

MAGIC AND SOCIETY: HARRY POTTER'S EFFECT ON READING THROUGH THE EMPOWERMENT OF LEARNERS AND OF EDUCATORS

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Abstract

Harry Potter is a blockbuster. Reading the books from the series, one can find challenges and problems every adolescent confronts with. Harry faces real-world challenges, such as: racism, status in society, corruption. Reading about Harry Potter's experiences, the choices he faces and the dilemmas he has empowers the reader (the learner) to find a way through his/her own choices and dilemmas. Education through active citizenship means empowering the learners to take part actively in society and to think critically about certain issues in society. Harry Potter books are a good resource for educators in attaining active citizenship skills.

Keywords: Harry Potter, magic, teaching, reading.

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1. Introduction

There seems to be a general understanding that the opportunities to explore literacy and imagination in schools nowadays are reduced. Reference is made to experiential opportunities, in which the reader has the chance to indulge into an exploration at several layers (reading the books, watching the movies based on the book, discussing critically about the books, with reference to their own lives and extracting some conclusions for the future).

On one hand, for the average reader, Reading is becoming more and more fragmented and somehow limited in time – text messages, audio messages, instead of written messages, used due to the fact that they are faster and easier to understand. On the other hand, learners and readers have more opportunities than ever before to engage in quite innovative and seductive literary practices, due to media and technology. Younger learners are media savvy and schools and educators in general rarely empower or even use the skills of their learners when educating them. The focus is still on the content and on the educator and less on the learner.

2. Harry Potter series – a reading for educators and learners

The blockbuster success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series was also sustained and on an increasing trend during the pandemic. According to its editor, Bloomsbury Publishing, the annual profits registered a record during the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns, as more people turned to reading books. According to the statements of the publisher mentioned above, the sales for Harry

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Potter saw a rise of 14% to £185m, while profits were up by more than one-fifth, to £19.2 in the year to the end of February. According to the chief executive Nigel Newton, people *craved intellectual stimulus and comfort*.

The success of Harry Potter series, after 20 years since the publication of the first book increased the desire for reading among many adolescents and young (and not only) adults. In the Harry Potter series, there are some universal issues each person confronts with during one's lifetime. The books provide a cross-cultural representation of contemporary anxieties. These anxieties relate to childhood, to growth/adolescence, to power (both political and personal), to knowledge and education.

According to the report quoted, *Kids and Family Reading Report, 7th edition*, published by *The Scholastic* in 2019, 58% of school aged children (ages 6-17) state that they love or like reading books for fun, while 52% agree that reading books for fun is extremely important or very important. Starting from these findings, the feedback for the educators is that, in order for the learners to be interested in reading, the text has to be fun, but also close to the interests, preoccupations of the readers, so that they could mirror themselves in the respective text.

Harry Potter series can be read as a school story, referring to the way in which it reflects the issues or the challenges many schools and many families too deal with: family roles in education, discipline, pedagogical styles, political influence and close cooperation. It is far from being just a simple book series for children, it is rich in challenges. The decisions made by Harry and the challenges he is being faced with are not purely black and white, bad and good, devilish and godly. There are shades of grey in the world Harry is part of. There are opportunities of redemption for many characters in Harry Potter series. The challenges Harry Potter faces and the problems Harry Potter has are from the real world, they refer to mean teachers, school examinations, bullies, crushes between boys and girls, they are all common experiences. The hardships of school life are common, and the power of perseverance through difficulties and hardships is universal and vital.

Fantasy fiction offers a safe space, out of this world, a safe distance that force the reader to adopt a critical thinking attitude on the modern-day problems. The mates of Harry and Harry himself are confronted with issues present also in the real-world around us, among which the following are worth mentioning: racism, class status, war, political corruption present in our real-world societies and other challenges which are characteristic to the period of time when a child grows into an adolescent. Historian Edmund Kern, the author of the book entitled *The Wisdom of Harry Potter: What Our Favourite Hero Teaches Us About Moral Choices*, writes about how Rowling deals with these challenges, stating that she describes Harry and his friends in *ethical dilemmas requiring them to think in complex ways about right and wrong* (Kern, Edmund, 2003: 14). The characters in the book do not avoid difficult challenges and dilemmas, despite the struggle. The characters in the Harry Potter series are not extraordinary heroes, on a pedestal, but they are shown as thinking through their problems, usually in a group process.

At societal level, many people share common beliefs about educators and their work. Much of these shared beliefs come from our own school experiences and from the various exposures accumulated during the contact with the educational system. From this perspective, in the Harry Potter series several archetypes of educators are present. To illustrate them, reference is made to McGonagall who is stern and confident, Snape, who is bitter and cruel and Lupin, the caring expert. There is no elaboration on the lives of teachers, it is what we see from Harry's perspective. The personalities and the motivations of teachers are present indirectly, through side gestures and nuances. The history teacher, professor Binns, is the archetype of the boring history teacher, having no interest in the students' learning or in their lives. When reaching the faculty, at Hogwarts, the readers of the book are competent enough to see which teacher is good and which one is not. Consequently, most of the readers would not choose the class taught by Professor Binn, choice which is somehow tells a lot about ourselves and our cross-cultural educational encounters. In regards to the assessment of a good educator, one may name several qualities, such as expertise, knowledge of the subject taught, and so

on, while others may choose other characteristics, quite difficult to describe and to quantify, because they refer to “magic”.

Professor Remus Lupin is regarded as caring and also possessing the skills necessary for teaching the subject topic. His pedagogical skills have long-term effects, encouraging his students to extract knowledge from practical, experiential lessons and to engage in them in order to build their self-confidence. Self-confidence is a very important skills to take with you from the school years. In one particular moment in the book *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Snape warns Professor Lupin: (...) *not to entrust him with anything difficult*. Professor Lupin answers by saying that *I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation ... and I'm sure he will perform it admirably* (Rowling J.K,1999:132.).The professor's choice of supporting Neville is admirable and is a sign of a high level of caring. Professor Lupin also helped Harry to acquire a skill that helped him prove in front of the others that he is strong enough and experienced enough to be their leader. Another telling example regarding the archetypes of teachers present in Harry Potter series is Professor Umbridge, who embodies oppression at the classroom level. Professor Umbridge also represents the insertion of politics into educational spaces. Professor Umbridge herself is the politician who thinks that she knows better than the actual educators. Without any consideration to the actual needs of the students, Professor Umbridge drafts and enforces arbitrary mandates (called in the book *decrees*). This archetype of educator makes reference to the worst forms of corruption and control, in order to limit the access to information or to opportunities to educate, on reasons of gender, class, race.

Some of the educators present in the Harry Potter series are preaching, indirectly, about resilience and perseverance. These two are top skills in today's world. As Jim Garrison outlines in his book, *relying on intuition, emotion and imagination is a key ingredient in the workings of teachers who desire to create teachable moments* (Garrison, J, 1997: 122). Through critical thinking and reflective practice, students and educators influence themselves reciprocally, as the educators are also subjects of the experiences from the classroom, while students are educators, with ideas to share and to question. This process of asking questions and of being reflective transforms both students and the educators as they are working together and acquire the content and the learning, creating *magic*. When put into practice carefully, a critical approach to teaching creates a community of learners, which can set up goals and attain them. These goals can be about reading, writing, comprehension, sharing literary experiences, drawing inferences and engaging in self-discovery.

As learning is both visible (knowledge, content) and invisible, reference is made to the *magic* happening in schools. Visible learning refers to the pure transfer of knowledge from the educator to the learner. This is what is going on in most of the schools. But learning is also invisible and it focusses more on the learner and on his/her empowerment. It is about abilities, skills, attitudes and values. The most important invisible learning that takes place in school is about life skills, those particular skills, competences, values or attitudes, depending on the case, which help us lead a good life and, why not, succeed and lead the way in society. Harry Potter series empower the Reader and sets a good context for the learners and the educators to teach each other.

3.Conclusion

Attempting to analyse briefly from a theoretical perspective the effect of Harry Potter series on reading, the conclusion is that the result is positive from several perspectives. It encourages people to read, and the reference is made to both learners and educators. It empowers the educators and the learners too gain new competences, not only for the professional interactions within the educational institutions (schools, universities), but also as life skills.

Life skills are of paramount important in society today, as critical thinking and imaginative approaches may represent the key to success in a society in which education is undergoing profound changes.

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