

The Views of Greek Primary School Teachers about Children's Literature

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This study investigates the views of Greek primary education teachers regarding children's literature, their contribution to fostering their pupils' love of reading, and the help they provide their pupils in understanding texts. We investigate what teachers believe children's/young adults' literature to be, how many are interested in it and how many attempt to transmit their love of reading to their students. These attitudes are investigated in correlation to the teachers' education, age, social features, gender and years of teaching experience. In addition, teachers' perceptions of their students' opinions of children's literature are explored and the degree to which they believe the students to be interested in it. Finally, this research also attempts to chart teachers' reading preferences.

The research

The present research was conducted in 2007 and 2008 and records educators' views of children's literature. Questionnaires were sent out to teachers from different regions of Greece who were receiving further training in the Department of Primary Education Pedagogy at the University of the Aegean. The questionnaire contained 34 questions, the replies to which were codified and processed statistically. To extract and present the results, the frequencies and percentages in the replies were used. All findings with the respondents' gender were correlated and, in order to extrapolate the criteria on which the sample of educators would be grouped, the Data Analysis, Correspondence Analysis and Cluster Analysis methods, were used. It was decided to conduct this research in order to explore teachers' perceptions about children's literature due to the fact that teacher training in Greece had passed through a number of stages. Up to the 1980s, teachers were trained in a two-year programme at pedagogical institutes, which were abolished at the end of that decade. Throughout the 1980s, four-year courses for teachers were initiated in Primary Education Pedagogy Departments at Greek universities. Starting in 1997, programmes for the Academic and Professional Upgrading of Primary and Kindergarten Teachers were instituted to upgrade the two-year teacher-training

diplomas to a four-year programme. These upgrading programmes were offered for about five years.

The existing literature

A review of the literature pertinent to this research has shown that comparable studies have not been carried out, other than two studies, carried out in the early 1990s by Lehman (1990) and Scharer et al. (1992), which refer to teachers' opinions on children's literature. The first study carried out by Lehman (1990) outlines teachers' perspectives on the role of children's literature in reading programs; the implementation of literature — based reading programs; and the relationship between teachers' perceptions and actual practice. Lehman's study (1990) indicated that literature programs should be developed by teachers themselves and that elementary reading programs should be based primarily on children's literature. Furthermore, the same study showed that teachers did not have shared beliefs nor did they follow the same practices. For example, some believed that students should read many books while others believed that students should read one book in depth.

The second study, carried out by Scharer et al. (1992), investigated teachers' viewpoints concerning: the role that children's literature plays in reading instruction; the use of literature in classroom reading programs; and the relationship of teachers' beliefs to practice. Scharer indicates that teachers do not change what they believe about reading instruction but adapt their teaching structure to reading instruction, using literature. Furthermore, Sharer states that less emphasis is placed by teachers on factors such as the elements of literature, the wholeness of texts or the craft of the writer but focus more on the way in which literature is supported in other curricular areas.

Comparing the two studies outlined above, it can be concluded that these studies relate to the opinions of teachers about reading and literacy programs in the school. This present study, on the other hand, is different from the above studies as other factors are taken into consideration, such as: the relationship of the gender of the teachers to their opinions about children's literature; their contribution to fostering their pupils' love of reading, and the interest that their students show. Unlike the studies outlined above, this study lists which literature books the teachers prefer, teachers' goals in order of importance, and how much children read, according to age. These factors are categorized in three groups according to various factors. Although this study is different from the studies referred to above, it provides information about teachers' opinions about children's literature and contributes to the relevant research at an international level.

Objectives

The objectives of this research project were:

1. To discover what teachers believe children's literature to be and the degree to which they promote it among their pupils.
2. To investigate teachers' aims and priorities in teaching children's literature.
3. To investigate the degree to which teachers believe their students are interested in children's literature and whether children find it interesting, boring or difficult.
4. To discover whether teachers read children's literature, correlated with the children's age, gender and level of studies.
5. To ascertain the type of children's books teachers prefer to read, correlated with their gender, studies and age.

The findings

The sample was made up of 744 primary school teachers, 252 men and 492 women.

The processing of the material provided the following data: 19.09% of the total were 23–30 years old, and the majority (52.55%) 31–40. Consequently, 71.64% of teachers had been taught children's literature in the Primary Education Pedagogy Departments of universities. Of the rest, 21.91% were between 41–50, and only 5.24% were over 50 years of age. This latter group of teachers were graduates of pedagogical institutes and some had been taught children's literature in programmes for the Academic and Professional Upgrading of Primary and Kindergarten Teachers' certificates.¹ Table 1 sets out the gender and years of service of the teachers in the research sample.

Table 1. Teachers by gender and length of service

Years of service	Men		Women		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1–5	37	14.68	146	29.67	183	24.60
6–10	46	18.25	85	17.28	131	17.61
11–15	49	19.44	90	18.29	139	18.68
16–20	66	26.19	85	17.28	151	20.30
>20	52	20.63	80	16.26	132	17.74
No reply	2	0.79	6	1.22	8	1.08
TOTAL	252	100.00	492	100.00	744	100.00

¹ Both Lehman (1990:8) and Scharer (1992:8) in their investigations found that the teachers report that their students have positive attitudes toward reading, that a 80–85% percentage of them read aloud books of their own choice at least on daily basis. Both also Lehman (1990:10) and Scharer (1992:15) διαπιστώνουν the importance of reading many books versus studying one book in-depth.

The percentage of women teachers who had up to 5 years of service was double that of men. The percentage of men with 6–15 years of service was slightly higher than the corresponding figure for women. Also, the percentage of men with more than 15 years of service was 40% higher than the corresponding figure for women.

Of male teachers, 9.13% had attended post-graduate studies. The corresponding percentage among women was 6.30%.

Table 2. Teachers by gender and by views of what constitutes children's literature

What is children's literature?	Men		Women		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Literature about children	81	32.14	187	38.09	268	36.02
Literature addressed to children	27	10.71	100	20.33	127	17.07
Texts offering aesthetic enjoyment	12	4.76	37	7.52	49	6.59
Texts that cultivate the imagination	14	5.56	47	9.55	61	8.20
Texts that cultivate language	16	6.35	41	8.33	57	7.66
Texts that develop the personality	8	3.17	22	4.47	30	4.03
A kind of art	10	3.97	24	4.88	34	4.57
Texts that instruct	18	7.14	20	4.07	38	5.11
Something that contributes to intellectual development and love of reading	14	5.56	24	4.88	38	5.11

Table 2 offers the most interesting data in the project, since an understanding of what constitutes children's literature may influence teachers' attitudes, behaviour and convictions about literature as well as the ways in which they teach it. The question asked was an open-ended one and during its indexing and processing, the replies were grouped and ranked in categories that were as condensed as possible. Thus, the first column of the table resulted from processing the teachers' replies, which were related to what they were taught and possibly to personal opinions formed under the influence of social and intellectual factors and to aspects of their cultural background. The parameters thus created, either express the perceived content of children's literature or describe it on the basis of its functions (development of personality, instruction) or features (imagination).

The most significant differentiations between the two genders in terms of the way in which they perceived the content of children's literature can be observed in the replies "Literature about children" and "Literature addressed to children". A higher percentage of women than men cited these two descriptions. The first reply was the choice most preferred by the respondents, even though the most prevalent definitions of children's literature suggest that it is not necessary for a book to be about children, since such texts are sometimes about fictional adult characters. The definitions cited by teachers

believe it is necessary for these books to be addressed to children, to offer aesthetic enjoyment, to cultivate the faculties of language and imagination, and to contribute to the intellectual and overall development of the child's personality. In fact, cultivating the imagination was cited by a percentage of women (9.55%), almost twice as high as that of men (5.56%). Approximately the same proportion of women believed that children's literature contributed to developing language, to cultivating the mind and, above all, to developing the personality. Thus they recognised the pedagogical and instructive dimensions of texts for children that were characteristic of children's literature in the past. At the same time, a larger percentage of women than men believed in the aesthetic enjoyment of books. However, a larger proportion of men than women believed that children's literature consisted of "texts that instruct" or contributed to "intellectual development and love of reading". Scharer's study (1992:12) also indicated that the cognitive/affective construct refers to the emphasis that teachers place on the selection and use of books for two reasons: affectively for the purpose of enjoyment or cognitively as a means to assist children in acquiring knowledge about literature, literacy, or specific content. Even in instances of teachers with strong literary goals, children's enjoyment of literature and motivation to read books was stressed more than the development of the children's understandings of the writer's craft.

In the main, educators of both genders liked teaching children's literature and also promoted it among their pupils. The following table reflects this fact.

Table 3. Teachers' promotion of children's literature

	Men		Women		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Not at all	6	2.38	4	0.81	10	1.34
A little	92	36.51	133	27.03	225	30.24
A lot	126	50.00	273	55.49	399	53.63
Very much	23	9.13	81	16.46	104	13.98
No reply	5	1.98	1	0.20	6	0.81
TOTAL	252	100.00	492	100.00	744	100.00

As the data demonstrates, women promoted children's literature among their pupils "very much" and "a lot", whereas a higher percentage of male teachers promoted children's literature "a little".

To a greater degree than other teachers, university graduates (women and men alike) declared that they promote children's literature either "not at all" or "a little". Male and female graduates of pedagogical institutes and male graduates of upgrading programmes appeared more likely than their other colleagues to declare that they promoted children's literature "a lot", while male and female graduates of upgrading programmes appeared more likely than their other colleagues to declare that they promoted it "very much".

The majority of teachers (54.97%) in primary education identified the categories of “very much” and “very” interested in children’s literature, for their pupils, with a higher percentage of women than men making these observations (men: 49.21%, women: 57.93%)¹. Approximately the same proportion of men (48.81%) believed that their students were interested “a little” or “not at all” in children’s literature. The percentage of women who observed that their pupils were “a little” or “not at all” interested was comparatively lower (40.65%) than for men. Male teachers noted that 1.59% of their students believed that children’s literature was either “very” boring, 5.16%, “fairly” boring, 8.33%, or “minimally boring” whilst 1.98% of them found it “not at all” boring. Female colleagues, in comparison, ranked student views, in the same categories, as 0.61%, 3.86%, 20.53% and 18.29%, respectively. The rankings “very” and “fairly” boring were selected by men and women who were primarily graduates of university departments of pedagogy. 1.59% of teachers believed that students regarded children’s literature as “very” difficult and a higher percentage (11.51%) ranked it as “fairly difficult”. These teachers were mainly graduates of university departments of pedagogy. Some 16.67% of male teachers believed that their students considered children’s literature “minimally” difficult, while a smaller proportion (10.71%) felt that their pupils regarded it as “not at all” difficult. No reply was received from 59.52% of the male teachers and similarly, more than half the women (55.28%) did not reply to this question.

As regards the goals that teachers have when teaching children’s literature, of particular interest is the finding that a higher percentage of men (17.46%) attached priority to the enjoyment of the text (13.82%), whereas women, regarded the pedagogical objectives (4.67%) as more important (3.97%). Both genders, however, highlighted aesthetic enjoyment and pedagogical objectives (female (79.27%), male (73.81%).

Table 4. Percentage of teachers who read children’s books:
Distribution per year by age group and number of books

AGE	1-3		4-6		7-10		>10	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
23-30	40.00	37.70	20.00	33.61	20.00	14.75	15.00	10.66
31-40	49.61	25.95	24.03	40.84	17.05	13.74	6.20	17.56
41-50	33.73	35.00	33.73	36.25	15.66	12.50	13.25	13.75
51-60	44.44	47.62	27.78	38.10	11.11	4.76	5.56	9.52
	42.86	31.30	27.78	37.60	16.27	14.23	9.13	14.63

According to Table 4, a higher percentage of male than female teachers read between 1-3 books of children’s literature per year. This holds true, especially among women, 23-30 years old, and over 40. Male teachers who read the same number of books, were aged between 31-40 and 51-60. A larger percentage of males than females, although much smaller than the previous figure, read 7-10 books a year. This was mainly true for males aged 23-40 and females aged, 23-30. Finally, a higher percentage of women

aged 31–40 and 51–60 and men ages 41–50, read 4–6 books annually, while 17.56% of women aged 31–40, read more than 10 books per year.

Table 5. The types of children's books teachers prefer by gender

Types of books	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Historical	123	48.81	181	36.79	304	40.86
Social	126	50.00	310	63.01	436	58.60
Detective	19	7.54	41	8.33	60	8.06
Humour	69	27.38	166	33.74	235	31.59
Adventure	73	28.97	205	41.67	278	37.37
Fantasy	81	32.14	147	29.88	228	30.65
Science fiction	39	15.48	43	8.74	82	11.02
Folktales-fables	104	41.27	281	57.11	385	51.75
Poetry	43	17.06	113	22.97	156	20.97
Comics	45	17.86	72	14.63	117	15.73

Table 5 shows the types and genres of books preferred by the teachers who took part in the project. The overwhelming majority of the data in Table 5 reflects anticipated preferences. However, they also indicate unexpected preferences in the selections of the type of literature, by gender. For example, more women preferred detective fiction than men. Another unexpected preference among women can be found in the adventure and fantasy fiction categories.

Teachers' preferences by gender, as a function of age, show reading preferences as follows: Men 41–50 and women 31–40 preferred children's historical books, while texts with social content were preferred more by men and women between 31–50 years old. On the contrary, male and female teachers 23–30, preferred detective fiction and humour, but with men ahead percentage wise in each of these two genres. Men 31–50 and an even higher percentage of women 31–40, preferred adventure stories. Women between 23–50 enjoyed fantasy, as did men between 23–30 and 41–50. Science fiction was more interesting to men, 41–50, and to women, 31–50. Male teachers 31–40 appeared less likely than female colleagues of the same age, to prefer folktales and fables, a lack of preference that declined even further, in men 41–50. It is very likely that this orientation in reading preferences among women was associated with their teaching of folktales and fables to their pupils. In this way, reading and teaching were interrelated, although this cannot be reckoned as a factor in favour of science fiction, which did not appear as a literary genre in the Language textbooks until their most recent revision two years ago.

Men who graduated from pedagogical institutes preferred children's books on social, humorous and adventure themes, as well as fantasy, science fiction, folktales, poetry and comics. Their female colleagues, with the same studies, showed a preference for

all the above literary texts, other than fantasy and science fiction. Men with a degree from a pedagogical institute and an upgrading programme, preferred literary texts with historical and social content, as well as folktales and poetry, compared interestingly, with women teachers with the same training who preferred literary texts on social and adventure themes and folktales. And finally, male teachers with a university degree preferred detective and humorous children's books, poetry and comics, compared with their female colleagues with the same education who gave priority to historical, detective and humorous literary texts, as well as to fantasy, science fiction, poetry and comics. These data have led to the conclusion that male and female graduates of pedagogical institutes, with or without the upgrading programme, preferred literary texts with social content and folktales, while their colleagues, both men and women, with a degree from the primary education pedagogy department of a university, preferred detective stories and humorous texts, science fiction and comics.

Grouping of teachers

As can be seen from the foregoing, graduates of primary education departments of universities do not promote children's literature, in particular, among their pupils, and believe, in fact, that the children find it uninteresting and difficult. Also, among the children's books, they preferred detective fiction, humour, science fiction and comics. This does not, of course, mean that there are no university-educated teachers with different characteristics or that other teachers do not have the same profile.

In order to reach a result through the correlation of the variables, that is, the research questions, we used the method of Correspondence Analysis (a Data Analysis method was used, with the Correspondence Analysis). With this method, the most significant criteria for differentiating or grouping these teachers arose. The criteria are set out below in order of significance:

1st differentiation factor

What differentiated the educators taking part in the research, most significantly, were the characteristics of young graduates of university primary education pedagogy departments, as compared with their older colleagues who had graduated from pedagogical institutes and had completed the upgrading programme.

In the first category, there were women with up to five years' service. They believed that pupils find children's literature of very little interest or very difficult. They claimed that they did not promote children's literature, in particular, among their pupils and believed that it was not necessary to urge them to read books for enjoyment. The types of children's books they preferred were comics, detective stories and humour.

In the second category there were men over the age of 30, with more than 10 years experience, who had graduated from pedagogical institutes and completed the upgrading programme. They declared that they systematically urged their pupils to

read children's literature, and that the children were very interested in doing so. The teachers preferred books with social content and attached a priority to the pedagogical objective.

2nd differentiation factor

The second most significant differentiation was between educators who actively promoted children's literature and their colleagues who did not declare such an activity as important.

Teachers in the former case were women, aged mainly between 31–40, who had studied children's literature at university. They set their objectives as promoting both enjoyment of literary texts and an emphasis on the pedagogical dimension and declared that they promoted children's literature strongly among their pupils. They themselves read at least seven children's books per year, preferably poetry, humour, comics, adventure and fantasy stories. In their opinion, students were very interested in children's literature and did not find it at all difficult or boring.

In the latter case, teachers declared that they promoted children's literature minimally or not at all among their pupils. These teachers were mainly men aged between 51 and 60 years old who believed that pupils were only minimally interested in children's literature, if at all, and they definitely found it boring and of little interest.

3rd differentiation factor

As a final observation, the educators who participated in the project can also be differentiated in terms of whether they were graduates of pedagogical institutes and professionally engaged in children's literature or whether they were graduates of pedagogical institutes and upgrading programmes who did not promote children's literature, in particular.

The former had served more than 20 years in the school system and were over 40 years of age. They declare that pupils found children's literature very interesting. They themselves read at least seven children's books annually, and encouraged their students to read books for children.

Graduates of upgrading programmes were younger and less experienced than their other colleagues. They read 1–3 children's books a year and did not promote children's literature, in particular, among their pupils. They believed that their pupils were only minimally interested in children's literature and that they found classes on the subject fairly boring, fairly difficult and of very little interest. And finally, they themselves preferred children's books that were either fantasy or detective stories.

Grouping into clusters

We then applied another data analysis method, Cluster Analysis, which grouped the sample of teachers into clusters with basic common features, based on the similarity of replies. In this way, educators in this survey were grouped into three clusters that were interlinked, as can be seen in the diagram below.

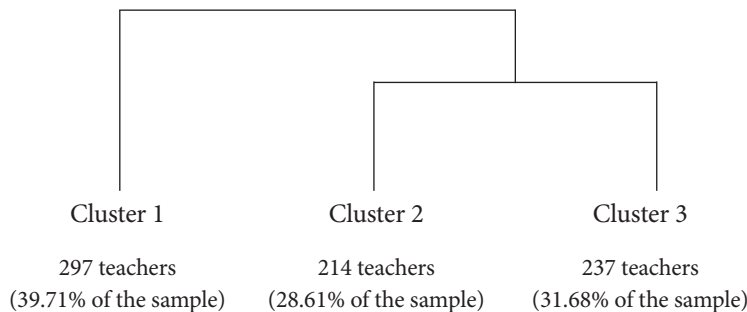


Diagram 1. Grouping by features

The first cluster, which represents some 40% of the sample, contains mainly women teachers who were university graduates. The second accounts for less than 30% of the respondents, who were male graduates of pedagogical institutes. The third cluster comprised men and women teachers who, after graduating from pedagogical institutes, continued their studies in an upgrading programme. The first group, according to the Cluster Analysis diagram, is differentiated from the other two.

In the first cluster, women teachers were up to 30 years old with less than five years of teaching experience, and had studied children's literature at university. Their pupils found children's literature minimally, or not at all boring or difficult. Their preference in children's books was for detective stories and humour, and they attached priority to cultivating the imagination. They believed that children's literature must be taught as an independent subject because, in this way, children came into contact with books effortlessly. And finally, they mainly defined children's literature as books about children, addressed to children.

Teachers in the second cluster were men over 40 years old who had been teaching for more than 15 years. They believed that their pupils were not interested at all in children's literature, and that the most significant reasons for teaching it were pedagogical. They promoted children's literature minimally and did not urge their pupils to read such books because, in their opinion, they didn't have time.

In the third cluster were teachers who declared that they were taught children's literature in the upgrading programme and that they had liked the course. They were between 31 and 50 years old and had taught for more than 10 years. They believed that their pupils were interested in children's literature. For them, the pedagogical aims and aesthetic enjoyment of the books were equally significant. They promoted children's

literature actively among their pupils and regularly urged them to read books. They themselves preferred books with social content.

Summarising

In conclusion, the analyses revealed that the majority of teachers, irrespective of their age and the number of books they read per year, were interested in children's literature, which is why they promoted it among their pupils, whom they perceived to be interested. Furthermore, many teachers attached priority to the enjoyment of a book, but without rejecting a pedagogical purpose. Both men and women combined aesthetic enjoyment and the pedagogical dimension. They read stories from all types of literary genres, with priority given by women, despite what one might expect, to detective fiction and by men, to fantasy texts and comics, irrespective of their studies. The number of years of teaching experience and the type of studies influenced both the number and type of books they read. Cluster Analysis group teachers of both genders fell into three clusters, according to their social features as identified by Correspondence Analysis.

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