How Do Teachers' Attitudes Towards Comics Influence Their Use in Slovene Language Classes?

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Abstract Teachers' attitudes towards themes, largely impacted by the individual's stereotyped perceptions, may have an important impact on the learning environment they consciously or subconsciously form. Comics are such a theme that, even after decades of prejudice, they are still paving their way into the classroom and are still a source of discomfort for some teachers. This quantitatively designed study included 139 participating teachers. The descriptive and non-experimental causal methods of empirical pedagogical research were used to verify the impact of teachers' attitudes towards stereotypical themes on learning environment formation in terms of teachers' attitudes towards the use of comics in Slovenian language classes. Variable data were obtained through questionnaires for Slovenian language teachers in primary school, focusing on 17 methods and purposes of using comics in class. Statistically significant differences were present in 11 points. The results showed that using comics in class was not particularly influenced by the teachers' attitudes towards comics or their fondness of comics, rather it was influenced mostly by a lack of formed relationships towards comics. This work emphasizes the meaning of teacher education and training in all learning and teaching areas, where a greater inclination for forming stereotypical attitudes exists.

1   Introduction

Comics had no real place in Europe for a long time, as they were not considered either an art form or literature. Today we know that comics are a multimodal text, characterized by both visual and verbal art (Batič, 2016). Comics are increasingly included in schools – as art literature, as a didactic step, as a didactic method, and as such they are explored in school settings: in language and literature teaching (e.g., Kerneža & Košir, 2016; Reid & Moses, 2020), visual literacy (e.g., Golding & Verrier, 2020; Wallner, 2020), in combining language and/or literature with other areas (e.g., Dallacqua, 2020; Oppolzer, 2020), or entirely in other subject areas (e.g., Azamain et al., 2020; Chu & Toh, 2020; McGarr, 2020; McGarr, Gavaldon & Saez de Adana, 2020; Phoon etc., 2020; Zhang, 2019), etc.

But where do comic stereotypes come from in the first place, and how did negative attitudes toward comics develop among teachers? Groensteen (2009) explains this phenomenon. Since their beginnings, comic books have changed their readership twice. In the 19th century in America, they were intended for adults. At the beginning of the 20th century, readers in Europe could read these comics mainly in the press for children and young people. As a result, comics also attracted the attention of teachers. Since teachers were among the first in Europe to speak out about comics and the idea of comics, their views prevailed over other opinions. Comics were withheld from adult readers, and the more they appeared in the children's and young adult press, the more they provoked educators, who condemned them as harmful to children. Comics were blacklisted for allegedly corrupting and affecting an already limited audience. And this is still evident in the school environment today.

Attitudes in the learning process are an important part of the environment (Connelly, 1998), which includes the teacher as a fundamental part (Tanang & Abu, 2014). Teachers' attitudes are an important concept that shapes the educational environment and the learning process (Ballantine & Spade, 2006; OECD, 2009). Students directly observe teachers' views on a daily basis (Greene, 2006), which can affect students' attitudes towards the topics covered or not covered, their willingness to learn about a particular topic (Gal et al., 1997), various aspects of student motivation (including intrinsic motivation), and attitudes towards learning and opinions about the teacher (Alkhateeb, 2018; Mojavezi & Marzieh Poodineh, 2012).

The learning environment consists of several elements. In this study, the focus is on the teacher, because it is the teacher who creates and maintains an environment in which they do or do not interact positively with the children. A positive classroom environment is an essential component of student and teacher well-being and a foundation for student engagement, effort, and commitment (Potvin, 2021). The role of the teacher is to support the overall development of the child, which they also control with their views, as teachers often pass on their attitudes to their students. Teachers' attitudes can influence students' attitudes towards the topics discussed (or not discussed) in class, students' motivation, students' attitudes towards learning, etc. Teachers' beliefs influence their thoughts and decisions in learning environments (Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2009).

But are teachers of Slovene even obliged to read comics and use them in their teaching? Yes. In the curriculum for the subject of Slovene, comics are mentioned in the first teaching period (grades 1–3) in connection with the objectives in the field of literature. As part of the operational goal of developing receptive skills through reading, listening, and watching performances of artistic texts by talking/writing about them, students should gradually express their understanding of the behaviour of literary characters through a combination of drawing and writing (e.g., comics) (Poznanovič Jezeršek et al., 2018, p. 15). In the first teaching period, comics are also found in the content that children are expected to know. While developing the ability to experience, understand and evaluate artistic texts, they are expected to acquire literary knowledge, which includes the understanding and use of the term comic (alongside the term picture book) in 1st grade (ibid, 18).

In the second teaching period (grades 4–6), students identify the characteristics of comics as part of developing receptive skills and learning about comics is placed in the context of learning about longer realistic narrative prose and summarizing its characteristics. In addition, from 4th to 5th grade, students write two texts using a comic, and they may also turn a shorter literary text into a comic or vice versa (ibid, 28, 30).

Students in the third teaching period (grades 7–9) can also achieve the goal of developing receptive skills through the use of comics. By transforming a shorter literary work into a comic or vice versa, they can develop their ability to receive and create prose texts (ibid, 44).

In the area of language, the curriculum does not list comics as a goal, but the teacher can include them in various ways to achieve the language objectives in the stages before, during and after reading the text (ibid).

Several studies in many research areas examine the topic of teachers' attitudes and beliefs. Research is particularly common in the area of educational inclusion (Lacruz-Perez et al., 2021; Uusimaki et al., 2020) and technology (Ardiç, 2021; Serin & Bozdag, 2020). There are quite a number of studies that focus on stereotypes, especially cultural and ethnic stereotypes (Kleen & Glock, 2018; McGaha, 2015) and gender stereotypes (Gray & Leith, 2010; Nurlu, 2017). However, there is very little research on the impact of teachers' attitudes towards comics, which are certainly one of the stereotypical areas in the school environment because of their turbulent history.

The Present Study

The present study is based on the theoretical background of research in related fields and on the starting point of previous research that investigated comics as a literary-didactic method and their use to reduce gender differences in literacy in the primary level of education, demonstrating that teachers still have negative attitudes and prejudices against the use of comics in any form in the classroom (Kerneža, 2016). The study also examined Slovene teachers' attitudes towards the instruction of comics as a literary and artistic text form in the literary curriculum and towards teaching comics as a (productive) literary and didactic method in the Slovene classroom (Kerneža, 2020). This showed that the field of introducing comics in the classroom is a complex process and that teachers' attitudes towards comics influence their use in the classroom.

The aim of the study was to find out whether and how teachers' attitudes towards comics influence the use of comics in the classroom. Based on the theoretical foundation and the empirical findings reported above, the author hypothesized that the more positive teachers' attitudes toward comics, the more likely they are to use them, and vice versa – the less they read comics, the less they use them in the classroom. The author also assumed that teachers who do not have a particular attitude towards comics are more likely to use them in their work than teachers who do not like reading comics.

The general hypotheses were:

- H1: The frequency of using comics in the classroom is related to teachers' attitudes toward comics.
- H2: Teachers who have a positive attitude towards comics are more likely to use comics in some form in the classroom.
- H3: Teachers who do not have a particular attitude toward comics are more likely to use comics in the classroom than teachers who have a negative attitude toward comics.

2   Method

2.1   Participants and Procedure

The studied sample included teachers of Slovene in primary school from 1st to 9th grade. The topic of interest was how teachers' attitudes towards stereotypical themes affect the design of the learning environment with the use of comics in Slovene class. A questionnaire was prepared for this study. The link to the questionnaire was sent to the heads of all Slovenian primary schools listed in the directories of educational institutions and educational programs published on the websites of the relevant ministry. A link to the online survey was also posted on social networks in groups where teachers meet. The survey was conducted in June 2020.

The questions were asked in two groups. In the first group, the focus was on Slovene teachers' attitudes towards comics in adulthood, with the highest score indicating that they liked reading comics very much, and the lowest score indicating that they did not like reading comics at all. There was also the option to choose an undecided/neutral attitude towards comics. The second set of questions included the following 17 dependent variables that represented the way comics are used in the classroom:

1. as introductory motivation;
2. to promote reading;
3. to promote reading literacy;
4. as a teaching tool;
5. as a learning tool;

6. as an aid to unlocking the meaning of abstract texts;
7. to promote reading in visual learners;
8. as a visual aid in discussing the interweaving of mood and tone through images;
9. in interdisciplinary connection;
10. to teach narrative writing;
11. for vocabulary development;
12. for students to create their own comics;
13. for students to create their own digital comics;
14. as a diagnostic tool to predict future literacy problems;
15. for interpreting literary characters;
16. for researching dramatic dialogue; and
17. to create a timeline of events.

Teachers rated how often they used comics in the above ways using a 5-point Likert scale, where the levels signified how often they used comics: 1 – never, 2 – rarely, 3 – sometimes, 4 – often, 5 – very often. Employing the Likert scale ensured the sensitivity of the questionnaire. The measurement characteristics of the questionnaire were reviewed. The content of the questionnaire was based on theoretical starting points and a review of published research. Objectivity was ensured through precise instructions. Prior to publication and submission, a small group of teachers completed a trial questionnaire.

2.2 Sample

The simple random sample for our survey consisted of 126 teachers of Slovene in Slovenian primary schools from first to ninth grade. Most participants liked to read comics (41.27%), followed by those who did not have a particular attitude towards comics (23.81%), this was followed by those who did not like to read comics (21.43%), and few participants really liked to read comics (7.14%) or they did not like to read comics at all (6.35%).

2.3   Data Analysis Methods

The collected data were analysed using the IBM SPSS 23 program. A descriptive and causal-nonexperimental method was used, where the data were interpreted using the Kruskal-Wallis test, which gave information about the frequency of use of comics in the classroom as a function of teachers' attitudes towards reading comics in adulthood. The data are presented and interpreted with a number, the mean, the χ2 value, and the statistical significance of the test (value p < .05).

3   Results

As can be seen in Table 1 the results show that the use of comics in the classroom was not so much influenced by teachers' attitudes towards comics or how much they like to read comics themselves, but by their unformed attitudes towards comics.

Table 1: The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test on the differences in the frequency of use of comics in the classroom according to teachers' attitudes towards reading comics in adulthood

Use of comics	Attitude towards reading comics	n	Mean	χ2	P
As introductory motivation.	I really like reading comics.	9	66.50		
	I like reading comics.	52	72.05		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	60.09	6.605	.158
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	54.31		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	53.30		
To promote reading.	I really like reading comics.	9	58.70		
	I like reading comics.	52	74.65		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	54.69	8.471	.076
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	63.75		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	55.71		
To promote reading literacy.	I really like reading comics.	9	69.55		
	I like reading comics.	52	72.44		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	54.06	7.237	.124
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	61.44		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	55.29		
As a teaching tool.	I really like reading comics.	9	75.80		
	I like reading comics.	52	75.13		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	62.00	17.902	**.001**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	58.88		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	42.85		
As a learning tool.	I really like reading comics.	9	63.15	13.159	**.011**

Use of comics	Attitude towards reading comics	n	Mean	χ2	P
	I like reading comics.	52	72.69		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	59.52		
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	71.94		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	44.93		
As an aid to unlocking the meaning of abstract texts.	I really like reading comics.	9	51.10		
	I like reading comics.	52	71.17		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	68.29	7.780	.100
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	60.13		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	51.74		
To promote reading in visual learners.	I really like reading comics.	9	55.95		
	I like reading comics.	52	73.20		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	63.74	9.490	**.050**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	56.25		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	49.55		
As a visual aid in discussing the interweaving of mood and tone through images.	I really like reading comics.	9	67.20		
	I like reading comics.	52	70.94		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	64.44	8.359	.079
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	59.25		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	48.38		
In interdisciplinary connection.	I really like reading comics.	9	63.80		
	I like reading comics.	52	74.13		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	64.26	11.900	**.018**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	52.88		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	47.71		
Using comics to teach narrative writing.	I really like reading comics.	9	56.00		
	I like reading comics.	52	75.09		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	53.50	11.766	**.018**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	58.56		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	51.82		
For vocabulary development.	I really like reading comics.	9	57.60		
	I like reading comics.	52	76.01		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	58.72	15.410	**.004**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	66.69		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	45.84		
For the students to create their own comics.	I really like reading comics.	9	56.90		
	I like reading comics.	52	73.04		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	65.02	9.937	**.042**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	46.00		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	51.21		
For the students to create their own digital comics.	I really like reading comics.	9	61.50		
	I like reading comics.	52	74.32	12.807	**.012**
	I do not like reading comics.	27	57.62		

Use of comics	Attitude towards reading comics	n	Mean	χ2	P
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	61.75		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	49.52		
As a diagnostic tool to predict future literacy problems.	I really like reading comics.	9	55.60		
	I like reading comics.	52	69.05		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	63.63	6.287	.179
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	64.63		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	52.53		
For interpreting literary characters.	I really like reading comics.	9	61.50		
	I like reading comics.	52	74.32		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	57.62	12.910	**.012**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	61.75		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	49.52		
For researching dramatic dialogue.	I really like reading comics.	9	66.75		
	I like reading comics.	52	73.75		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	60.70	11.459	**.022**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	55.06		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	48.02		
To create a timeline of events.	I really like reading comics.	9	62.50		
	I like reading comics.	52	74.23		
	I do not like reading comics.	27	56.96	15.145	**.004**
	I really do not like reading comics.	8	71.44		
	I do not have a particular attitude towards comics.	30	45.19		

There were statistically significant results for 11 of the 17 variables examined. The Kruskal-Wallis test shows that there were no statistically significant differences in the frequency of use of comics in the classroom according to teachers' attitudes toward reading comics in adulthood. This pertained to the use of comics as introductory motivation, to promote reading, to promote reading literacy, as an aid to unlocking the meaning of abstract texts, as a visual aid in discussing the interweaving of mood and tone through images, and as a diagnostic tool to predict future literacy problems.

Among the teachers who most often used comics as a teaching tool were those who *really like* and *like reading* comics, followed by the teachers who *do not like reading comics* and the teachers who *really do not like reading comics*. The teachers who were least likely to use comics as a teaching tool were those who *have no particular attitude towards comics*.

The teachers who most often used comics as a learning tool were those who *like reading comics* and the teachers who *really do not like reading comics*, followed by the teachers who *really like reading comics*, teachers who *do not like reading comics*, and finally teachers who *have no particular attitude towards comics*.

Teachers who *like reading comics* and teachers who *do not like reading comics* were the teachers most likely to use comics to promote reading in visual learners. Less frequently, comics were used by teachers who *really do not like reading comics*, by teachers who *really like reading comics,* and by teachers who d*o have no particular attitude toward comics*.

Comics were used in an interdisciplinary connection by teachers according to frequency of use in the following order: teachers who *like reading comics*, teachers who *do not like reading comics*, teachers who *really like reading comics*, teachers who *really do not like reading comics*, and teachers who *have no particular attitude toward comics*.

Comics for teaching narrative writing were most commonly used by teachers who liked to read comics. This type of use of comics in the classroom was used less often by teachers who *really do not like reading comics*, teachers who *really like reading comics*, and teachers who *do not like reading comics*. Teachers who *do not have a particular attitude towards comics* were least likely to use comics to teach narrative writing.

Teachers who *like reading comics* and those who *really do not like reading comics* were more likely to use comics to develop vocabulary than their colleagues who *do not like reading comics* and those who *really like reading comics*. Teachers who had *no particular attitude towards comics* were more likely not to use them.

Among the teachers most likely to encourage students to create their own comics were those who *like reading comics*, followed by those who *do not like reading comics*, those who *really like reading comics*, those who *have no particular attitude toward comics,* and finally those who *really do not like reading comics*. This way of using comics in the classroom is the only case where the teachers who had *no particular attitude towards comics* were not the least likely to use this form at work.

Students of teachers who *like reading comics* created digital comics quite often, followed by students of teachers who *really do not like reading comics* and those who *really like reading comics*. Digital comics were less often created by students whose teachers *do not like reading comics*, and even less often by students whose teachers *do not have a particular attitude towards comics*.

The use of comics to interpret literary characters was more commonly used in the classroom by teachers who *like reading comics*. Teachers who *really like reading comics* and teachers who *really do not like reading comics* were less likely to include them in schoolwork in an explained form. These were followed by teachers who *do not like reading comics*, and the interpretation of literary characters was used least often in classes where teachers had *no particular attitude towards comics*.

Dramatic dialogue was most often explored by teachers who *like reading comics*, and by teachers who *really like reading comics*. This was followed by teachers who *do not like reading comics* and teachers who *really do not like reading comics*. The students of teachers who had *no particular attitude towards comics* were less likely than their peers to encounter this form of comic use.

Teachers who *like reading comics* and those who *really do not like reading comics* were more likely to use comics to create a timeline of events than their colleagues who *really like reading comics* and those who *do not like reading comics*. Even in this case, the use of comics mentioned above was less frequently used by the teachers who *do not have a particular attitude towards comics*.

4   Discussion

The results show that the frequency of using comics in the classroom was related to teachers' attitudes towards comics, which confirms the introductory hypothesis, since the differences in most variables were statistically significant. It is surprising that teachers who have positive attitudes towards comics are not necessarily more likely to use comics in some form in the classroom than teachers who have negative attitudes towards comics, as this is a stereotypical topic. The likelihood of using comics in the classroom varied between those who liked reading comics and those who did not. The author also rejected the hypothesis that teachers who have no particular attitude toward comics are no more likely to use comics in the classroom

than teachers who have a negative attitude toward comics. The very teachers who did not have a particular attitude toward comics generally answered, except in one case, several times, that they were less likely to use comics. Most of the hypotheses were not confirmed, but they provide an important starting point for further reflection.

The results show that comics have found their place in our schools. Teachers' attitudes also seem to be an important part of the school environment. In choosing the content and methods, the teacher shapes the learning process; in choosing or omitting a topic for discussion, or in using a certain working method in the classroom, they also influence students' motivation and attitudes towards schoolwork. It would be interesting to know how the students of the teachers interviewed experience the classroom environment, because a positive and stimulating learning environment is the basis for the work of both the teacher and the student. The use of comics in the school environment attracts students. Comics represent something new in the learning environment, and students enjoy reading them while growing up. Nowadays, comics are often discovered by teachers together with their students. Indeed, comics are currently experiencing a renaissance in Slovenia, with comics by Dave Pilkey, Boštjan Gorenc and Matej De Cecco, Rene Goscinny, Herge, Božo Kos, Marjan Manček, Matjaž Šmit, Miki Muster, and many other domestic and foreign authors. These authors' comics are either recent editions read for the first time by this generation, or they are comics already read by their parents and grandparents.

Teachers views and beliefs prove to be crucial in the design of the learning environment in most studies, and this was also confirmed in this study. It turned out that the choice to use comic-related methods in Slovene classes was not so much influenced by the teacher's attitude towards comics, but by the absence of a relationship or the lack of a formed attitude towards comics. Indeed, the author had expected that teachers who did not have formed attitudes towards comics would nevertheless use comics in their lessons more often than teachers who had negative attitudes towards comics. However, it turned out that the lack of attitude towards comics in the Slovene classroom had the greatest influence on what kind of learning environment the teacher would create through the choice of methods and forms of work.

The findings shape our awareness of improvements in the area of using comics in various ways in the classroom. We need to think about how to introduce comics to teachers in a way that cultivates what is, at best, a positive attitude before they use them in the classroom. There is a need for teacher education and training in all areas of using comics in the Slovene classroom. Since this is an area of learning and teaching where the spirit of stereotypical opinions about comics still lives in teachers, this is especially important.

It should be remembered that teachers' views are very resistant to complex changes (OECD, 2009), but they can also be easily changed if the programs used to influence their views are implemented with sufficient quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

In future research it would be useful to compare particular learning environments created by teachers with positive attitudes toward comics, teachers with negative attitudes toward comics, and teachers who do not have particular attitude towards comics. It would be worthwhile to focus on the learning environment, classroom relationships, the way teaching and classroom management are carried out, working conditions, teacher and student participation, pedagogical focus, and working forms and methods. It would be worthwhile to compare students' learning outcomes depending on teachers attitudes towards comics. With the help of individual interviews, one would get an even broader insight into the field of influence of stereotypical themes on the formation of the learning environment with the use of comics in Slovene language classes.

The results are based on teacher responses, which may be subjective. The way the data was collected is also a limitation– the questionnaire was conducted in an online environment, which is not difficult to leave if one has a negative attitude towards a certain topic, which likely led to the teachers who had stereotypical views about comics not participating in the survey.

The study offers new insights into teachers' views on the use of comics in the Slovene teaching environment and at the same time provides many starting points and space for further research.

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