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What and How Does Today's Child Read? The Voices of Third-grade Pupils from Białystok on Their Encounters with Literature, Favourite Characters, and Creative Writing

Abstract

   This article examines the reading preferences of third-grade pupils from Białystok, focusing on how they engage with literature, their favorite characters, and their own creative writing. The qualitative study, based on focus group interviews and rooted in childhood studies, involved 96 pupils and aimed to capture authentic reading experiences and expressions of literary creativity. The theoretical section outlines key concepts related to children's reading development and the cultural and environmental factors shaping it, referencing prior research (e.g., Baluch, Krasoń, Leszczyński, Ungehauer-Gołąb). The empirical findings highlight the role of adults as mediators, the influence of media and technology, and the need to adapt educational practices to the realities of contemporary childhood. These insights may support teachers, librarians, and parents in fostering reading habits in children.
   Keywords: early primary school pupil; children's literature; literary education; *childhood studies.*

Instead of an introduction – theoretical assumptions of own research

   In an age of ubiquitous media, technology, and an overabundance of "consumer stimuli," it's easy to overlook the crucial role exposure to quality litera-

ture plays in a child's development. Paradoxically, the abundance of available content can be frustrating for both children and their parents, leading to difficulties in choosing appropriate books. On the one hand, contemporary audio-visual culture is gradually replacing contact with the spoken word. Imaginative, rapid communication doesn't foster in-depth reflection or understanding complex, metaphorical content that must be read, not just viewed. On the other hand, modern technologies can support reading by "bringing books to life" by combining words with images, sound, and playful elements, which can also develop a child's aesthetic sensitivity and facilitate the reception of content (Pawelec, 2013). Despite these opportunities, young readers, so-called digital natives, a generation raised in the internet world, accustomed to short, dynamic forms of information transmission often struggle to concentrate and quickly become discouraged by longer reading sessions. Although books are available today in various formats – printed, electronic or as audio books- reading itself is becoming an increasingly greater challenge (see Eurostat data from August 2024 on reading in Europe and research on the state of reading in Poland in 2024 conducted by the National Library).

In this changing world, a new approach to promoting literature is needed – one that takes into account changes in young people's lifestyles, reading habits, and new technological possibilities. The children's book market is developing rapidly in the 21st century – the number of publications is growing, new literary and graphic forms are emerging, and there are a growing number of initiatives promoting reading, such as the "Rabka Festival," the "Children's Book Fair" in many cities in Poland and Europe (e.g., Bologna), storyteller festivals, and the June "National Week of Reading to Children." Schools and libraries also play a significant role as part of the "National Reading Development Program." Simultaneously, the number of blogs, magazines, and discussions devoted to books for young readers is growing, confirming that books continue to serve an important function – as a source of entertainment, cultural identity formation, and emotional support. Since 2001, the "All of Poland Reads to Children" campaign has been running, aimed at helping them choose quality literature and raising awareness among adults about the importance of regular, enthusiastic, and engaging reading with children (Swędrowska, 2014). Such a shared ritual fosters closer family bonds and builds bridges between generations.

Many researchers (educators, psychologists, literary scholars, bibliotherapists) have for years emphasised the importance of consciously introducing children to the world of literature. A key role in this process is played by an adult— a parent, teacher, or caregiver—whose attitude toward reading influences the child more than the book itself. Alicja Baluch emphasises that how a caregiver perceives and interprets a text can be crucial to a child's later interest in literature (Baluch, 1994, p. 10). The importance of a literary guide's emotions, their

ability to "read with emotions," is also emphasised (Żółtowski, 2019).[1] Monika Kupiec (2024, p. 162) encourages working on an attitude that can be described as "reading with children" rather than "reading to children." This is why the process of literary initiation is so important, because reading needs do not arise spontaneously but are the result of conscious, long-term activity in which an adult plays the role of a guide and intermediary in the world of literature (Papuzińska, 1981, p. 203). As Alicja Ungeheuer-Gołąb argues, reading at home, above all, shapes literary taste, values, and moral sensitivity, and the important question we should ask during reading is: what kind of person do we want to raise? (insensitive or sensitive to the fate of people and the world) (A. Ungehauer-Gołąb, 2001, p. 28). Anna Janus-Sitarz also emphasises the importance of shared "reading at home" and the need to familiarise children with the diversity of cultural texts, as well as discuss difficulties in their reception, developing young people's reflectiveness, and encouraging them to reflect on "the value of their own encounters with literature" (Janus-Sitarz, 2009, p. 115). Literary scholars also emphasise the importance of ensuring the quality of children's literature, because the so-called "first books," as Grzegorz Leszczyński (2012) calls them, remain in a child's consciousness for life as "big-little books." Zofia A. Kłakówna (2013), in turn, draws attention to the quality of reading, writing about "reading weather," which largely depends on the teacher – their attentiveness, reflectiveness, flexibility in selecting reading materials, and the ability to adapt methods to the emotional and intellectual needs of children. Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska and Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek (2017) emphasise that the foundation of contact with a book should be freedom and pleasure.

All of this research confirms that literary education plays a key role in a child's overall development and in shaping their identity. In early childhood education, therefore, collaboratively discovering the value of literature and supporting students in the process of becoming conscious, attentive, and critical readers of texts is particularly important. This raises important research questions: what do contemporary children actually read? How do they perceive books and the reading process itself in the context of their daily lives? These are key questions in the analysis of children's reading preferences – a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, determined by both internal and external factors. Individual interests, emotional needs, developmental stage, and previous reading experiences influence these preferences. The form of exposure to books is also significant – whether a child reads independently, listens to texts read by adults, or uses other forms of media such as e-books or audio books. The availability and appeal of books are also significant: their graphic design, difficulty level, subject matter, and their presence in the child's environment. The influ-

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[1] All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

ence of the social environment – family, school, and peers – also plays a significant role. Reading preferences are also influenced by favourite literary characters, with whom children identify, and their own creativity – ideas for books they would like to write. The latter are not only a manifestation of creativity but also a valuable source of knowledge about a child's inner world. All these elements contribute to the image of a child's reading taste, level of engagement, and development direction of reading skills.

It's worth noting that the topic of reading preferences among early childhood education students was addressed in Polish research as early as the late 1990s. Katarzyna Krasoń (1999) highlighted the numerous methodological challenges associated with studying this age group. She emphasized that children's literary preferences are largely shaped by adult intermediaries – parents, teachers, and librarians – meaning that children's book choices do not always reflect their true interests, but rather stem from available resources or targeted adult suggestions. The researcher also pointed out that starting school is associated with obligatory reading, which can discourage reading, especially when the suggested books do not align with the child's actual needs and preferences. Krzysztof Kruszko's (2015) study demonstrated that early school children most often listen to books read to them by their mothers, especially in urban settings. Girls show a greater interest in literature than boys, preferring fairy tales, poetry, and newspapers, while boys are more likely to reach for adventure books and gaming magazines. Children's reading is primarily supported by schools through competitions and library activities, and the school library is the most common source of books. In their free time, only some children read books on their own initiative, and only a few receive them as gifts. Olimpia Gogolin and Eugeniusz Szymik (2017) presented the results of a survey conducted among students in grades 1–3 of primary schools in Czerwionka-Leszczyn (Silesian Voivodeship), the aim of which was to examine children's relationships with books as readers. The survey allowed them to determine what motivates students to read, what attracts their attention in books, and where they look for interesting titles. The study results revealed a clear influence of popular culture, particularly Disney cartoons and fads (e.g., Pokémon) (Vasquez 2005, pp. 201-215), and the dominant role of required reading, including literary classics (especially works by Brzechwa and Andersen). A.M. Klas-Markiewicz and M. Szczęsna (2023) also joined the discussion on reading among students in grades 1-3, analyzing reading levels, motivations for reading choices, thematic and genre preferences, and children's attitudes toward the Ministry of Education and Science's reading canon. Their research, also based on a diagnostic survey, focused on children from rural areas. The study showed that students in younger grades were eager readers, reaching not only for required reading but also for books outside the canon, especially about animals.

Due to its limited space, this article presents only a selected portion of my own research on the reading preferences of early school-age children. I consciously focused on specific issues, omitting other categories, such as favourite and less-favourite books (including required school reading), motivations for reading, and factors influencing reading choices, which would require a separate study. Therefore, I present a portion of the research that reveals children's forms of contact with books, their favourite literary characters, and ideas for their own stories.

Methodological Assumptions of the Own Research

The impetus for undertaking my own research into children's reading preferences came from the desire to engage in direct dialogue with young readers. I wanted to hear their authentic voices regarding their first experiences with literature, so I decided to conduct the research within a qualitative paradigm, grounding it in the perspective of childhood studies.

My research focused on the responses of children regarding their forms of contact with books, who are about to complete the first stage of education, their favourite literary characters, and their ideas for their own literary creations. The study aimed to understand the ways in which children interact with literature, their emotional and cognitive responses to literary characters, and their attempts to construct their own stories. I wanted to capture how children perceive books and reading as part of their daily lives and how they express themselves and their needs through literature. Therefore, I formulated the following main problem: What are the reading preferences of contemporary third-grade students? I also developed specific research questions to explore this issue: What forms of contact with books do children completing the first stage of education prefer? Which literary characters would they like to befriend, and why? What ideas do they have for their own literary stories, and what do these stories reveal about their inner worlds?

From the perspective of contemporary childhood studies, a key assumption is that understanding children's reality is only possible with the active participation of children themselves, who are the most comprehensive and reliable sources of knowledge about their own childhood experiences. Analysing children's statements and creations, researchers look for manifestations of their self-awareness and signals regarding their needs. Therefore, recognising children's agency, listening carefully to their voices, and refraining from judgment are crucial in this approach (Clark, 2004; Szymborska, 2016; Zwiernik, 2012; Qvortrup and Corsaro, 2009). I attempted to reconstruct children's perspectives on books and reading, based on the authentic statements of the study partici-

pants. In line with the principles of childhood studies, which treat children as full co-creators of meaning rather than merely recipients of adult narratives, the analysis of children's statements also aimed to present them as active, competent participants in culture. This approach allows not only for a better understanding of contemporary children's reading practices, but also for the formulation of conclusions important for teachers, parents, librarians and cultural and educational policy makers.

The data collection method was focus group interviews. Participants were children aged 9-10, third-grade students from eight public primary schools in Białystok. The research sample was purposive and was selected through school principals, who demonstrated openness and interest in the research topic. Participation in the study was preceded by consent from the principals, parents, and the children themselves. A total of 96 students participated in the study – 48 girls and 48 boys. I conducted interviews with 16 groups of children – two groups of six (composed of three girls and three boys) from each of the eight schools. In accordance with the principle of contextuality (Ciechowska, 2017, p. 120), the interviews took place in a familiar environment for the children – on the school grounds, in their classrooms, in the school library, or in the afterschool club. Each meeting lasted approximately 40 minutes. The anonymity of the children participating in the study was maintained – their names and statements were marked with the following symbols: from Dz1 to Dz3 (where "Dz" denotes a girl), from Ch1 to Ch3 (where Ch denotes a boy), and from F1 to F16 (where "F" denotes the focus group number). The children were given cards – identifiers, e.g., F1Dz1Ola. In this article, I will quote selected statements of the children, marking them, for example, F1Ch1 (the first focus group, boy no. 1). I recorded the interviews with a voice recorder and transcribed them immediately afterward, which allowed me to record initial observations and apparent digressions that might prove important in further analysis (Lisek-Michalska, (2013, pp. 28–29).

I conducted focus group interviews from January to June 2025, using an interview plan beforehand prepared, based on open-ended questions. Flexibility was also a key element of the interviews – subsequent questions were prompted by the children's responses, allowing for the development of topics important from their perspectives. This format, inspired by free dialogue (Kvale, 2013), fostered the children's active participation and allowed them to freely express their opinions and experiences. The group nature of the interviews enabled observation of the children's mutual influence on each other's statements – complementing and confirming them, but also confronting differing opinions.

Analysis and Interpretation of My Own Research Results

The collected material was subjected to thematic analysis. Following the approach of V. Braun and V. Clarke (2022), this analysis involves the active involvement of the researcher – not only identifying themes but also developing an understanding of how participants construct their reality. Through inductive coding and repeated analysis, I categorized the responses, identifying the main themes that corresponded to the research objectives and questions. The following sections present a summary of these themes and their interpretation.

1. Children's Contacts with Books

It's worth beginning the study of children's reading preferences by exploring the forms of their contact with books, because the way a child engages with text – whether reading independently, listening to text read by an adult, or using audio books – has a key impact on their engagement, understanding of the content, and shaping their individual reading preferences. Analysis of children's responses revealed a significant diversity of reading practices and highlighted, above all, the role of the interpersonal dimensions of this activity.

Many children reported that they enjoyed reading independently because it helped them focus and remember the content. Reading independently also helped them empathize with the characters and gave them a greater sense of independence and control in learning about the story. Examples include: "I prefer to read alone because it helps me focus and remember" (F16Ch2), "I read alone because I don't like being interrupted" (F5Ch3), and "I don't like being read to because it makes it difficult to feel the emotions" (F5Ch1). Several children (boys) combined independent reading with other activities, for example, sharing chapters with their parents or listening to audio books (F3Ch1,2; F10Ch3; F9Ch1; F11Ch1).

Adult reading was also highly appreciated by children, especially before bed, as it had a calming and relaxing effect. It also proved effective for more challenging school reading assignments, as it facilitated better comprehension. It was important for the children that reading aloud was done "nicely", with appropriate intonation and voice modulation, adapted to the individual characters ("Mum imitates the characters nicely" (F8Dz3), "I love it when mum reads to me – it's time just for me and mum" (F8Dz1), "The teacher at school reads so interestingly that you want to listen" (F15Dz1). The children most often mentioned their mother as the person who reads, but also their father, grandmother, older siblings, teacher or after-school care worker. Kruszko's research (2015) also indicated their mother as the person who reads most often to the children. One of the girls emphasised that she loves reading together with her sister, because

it often turns into fun and making up stories together. Reading, therefore, has a ludic function – it turns into creative play and a form of creative expression. This confirms the assumptions of childhood studies, which indicate that children not only receive culture but also co-create it. A book does not exist without a reader, so it's worth bringing it to life through play. It's worth letting children play with literature – staging it, telling it, and adding their own versions, because, as Papuzińska claims, reading should always be a starting point for other activities (Papuzińska, 1981, pp. 80–82).

The importance of a loved one is particularly evident in home reading rituals, which build an atmosphere of closeness and a sense of security. In the school context, a teacher who can read inspires admiration, becoming an authority, and books reading – becomes more interesting and accessible ("I like it when the teacher reads, because then I understand better" F16Ch3). Although few children used the term "audio book," many statements referred to listening to stories, which served a relaxing function – children listened to them to rest ("without having to strain" F2Ch2), to help them fall asleep ("I listen before bed with my eyes closed" F6Ch3), and also aesthetically – they appreciated acting skills, and the role-playing brought them clear joy.

As children's statements suggest, reading serves not only a cognitive but also an emotional function. Daily rituals, such as evening reading, are an important form of building relationships; reading with loved ones is a time of being together, not just acquiring information. Children learn through relationships and rituals, which often prove to be the most lasting and enjoyable reading experiences, shaping habits and attitudes toward books. This emotional embedding of reading in relationships directly influences the development of reading motivations, which can be divided into external (instrumental), resulting from obligation or adult pressure, and internal (autotelic), based on the child's inner need (Ungeheuer-Gołąb, 2001, pp. 20–21). It is these autotelic motivations that most often lead to a lasting and positive attitude toward reading. In this context, the process of so-called reading initiation – the first experiences with books that have the potential to shape a child's long-term reading habits – becomes particularly important. This initiation takes place primarily in a family environment, and it is the family that most often provides the first impulse to reach for a book.

The school library also plays an important role in shaping reading habits. Most children surveyed declare that they enjoy going there and perceive the library as a peaceful, warm, and friendly place. Some visit regularly, others primarily for required reading. Students often emphasise the importance of the atmosphere and the role of the librarian, who actively supports their reading choices. Children appreciate the opportunity to choose their own books and the openness of the librarians: "There's always something interesting" (F8, Dz1), "I like the librarian because she recommends good books" (F3, Ch2), and "I go

there several times a month; it's my favourite place at school" (F9, Dz1). The range of books available for borrowing is diverse – from school reading, through adventure stories, fantasy, animal books, and even comics. It is worth quoting one statement from a student referring to the book *About a Girl Who Wanted to Save Books* by Klaus Hagerup: "[…]She (the main character of the book) read every day and found out that books that no one reads disappear. So she took half the library to save them" (F11, Act 3) – which shows the emotional connection the reader has with the story.

Critical voices also emerge – some children note that books are damaged or the library doesn't offer interesting titles: "I like some, but there are more interesting books in a bookshop" (F2, Ch3), "They usually don't have the books I'm interested in" (F9Ch1). At the same time, they point to other sources of books, such as municipal libraries or online bookstores, for example, "I buy books from Trzy Kropki bookstore – now it's only available online" (F2, Ch1). For some children, the school library is their only place of contact with literature, especially when there are no books at home. Therefore, the library serves not only an educational function but also a compensatory and social one, enabling the development of reading skills in children who might otherwise be deprived of it.

2.   Favourite Book Characters and Motivations for Befriending Them

It's worth exploring children's reading preferences by considering their favourite book characters and the motivations behind choosing and identifying with them. Choosing characters with whom children want to identify or admire helps us better understand their emotional needs, developing value systems, interests, and perceptions of the world. Therefore, it is a significant factor influencing their reading tastes and engagement.

Among the most frequently mentioned favourite literary characters were Beadie, the heroine of Maria Kruger's book, a girl with a magic bead that grants wishes, and Harry Potter, valued by children for his courage and "friendliness" (F13Ch2,3; F15Ch1,2). Both characters were appreciated for their extraordinary powers, access to the world of magic, and ability to influence reality, which may indicate a child's desire for agency and the need to escape into the world of imagination. Lampo, the dog from Roman Pisarski's book "*About a Dog Who Ridden a Railway,*" a character symbolising loyalty, attachment, and fidelity, also ranked high on the list of favourite characters. Candy, the cat from Waldemar Cichoń's series "*Candy, You Rascal!*", also enjoyed considerable popularity, gaining recognition for his mischievousness and sense of humour – children emphasised his playful and "human" nature. Respondents also readily identified with the characters in Astrid Lindgren's book *The Children of Bullerbyn*, whose everyday lives and ordinary adventures seemed to build a sense of community, secu-

rity, and belonging (F2Dz1,2; F10Dz2,3; F10Ch1). Statements referring to the group of friends from the *Scooby-Doo* comic strip were similar – children appreciated their cooperation, mutual support, and shared adventures, which may indicate the importance of the relational dimension of reading (F9Ch1,2; F16Ch1; F6Ch1,2). Among the characters mentioned was the protagonist of Hugh Lofting's series, Doctor Dolittle, distinguished by wisdom and empathy, who understood animal language, which clearly corresponds to a child's interest in the natural world and concern for animals. Pippi Longstocking, as a rebellious character, full of energy and courage, proved to be a symbol of independence, creativity, and childlike autonomy (F1 Dz3; F4 Dz2,3). In turn, Hermione Granger, as an intelligent, helpful, and consistent heroine, was seen as a role model, embodying the values of knowledge, agency, and solidarity valued by children (F3 Dz3,1; F6 Dz2; F10 Dz2).

Children also mentioned other characters they found likeable, highlighting the traits they found particularly attractive. Funny and likeable characters, such as Tomek Lebski, were very popular, appreciated for their sense of humour, mischief, and friendly nature (F2Ch1; F3Ch2,1; F7Ch2; F7Dz3). Other magical characters, such as *Elsa from Frozen*, also attracted attention because of her extraordinary abilities (F8Dz1; F14Dz1,3; F17Dz1,2). Brave and loyal characters such as Batman, Spiderman (F9Ch1,2; F16Ch1) or Kazik from the book *Kazik's Africa* by Lukasz Wierzbicki (F5Act1,2; F13Ch2,3) also aroused admiration, whose traits – courage, readiness to act and helping others – were seen as worthy of imitation. Among the indications, there were also "touching" characters, such as Asiunia from the book by Joanna Papuzińska (F6Act1,2; F15Act1,2,3; F16Act2) – a child living during the war, or the siblings from *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, whose fate moved children and aroused compassion and empathy (F15Act1,2,3; F1Ch2,3).

The declared desire to befriend literary characters is often linked to several recurring themes. Children long to experience extraordinary adventures together, and they find qualities in the characters that they value and identify with—such as courage, intelligence, and a sense of humour. They often admire specific abilities of the characters, such as the ability to cast spells or communicate with animals. Some children mentioned characters from computer games, such as those from *Minecraft* (F9Ch1,2; F11Ch1,2,3; F1Ch1,2,3), while others expressed a desire to befriend real-life characters, such as Robert Lewandowski (F3Ch3; F5Ch1,2). Friendship with book characters can serve an important function for children – providing motivation for reading and simultaneously serving as a source of inspiration and positive emotions. Children's choices, both typical and unique, reveal the richness of their imagination, the diversity of their needs, and the individual paths they take to build their identity. This choice of characters reflects the diverse needs of children – from the longing for magic and the

extraordinary, through the desire for close relationships and a sense of community, to the aspirations of being wise and unique.

It's worth noting that many children's choices often reflected their recent reading – their favourite characters were often from books they had just read. This demonstrates the dynamic nature of children's preferences – what's current and fresh can quickly acquire a special emotional significance. An example is the hare who conquered fear from Elżbieta Zubrzycka's therapeutic fable "*About the hare, Filip, who out of fear accomplished great deeds,*" which was suggested to the boy by his mother (F7Ch3). For the child, this story was important and necessary—it helped him confront his own fears, confirming the therapeutic potential of literature.

It's also significant that the characters mentioned included Elsa, Batman, Spiderman, and *Minecraft* characters. Their presence suggests the considerable impact of contemporary pop culture, extending beyond the traditional boundaries of children's literature. Although some of these characters have their counterparts in books or comics, for most children, the primary source of contact with them was audiovisual media—films, TV series, computer games, and the internet. From the perspective of childhood studies, such choices once again reveal children as active participants in a culture that is now clearly transmedia and multichannel. For them, literature is just one possible source of inspiration—games, YouTube, streaming platforms, and mobile apps are equally (and often more) important. Children move fluidly between various forms of media, creating their own individual cultural configurations. They often reach for a book after watching a film, while a computer game can prompt them to seek out information or literary history, and vice versa (Buckingham, 2013; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Literature remains relevant here, but becomes one of many equally important channels for participating in culture. This choice of protagonists reflects not necessarily a lack of interest in literature, but rather the complexity of the contemporary cultural landscape in which children operate. Children's cultural identity is shaped today in the digital space, but it's worth remembering that it is still deeply rooted in narrative forms of self-expression.

It should be noted that the majority of the children surveyed indicated their favourite literary characters as characters from school reading lists, such as Carol, Doctor Dolittle, and characters from *Harry Potter* and *The Bullerby Children*. This may be a sign that the requirement to read school reading lists, despite its institutional "compulsion," allows children to engage with classic children's literature. The children's choices often reflected traditional gender preferences. Girls more often identified with heroines such as Britta, Anna (*The Bullerby Children*), and Hermione (*Harry Potter*), while boys more often identified with male characters. During the focus group discussions, a significant degree of agreement was observed among the participants. The children demon-

strated enthusiasm and mutual understanding, often reacting spontaneously, emphasizing shared experiences with exclamations such as "I like that too!" "Oh! I know that too!", etc.

3. Children's Ideas for Their Own Books

It's worth exploring children's reading preferences by considering their ideas for their own books, as these creative concepts reveal the topics that interest them the most. The children eagerly shared their ideas for books they would like to write. Analysis of the collected materials revealed the children as "authors" capable of self-reflection and allowed us to discern the richness of themes present in children's imaginations. Their hypothetical stories were not only a testament to creativity but also a glimpse into the children's world of emotions, values, and needs. Many students chose magical and fantasy themes as the basis for their literary ideas. In their stories, magic served as a tool for exploring emotions and dreams, as well as for symbolically coping with difficulties and problems. Characters such as "sorceresses fighting evil" (F2Dz1,2), "children with supernatural powers" (F10Dz1) or "magical animals" (F10Dz2,3) were a metaphor for the need for agency and control over the surrounding world, and for coping with uncertainty (Bettelheim, 1996, pp. 31-33). Many of the responses were inspired by literature and media – there were references to the Harry Potter series and fairy tales with fantasy elements (e.g., Sonic, Pokémon) (F5Ch1,2; F10Ch1,2,3; F11Ch1). The children expressed a desire to write a continuation of the adventures of Harry Potter and his descendants, as well as a continuation of their popular book, The Incredible Adventures of Ten Socks by Justyna Bednarek (e.g., further adventures of the "pirate sock" (F10Ch2), the "magician" (F10Ch1), and the "circus performer" (F14,Ch2,3)). This indicates a strong attachment to the world presented in both series and a need for further exploration. The students' responses also included interesting attempts at inter-textual connections between characters from different literary universes. For example, there were ideas for a meeting between Judy Moody (the heroine of Megg McDonald's series) and Wimpy Kid (the hero of Jeff Kinney's series) (F16Dz1,Ch2) as well as a juxtaposition of the Wimpy Kid character with Tom Gates (the hero of Liz Pichon's series) (F4Ch1,2). Such solutions demonstrated the children's creative approach to familiar narratives, which at the same time fits in with the need for storytelling, deeply rooted in human nature. Contemporary culture confirms Walter Benjamin's observations regarding the enduring importance of narrative as a means of conveying experience, knowledge, and solace, as well as a tool for critically analysing reality (Benjamin, 1975, pp. 91-94). A particularly interesting motif was the modern school, where the presence of magic combined with everyday life, creating a unique universe in which children could act as heroes and

solve problems on their own. Magic in this approach became a symbol of strength, agency, and security. Animals appeared equally frequently in children's literature. Alongside the universally known and beloved pets – cats, dogs, fish, and parrots – children also eagerly reached for less obvious species, such as horses, cows, and donkeys, considering creating stories with them as well (F3Dz1; F5Dz3; F10Ch1,2,3). Animals were often personified – there were "talking cats" (F12Dz1,2), inhabitants of the "cat city" (F9Ch3), "guinea pigs as detectives" (F1Ch3) or "Batman the dog in a cape" (F9Ch1,2). The most common themes in these stories concerned friendship, care and rescuing animals (e.g. "*Dog's happiness" – a story about a girl and a dog from the countryside*) (F8Dz2). Animal characters served as close companions, often replacing human characters. Importantly, they were also assigned a value system – empathy, loyalty, and courage. Adventure and action themes were also strongly present. The vast majority of children wanted to write dynamic books, full of puzzles, journeys, and unexpected twists. Their stories abounded with themes such as "robot wars" (F5Ch1) or "spaceships" (F7Ch3), "time travel" (F7Ch1,2), "detectives searching for treasure" (F6Dz1, Ch3), "space expeditions" (F1Ch3), and the conquest of "other planets" (F11Ch1,2, Dz1). Adventure and action became a form of action for them and a way to gain experience. Furthermore, the presence of humour in narratives serves a deconstructive function, allowing children to question existing structures and norms.

Late childhood is a stage of intense cognitive development, characterised by a heightened curiosity about the world and a need for exploration and experimentation. Children at this age can consider the perspectives of others, argue their own positions, and analyse the motives behind their actions, which is clearly manifested in the stories they create. It is in these narratives that children test the limits of their cognitive and social competences, while simultaneously revealing developing moral concepts, such as justice, which help children organise the presented world and understand the actions of the characters (Wadsworth, 1998, pp. 129–130).

Some children were inspired by their own daily lives, families, relationships, and personal experiences. Ideas included books about themselves, family members, a beloved dog, a favourite teddy bear, holidays, or school. These narratives allow children to explore their own identity and imagine themselves in various roles (Erikson, 2004). Examples of such projects included girl characters such as "Zosia – Helpful, Brave, and Pretty" (F7, Dz1) or the story "My Life as a Ballerina" (F12, Dz3), expressing the aspiration to create an ideal self-image.

Children often chose a narrative told by a fictional character, which allowed them to reflect on themselves from a distance. In late childhood, the ability to self-assess develops, based on generalising experiences of successes and failures, leading to an increasingly stable self-image. Realistic and positive self-as-

sessment promotes healthy development and facilitates coping with future crises (Appelt, 2003, p. 5). In this approach, creativity becomes a tool helpful in constructing identity – books served as a form of self-expression. Similarly, many children's statements indicated the joy derived from the act of creation itself, humour, play, and experimentation with form. The children created stories about "broken vacuum cleaners" (F4Ch2), "funny adventures of people with LEGO" (F10, Ch1,2), and "Ptyś the parrot as a comic book hero" (F8Dz2). They perceived writing books as a creative interplay with reality. Their ideas demonstrated a great deal of freedom of thought and a willingness to think outside the box; several boys suggested that they might "someday" also write a game guide (F3 Ch2,3; F10 and 12 Ch1,2).

Social and existential themes also emerged among the children's ideas. The children were able to contextualise their stories in current events, such as the war in Ukraine. They also explored themes related to acceptance, otherness, and loneliness, as in the story inspired by the "ugly duckling." Some stories touched on difficult emotions, such as the death of a beloved dog, which ultimately turned out to be a dream. This was a way of coming to terms with difficult topics and experiences. The children demonstrated an understanding of social reality and a need to describe it – literature became a space for them to process fears, conflicts, and experiences of misunderstanding. In her research, Dorota Klus-Stańska also emphasised that children's stories about their own experiences were a form of searching for meaning and a way to understand themselves and the world around them (Klus-Stańska, 2002, pp. 189–220). Supporting narrative activity in young children should be considered an important element of humanities education and psychosocial development.

Conclusions

The research aimed to give voice to the children themselves – their statements, reflections, and creative ideas served as the starting point for the analysis. Instead of focusing solely on their reading level or knowledge of specific titles, I attempted to understand the meaning children attributed to books and how literature was integrated into their everyday experiences. This allowed me to capture the deeper, relational, and emotional dimension of their contact with literary texts.

My research revealed the diverse nature of children's contact with books, which extended beyond the framework of compulsory school reading. Literature was present in children's lives in many forms – spontaneous reading, listening to audio books, shared reading with adults, and even as a school activity. The importance of the relational aspect of reading proved particularly significant, in

which books became a space for the exchange of emotions and ideas, not merely a teaching tool. Books were presented as a medium not only for learning but, above all, for socialising—a pretext for closeness, conversation, and shared experience, in which the adult played the role not only of the reader but also of a cultural mediator and reading companion. This approach resonated with the concept of, among others, Kupiec (2024), who emphasised the importance of "reading with a child" as a form of building relationships and a shared sense of community.

The children's responses revealed an awareness of their literary preferences. Emotional literature held a special place – stories about friendship, family, loss, and animals – which enabled young readers to understand themselves and the world. Their ideas for their own books, however, demonstrated considerable creativity and a deep immersion in the world of pop culture and children's literature. Recurring themes include magic, school, animals, continuations of existing stories, and the presence of pop culture characters. A particularly interesting phenomenon was intertextuality—children's narratives often connected different worlds and characters, transcending the boundaries of individual texts, creating their own versions and syntheses of familiar stories. This creative way of absorbing and processing content demonstrates the fluidity of the boundaries between high and popular culture, as well as the presence of transmedia thinking, which Henry Jenkins described as a feature of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Today's children are not so much "abandoning" books as changing the way they use them – they want to transform them and imbue them with new meanings, rather than merely receiving pre-made content.

The collected data allows us to formulate several important practical recommendations. Analysis of children's narratives reveals the need to create a space where children can talk, both about themselves and about the fictional world. The ability to create narratives in various situations and for various reasons, from autobiographical to fantasy, fosters the exploration of experiences and imagination. It's worth supporting children in their creativity by providing them with space, time, tools, and confidence in their abilities. Creating books – individual, class, or collaborative – can be an extremely valuable educational tool. Spontaneously created stories are valuable and worth recording not only as evidence of linguistic development but also as a source of knowledge about children's needs and values. Equally important is appreciating children's choices and recognising their preferences when planning library purchases or selecting supplementary reading. It's good to remember that literature requires openness to various forms of communication – from traditional text to audio books, comics, and interactive books. The teacher's task also becomes preparing students to act as responsible consumers of information and critical recipients of opinions, especially in the context of the strong influence of the media, which often promotes behavioural patterns that are detrimental to children's development.

Group dynamics played a significant role in my research – participants interacted with each other, significantly strengthening their engagement and openness. The phenomenon of social facilitation, or the positive influence of others' presence on individual activity, was particularly evident (Ciechowska, 2017, p. 105). Children were more willing to share their experiences and emotions within the group, confirming the validity of discussing certain topics in a group setting rather than in individual interviews, which could cause embarrassment. Although a so-called "dominator" occasionally emerged in the group, influencing other participants with their activity and the force of their speech, the overall effect of the interaction was overwhelmingly positive – the children stimulated each other, and the sense of community facilitated breaking down barriers and opening up to conversation.

The study's limitations include the relatively small number of participants, differences in the dynamics of individual focus groups, and the frequent emergence of dominant leaders, who sometimes restricted the freedom of expression of other children. An additional complication was the limited time available for discussion, resulting from the timeframe of the lesson.

It is worth continuing this type of research, as it reveals only a fragment of a broader phenomenon, and the dynamic nature of contemporary culture – especially influenced by media – can influence reading preferences year after year, even beyond the children's group. Therefore, contemporary analyses should encompass both traditional literature and digital content, reflecting the changing forms of engagement with text.

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Co i jak czyta współczesne dziecko? Głos uczniów klas trzecich z Białegostoku o formach kontaktu z literaturą, bohaterach i własnej twórczości

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje temat preferencji czytelniczych uczniów wybranych klas trzecich z Białegostoku, koncentrując się na ich relacjach z literaturą – formach kontaktu z książką, ulubionych bohaterach oraz pomysłach na twórczość literacką własnego autorstwa. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w metodologii jakościowej, z wykorzystaniem zogniskowanych wywiadów grupowych, w oparciu o założenia childhoodstudies. Analiza tematyczna wypowiedzi 96 uczniów pozwoliła na uchwycenie ich autentycznych doświadczeń czytelniczych, sposobów odbioru literatury oraz form ekspresji twórczej. Tekst składa się z części teoretycznej, w której przedstawiam wybrane koncepcje dotyczące rozwoju czytelnictwa dziecięcego, uwarunkowania środowiskowe i kulturowe tego

procesu, a także omawiam dotychczasowe wyniki badań w tym zakresie (m.in. prace Baluch, Krasoń, Leszczyńskiego, Ungehauer-Gołąb); z części metodologicznej i empirycznej. Wyniki badań podkreślają znaczącą rolę dorosłych jako mediatorów literatury, wpływ mediów i technologii na kształtowanie nawyków czytelniczych oraz konieczność dostosowania metod edukacyjnych do współczesnych realiów życia dziecka. Wnioski sformułowane na podstawie analizy materiału empirycznego mogą okazać się przydatne nauczycielom, bibliotekarzom i rodzicom wspierającym rozwój czytelnictwa wśród dzieci.

Słowa kluczowe: dziecko w młodszym wieku szkolnym, literatura dla dzieci, edukacja literacka, childhoodstudy.