers, their young collaborators, and the adult respondents, our project generates narratives of connection that counterbalance conflicts caused by the introduction of the new-old list of school readings, highlighting instead its reconciliatory, formative, and empowering potential as a subject of joint child–adult enquiry.

#### 4. Communal Reading Histories in Action

##### JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

To enable the emergence of such dialogues in a more democratic way than it usually happens at schools, the project proposes child-led research. Premised on the belief that young citizens have the right to make informed decisions and voice their opinions on all matters that directly concern them, this child-focused methodology endeavors to counter adultist biases in childhood studies. Arguably, its chief merit lies in empowering children and enhancing their "agentic potential" (Spyrou 2018, p. 160) by engaging them in the research process and encouraging them to take charge of it. With the aid of diverse techniques attuned to young researchers' abilities and particular contexts, participatory research can have far-reaching applications. Above all, it can pave the way for more symmetrical



child–adult exchanges facilitating the intergenerational coproduction of knowledge and meaning. The value of participatory projects, Imelda Coyne and Bernie Carter (Coyne and Carter 2018, p. 6) maintain, resides in their emancipatory character: they seek to give “children and young people greater control over the research process and space to talk about their experiences” and pursue their individual and collaborative explorations. At its maximum, it means that young co-researchers identify research needs, design the framework and methodology, develop and administer tools, collect and analyze data, and disseminate findings. As Roshni K. Nuggeshalli (Nuggeshalli 2014, p. 13) has it, such an approach acknowledges “the importance of children’s and young people’s voice and their role in reflecting and analyzing the world from their own perspective.” Thus understood, child-led research strives to rethink the construction of knowledge along more egalitarian lines by putting child and adult stakeholders on an equal footing and foregrounding the former’s insider perspective. Privileging children’s expertise and worldviews, in turn, necessitates developing academic practice aimed at reconfiguring roles within intergenerational research teams like ours and affording “children an opportunity to become active knowledge producers” (Spyrou 2018, p. 166). In keeping with this redefined network of relationships, in our previous and current participatory projects we have attempted to minimize the “us and them” dichotomy by “relinquishing [our] roles as controllers and knowledge owners” (Coyne and Carter 2018, p. 7) in favor of the more fraternal and less imposing figure of facilitators.

Indicatively, moving beyond the traditional confines of child–adult relations may prove problematic, mostly due to social expectations ascribed to teachers and the inability of adult collaborators to avoid occasional interventions as gatekeepers, which shows that participation as an idealistic concept fails to fully grasp the dynamic realities of intergenerational research encounters. Despite its indisputable merits and its huge promise for childhood studies, child-led research has been challenged for its reductive bias. In our previous paper (Chawar et al. 2018), we list a host of concerns often raised in relation to child-focused approaches. These include tokenism, an overfocus on specific age and ethnic groups (white primary schoolers from the West), simplistic and overoptimistic views of children’s agency, the idea of monolithic childhood constructs, the risk of overwhelming children with too much responsibility and the power imbalances resulting from blurring the boundaries between adults’ support for and supervision of their young collaborators. Much of the work done on participatory research rests on the unrealistic assumption that all young researchers “want to exercise their agency” and “will actively enjoy and embrace participatory techniques” (Coyne and Carter 2018, pp. 7–8). Moreover, children’s studies scholars are inclined to glamorize their young collaborators’ insider perspective as the most authentic and reliable source of knowledge about children and tend to have a low tolerance for obscurity and unpredictability, both of which constitute the essence of research by children. In consequence, in their efforts to emulate the precision of science, they may be compelled to clean up “the mess of the participatory process” (Spyrou 2018, p. 184) for the sake of ensuring that their participatory projects produce desirable outcomes.

In our intergenerational dialogue-based article (Chawar et al. 2018), we address some of these methodological flaws by painting a more nuanced picture of interactions, interruptions, interventions, and decision-making that occurred during our team’s research encounters. We subscribe to the belief that one way of bypassing the reductionist utopianism of child-focused methodologies is to reconceptualize children’s agency and the production of knowledge through the lens of relationality. Relationality can be understood as the “overall framework,” made up of entangled material and discursive forces, “through which we seek to understand the worlds which unfold in front of us and the sense we make of them” (Spyrou 2018, p. 7). To look at participatory research in relational terms means to accept the messiness of our individual lifeworlds and to emphasize the fact that how we perceive our present-day realities relies to a large extent on the interdependence of different human/non-human/material/non-material entities. This marks a changed emphasis in childhood studies towards viewing child-led research from a process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented perspective. Far from being fixed and neat, participation represents a fluid, dynamic, and messy enterprise involving a lot of coordination, negotiation, interferences, and unplanned interruptions. Relationality sensitizes

us to the complexity and contingency of our social lives, including intergenerational encounters. In order to give a more approximate representation of diverse childhoods, children's agency, and knowledge practices, children's studies researchers need to reflect on children's movable positionalities, such as their education and personality. Young participants, who engage in the research process more or less willingly, with varied intensity and by means of discursive and/or performative acts, bring into the research context their own personal, social and cultural entanglements and, through interaction with other team members, become affected by, or emotionally and intellectually invested in, other sets of beliefs, constraints and norms. Although it is impossible to attend to all structures of relationships, discourses, and experiences that come into play, in what follows we make an attempt to reconstruct some of the emerging and shifting research networks in the project.

## 5. Project Description

### JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

We would like to substantiate our proposal by discussing "Staś and Nel in the 21st Century": Do Long-established School Readings Connect Generations?", a participatory research project we conducted with a group of young researchers from grades 5–7 (10 children aged 11–15) and their Polish teacher, Ewa Chawar, at a primary school in Wrocław, Poland in 2018. The young researchers involved in the project have much in common: they all live in Wrocław, belong to the Educational Discussion Club at Primary School No. 28 in Wrocław, read a lot across genres and participate in extracurricular activities promoting reading. Most of the pupils knew us as they were members of the child–adult research team we co-organized in an earlier project (Chawar et al. 2018).

### ALEKSANDRA, ERYK, KATARZYNA, MAGDALENA, MAJA, MILENA, AND NATALIA

At the onset of the venture, the adult researchers presented us with the idea of intergenerational conversations about shared school readings. After some deliberation, which involved our Polish teacher, also a participant in the earlier project, we came up with the procedures for the study. Firstly, we compiled a list of books that are likely to be read across generations:

#### Grades 4–6

- Jan Brzechwa, *Akademia Pana Kleksa* [Mr. Kleks's Academy], 1946
- Bolesław Prus, *Katarynka* [The Barrel Organ], 1880
- Ferenc Molnár, *A Pál utcai fiúk* [The Paul Street Boys], 1907
- Henryk Sienkiewicz, *W pustyni i w puszczy* [In Desert and Wilderness], 1911
- Astrid Lindgren, *Alla vi barn i Bullerbyn* [The Six Bullerby Children], 1947

#### Grades 7–8

- Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo vadis: Powieść z czasów Nerona* [Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero], 1895
- Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve], 1822
- Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843
- Aleksander Kamiński, *Kamienie na szaniec* [Stones on the Barricade], 1943

Secondly, working in two groups, we prepared a questionnaire to be shared with parents of all the children attending the school and proposed to conduct semi-structured interviews with their parents, grandparents, and other adult family members. In both cases, the questions were shared with Justyna and Mateusz, who suggested small changes that did not significantly affect the focus we proposed.

The interviews and questionnaires centered on the following questions:

- Which of these set books have you read?
- Which one is your favorite?
- Do you think that these texts can appeal to younger audiences?

- What other texts did you read in primary school? How were they taught in class?
- What is your view on prescribed reading lists for primary school children?

### 5.1. The Survey

ALEKSANDRA, ERYK, MAJA, AND MILENA

The survey was our starting point in the project as it enabled us to collect more data than the interviews. Parents and guardians of Year Four pupils were the most active in the survey, while the parents and guardians of Year Two, that is, those whose children have not yet had read the texts included in the survey, were the least responsive. Of the 40 people surveyed, as many as half have good memories about a couple of school readings. This may indicate the imperfection of our reading system, but, looking at the number of people who did not like any of them (about 12%), we could say that the system is going in the right direction, although it still needs to be rectified, for example, by removing a few titles from the reading lists. The most familiar titles are *Mr. Kleks's Academy*, *In Desert and Wilderness*, *The Six Bullerby Children*, *Quo Vadis*, and *Sir Thaddeus* (1834) by Adam Mickiewicz. Half of the parents surveyed have a positive attitude towards books (not only school books), while the other half have read very little and 25% of the respondents like reading in general thanks to school reading. More than 70% of the respondents learned the content of the books by reading them, 20% by reading plot summaries, and 7.5% by watching film adaptations. These findings have been confirmed by the data collected in the interviews. Finally, the parents/guardians decided that the book that all generations should know is *Sir Thaddeus*, a Polish Romantic epic poem with strong patriotic content. According to the respondents, the most important values that should guide school reading are interpersonal relations and friendships. More than half of the parents also believe that the classic literature may lose its relevance, but the number of people who hold a different opinion is not much smaller. We would like the results to be useful in other studies and to arouse public interest.

### 5.2. Intergenerational Conversations

JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

Seven interviews out of 20 were conducted by the young researchers. They decided on the general scope of the interviews and formulated questions they wished to ask on their own. They also discussed with Ewa how to ask questions and clarify the respondents' replies if they found them difficult to understand. The rest result from homework assigned by Ewa to her other pupils (5th grade) in an attempt to put the pedagogical model we propose into practice. This may explain why, at moments, the interviews seem slightly superficial, as the children did not ask additional questions to clarify or delve deeper into some of the answers they received, even though Ewa had instructed them to do so. It is an important hint for our future endeavors related to the project: more attention should be given to the data-collecting methods in interviews. The group of the respondents included 15 mothers, one father, two aunts, one grandmother, and one teacher.

MAGDALENA AND NATALIA

The interviews we have collected reveal that the older generations had little influence over the shape of the canon. The reading lists at the time were composed of texts that varied in terms of length and level of difficulty. The interviewees frequently point to *The Six Bullerby Children* and *In Desert and Wilderness* as their favourite school readings. Some of them report having re-read their favorite childhood books at later points in their adult lives. It is noteworthy that the interviewees, all of whom grew up before or shortly after the collapse of communism in Poland, would rarely make use of any popular learning aids like plot summaries, film adaptations, or literary analyses to enhance their reading experience due to the fact that such study materials were either scarce or unavailable. However, some respondents did watch film adaptations, but only as a follow-up to the assigned books. The interviews also indicate that it was common practice to pick up school books at the school library. A few respondents have remarked that, due to the limited number of copies available at their school libraries, some of their assigned readings were read out loud in class by their teachers.



Surprising as it may be, the interviewees' reading comprehension was rarely checked in the form of quiz questions or written tests. Their teachers preferred other assessment methods like asking students to write essays, develop plot outlines or answer content-related questions at the blackboard. Although a few respondents admit having failed to get through some school readings, the majority succeeded in completing their reading assignments on time, even without any motivation or supervision on the part of their parents, who seemed to have had implicit faith in their children's organizational skills.

Many of the respondents are familiar with the texts Polish children are obliged to read today because the school canon has not changed much over the last few decades. A few of them report having experienced difficulty when trying to engage with some "inaccessible" (due to their archaic language) school readings. Still, they believe in the cognitive value of such long-established texts. The analyzed interviews also exhibit one regularity: those who identify themselves as avid readers never struggled when faced with school readings and are still fond of reading, though their reading preferences have changed over the years.

Finally, the interviewees have made a few astute observations regarding the benefits of school readings, including the ability to refer to famous literary quotes and the opportunity to broaden one's vistas ("books offer a wealth of knowledge") and get acquainted with a wide array of genres. Besides, as they argue, there are books that everyone should read at least once in their lives. One should not be discouraged by their length or their negative reviews; moreover, rather than relying on other readers' opinions, one should make judgments based on their own reading.

JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

The interviews are instances of productive remembering where children not only played the role of witnesses of the past, but also co-constructed these accounts by introducing their perspectives and interpretations of what they learned. While we realize that the adult respondents may misremember their experiences, we agree with Alison Waller (Waller 2019, p. 20) that, rather than dismissing such narratives as inaccurate, for example, because of nostalgia, it is nonetheless interesting to see "what it is like to remember books from a childhood long past and what it is like to revisit them." We were struck by the initial reactions of the respondents: most of them were evidently both confused and pleased to be having a conversation about their past and present reading experiences, such as reading under a quilt late at night or enhancing the reception of a book by listening to classical music. Some respondents reminisced about their emotional attachment to particular texts as they became important contexts for their other afterschool activities. Some also shared their memories about how their own parents and grandparents supervised their reading, which in some households has constituted an intergenerational tradition of reading passed on until today. However, it was also interesting to learn that, in some cases, school reading was not supervised as either parents trusted their children or they did not have time to check on their children's progress because of other obligations. Simultaneously, the interviews reveal that contemporary parents have more control over their children's school readings as they supply the books. Yet, very few interviews indicated more than general interest in contemporary books (including children's literature) incorporated into the canon. Neither did the adults refer to the limited potential of the Polish school canon to encourage transnational literacy. A deeper engagement with these issues would certainly extend the scope of the intergenerational conversation about school readings, making the interviews not only a way of collecting and sharing information about the past, but also a means of enabling a relational child-adult co-creation memories and knowledge, and, ultimately, of shaping our present and future, including our interactions and decisions related to school reading. Our study shows that we should be looking for effective means to foster such exchanges if we want school reading to sustain a continuity of culture and tradition but also to contribute to positive social transformation.

## 6. A New Literature Pedagogy

By way of conclusion, we present our reflections on the project itself and our participation in it.

KATARZYNA

I got involved in the project because I was curious about its progress and results. I worked very well in the group; everyone listened to everyone, regardless of age and knowledge. The adults understood that we had to balance our participation in the project with our school duties. The project created nice memories and gave me an experience that will surely be useful in my life. I think that asking different generations about the current school canon is a great idea because we can look at this issue from various perspectives.

MAJA

I took part in the project because I was curious about the attitudes and opinions of other generations about school reading and books in general. I was also interested in the results of the survey in which adults took part. This allowed me to find out what they think about these issues. I also hope that the research we carried out will bring something to the life of the community and will interest others as much as it interested me. Such projects are important as most of my peers complain about the “old” school readings.

ERYK

I was involved in the project because I wanted to achieve its goal and “build bridges” between generations. I also wanted to add my contribution to creating a list of books that could be familiar both to young people and adults. The project could also support other research on this subject, which would benefit society as a whole.

ALEKSANDRA

I was involved in this project because I think that the “gap” between generations which concerns the difference in perception and attitude towards common reading is an interesting topic. The survey can clearly show the contrast between the assessments of books that adults had to read in school in their childhood years and our perceptions of the same texts. The results of this study may be useful in the future, and at some point in time it will certainly be good to compare the answers and choices made by others some time earlier.

MILENA

I wanted to try something new. The project enabled me to understand my relatives and other adults. Thanks to this project, I could learn about my family’s reading habits. I would like to continue this experiment or maybe start a new one to gain more insight into the adult world.

MAGDALENA

I was encouraged to take part in the project by our Polish teacher, Ms. Chawar. The project consisted in gathering information on how adults perceive our obligatory school readings. The task was to interview an adult, e.g. a parent, grandfather or siblings. Reading the interviews, you can get to know various standpoints on the same issue and different habits connected with reading books from a few, a dozen or even several dozen years ago. The interview is an opportunity to talk about books. I think this research was an interesting and enriching task.

NATALIA

I joined the project thanks to Ms. Chawar. She asked me if I would like to take part in it and I agreed. I liked it very much. My task was to interview a family member about books, and I asked my mother for an interview. We discussed the problem of whether school readings are necessary and how they bring generations together. The interviews we conducted made me aware that we can enjoy even very outdated school readings as long as we talk about them.

## EWA

This is another research project carried out by my pupils in collaboration with Justyna and Mateusz. I am very happy that there is a group of pupils willing to take part in such activities because during the three years of joint activities they have grown up and (some of them) have graduated. I am glad that the core of the group—the current 8th grade students—have been joined by younger participants, which promises some continuation of our collaboration. From my point of view, the subject matter of this project is very important and timely. In our previous study on the school canon, the pupils called for more influence on the choice of readings, which is not taken into account in the new curriculum. Studying how the current readings are perceived by former pupils—parents, grandparents, siblings—is very interesting. While waiting impatiently for the results of the interviews and surveys conducted by pupils, I hoped that older readers would not discourage my pupils from reading the obligatory classics and I was not disappointed. The interviews in particular became an opportunity to exchange and compare reading and school experiences. It turned out that books can unite generations and that there are texts that do not lose their relevance and even acquire new meanings when read in other circumstances. This is how they become a basis for intergenerational conversations.

## JUSTYNA AND MATEUSZ

We see both the project and this article as a challenge to typical academic knowledge production. Simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, it also provides an example of new approaches and practices aimed at the development of educational and cultural policies recognizing inclusive intergenerational collaborations informed by diverse perspectives, concerns and experiences, which in turn could result in destabilizing adult-driven policymaking. In particular, we believe that more attention should be given to exploring the role of literary education in fostering the sense of transnational cultural interconnectedness, which could be achieved for example through including more contemporary international children's literature books in the school canon.

## ALL

The introduction of the controversial school canon in Poland shows that negotiations for new texts, problems and values as replacing or complementing those already sanctioned by tradition may not always be possible, despite numerous reservations concerning the recent changes in the school reading lists on the part of professionals and the general public. While the situation in Poland could be seen as an impasse, "Stas and Nel in the 21st Century: Do Long-Established School Readings Connect Generations?" provides a model of a collaborative intergenerational venture enabling a productive and valuable engagement with canonical texts that may make them relevant to the lives of contemporary young readers and of those who read them in their own childhood. Engaging children and adults as co-creators of re-memory-work methods aimed at fostering productive remembering, the project has resulted in the emergence of symmetrical intergenerational communities of readers sharing each other's interests and concerns. In this way, it proves that, just as contemporary texts, literature from the past can play a pivotal role in individual and communal futures. The approach we propose could easily become part of bigger initiatives both in school and in other settings (e.g., libraries and museums) promoting self-reflexive, critical and action-oriented kinship explorations of the material and intangible heritage of Polish and international childhoods, responding to the increasing need for transnational literacy.

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