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Focus group interview through storytelling

Researching pre-school children's attitudes towards books and reading

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present an adapted form of a qualitative research method, focus group interview, for use with small children and demonstrate its use in a small-scale study. Researchers often avoid direct study of children, and study them indirectly by asking adults. This was frequent before 1990s, but today, researchers increasingly discuss research with children rather than on children. Nevertheless, in research with young children it is not possible to use all research methods, therefore the authors modified and tested one. The additional research objectives, besides verification of methodology, were to determine the pre-school children's attitudes to books, book-related places, reading.

Design/methodology/approach – The adaptation of the focus group interview involved merging the content questions of the research with a story and using a toy as the storyteller. This resembled storytelling and enabled the children to directly participate by talking to the animation toy instead of the researcher. The authors tested the method on a purposive sample of 13 pre-school children aged four and five in one public kindergarten.

Findings – Despite of the belief of some experts, who claim that focus group interview is not an appropriate method to explore habits or opinions of children, the authors found that adaptation of this method for the use with small children by means of storytelling and toy animation brings positive results because it enabled gathering data directly from the children. The content results show positive attitudes towards books and reading, differences in reading interests between boys and girls, daily exposure to books and reading, both in kindergarten and at home, and quite good knowledge of book-related places, especially libraries, somewhat less bookstores.

Research limitations/implications – Since this is only the first attempt to use this adapted methodological approach, it is necessary that the method is tested on different user groups and in different circumstances to further validate its suitability for this user group. Regarding the content of the study, the results cannot be generalized due to non-probability purposive sampling.

Originality/value – This is the first attempt to use the adapted methodological approach for researching young children. The research may serve as a beginning and incentive for further research in this area, since only high-quality results provide good modifications and adaptations of educational programmes and activities to ensure proper development of children's reading competences and attitudes to books and reading.

Keywords Methodology, Attitudes, Adaptation, Focus group interview, Kindergarten, Pre-school children

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

An individual's attitude towards books and reading plays a significant role in education and in personal development, especially when it comes to children. We should pay great attention to determining this relation because research indicates that children are developing some competences (e.g. reading, literacy, learning) better and more easily if adults read to them more frequently. We must keep in mind that children are a very specific and important group, although some researchers warn that when collecting data



about children's thoughts, feelings experiences and behaviour, studies have often relied on adults (Kortessuoma *et al.*, 2003). Until the 1990s, children were often generally characterized as not having sufficient maturity and/or competence to directly participate in studies, and a certain lack of trust in their ability to serve information can be observed (Manson and Steadman, 1997). Therefore, children's behaviour and habits have often been studied indirectly, by interviewing parents, librarians, caretakers and other adults who have contact with them (Holmes, 1998; Kortessuoma *et al.*, 2003). Researchers (e.g. Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005) warn that this can lead (and often did) to oversimplifications, misinterpretations and researchers' inability to see the whole picture because the surveys did not include actual opinions, actions feelings and experiences of children which would be expressed directly by them. Darbyshire *et al.* (2005) discuss this issue: they criticize some researchers who see children as unserious research participants who are unable to cooperate in research. Nowadays, increasingly, researchers talk about conducting research with children rather than on or about children; they are now more frequently viewed as partners in the research process (Hunleth, 2011; Bilal, 2005; Druin, 2005a, b).

Nevertheless, it is evident that in research with young children, it is not possible to use the whole range of research methods suitable for other (older) groups; instead, only selected methods are appropriate, and they further need to be adapted to be useful in this context. For example, when researching with children, we are not able to use written surveys or classical interviewing, but we can collect answers on the opinions, perceptions, feelings and behaviour of children with drawing, group interviews, observation, role-playing, etc. It has also been recommended to also adapt the setting: research should take place in an open and informal atmosphere with a variety of props and activities, while strictly formal and structured methods are less appropriate (Shaw *et al.*, 2011).

The aim of our research was twofold: primarily we wanted to determine whether a customized form of a focus group interview is appropriate for researching with young children under the age of six, who already have sufficiently developed communication competences. In addition, and to test our adapted method, we were examining pre-school children's attitudes towards books, book-related places and reading.

2. Overview of literature

2.1 *Focus groups with young children*

As the primary focus of our research is to test the developed methodology, we begin our literature review with the methodological part. Due to the limitations of article length it is not our intention to provide a comprehensive overview of all available methods, nor do we aim to present in detail their strengths and weaknesses. We focus on the method which we were testing, i.e. the focus group interview which is, according to Shaw *et al.* (2011) and Đurić *et al.* (2010), one of the most appropriate methods for researching with children.

As explained in the introduction, not all research methods are suitable to be used when researching children, and each method needs certain adaptations. Among methods which are utilized in research of young (pre-school) children – in most cases in adapted form – are observation (McKechnie, 2000; Prinsloo, 2005; Spink *et al.*, 2010; Kumar Agarwal, 2014), experimental method (Guha *et al.*, 2004; Druin *et al.*, 2001; Deák and Bauer, 1995, 1996; Deák *et al.*, 2002), interviews (Havigerová and Haviger, 2014), and sometimes combinations such as interviews and observations (Creel, 2014), tests, questionnaires and interviews (Burešová and Havigerová, 2015; Burešová *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, children in research process have often been investigated indirectly by

asking the relevant adults about their perception of the children's behaviours and attitudes (recent examples of such research are Burešová *et al.*, 2012; Mehra, 2014). Although such approach is of course acceptable, and at times perhaps necessary, its downside is that it can lead to incomplete or false interpretations (Holmes, 1998; Kortessluoma *et al.*, 2003).

According to Piaget (1972), children in preoperational stage (two to six years) think in a self-centred way. Vygotsky (1978) further warns that children function (i.e. process information and respond to it) differently than adults. In terms of verbal communication, at this age a child usually answers questions accurately, but only from their perspective, and the meaning of their words may be either broader or more limited than in an adult language, thus needing interpretation. At the age of four, a child can associate memories of single incidents with other memories and has sufficient mental ability, cognition and concepts to form understandable units of diverse experiences (Nelson, 1992).

Đurić *et al.* (2010) say that one of significant advantages of a focus group interview is its efficient use with children and young population because they can easily escort the rules of debate and are most often very spontaneous and sincere in expressing their views. Moreover, focus group interviews do not only play an important role in terms of data collecting, but also include participants' educational potential and insight into the problem. Đurić *et al.* (2010) add that focus group interviews also contribute to higher level of receptiveness of the participants. For example, if a shy child feels pressure and unnatural situation in a classic interview and will not open up, he/she would perhaps gradually start to participate in a group discussion, if having the feeling that it is not required to answer every question. Shaw *et al.* (2011) present some basic guidelines on how to conduct focus group interviews with children. It is important to consider different procedures than in research with adults. Groups should be smaller, with limited differences in age of participants. It is also advised not to use formal methods of questions and answers and to encourage a more dynamic, interactive and creative activities that motivate children to participate (Shaw *et al.*, 2011).

Some experts (Vaughn *et al.*, 1996; Heary and Hennessy, 2002) warn that this method is not suitable for research with children aged under six years because they do not have a sufficiently well-developed vocabulary for a structured discussion and that, due to this fact, their statements are difficult to interpret (Đurić *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, Shaw *et al.* (2011) claim that there is no bottom age limit below which children and young people cannot participate in research, assuming that the methodology is appropriate to the age group in question. Researchers must also keep in mind that children's vocabulary and use of language remain different from that of adults, which can lead to misunderstandings meaning that interpretations are often needed (Punch, 2002).

On the basis of these findings it was our assumption that an adapted method of focus group interview containing simple, clear and understandable questions and including other adaptations which we describe in the methodological section, could be efficient for children of the second age group, i.e. aged four and five. We believe that such adaptation offers an opportunity for children to think about a topic, hear the opinion of their peers and contribute their answers. Our decision was to focus only on the methodological aspect and to deliberately leave out the educational aspect of this method. Therefore, our intention was to test this methodological approach, in an adapted form, in a small-scale study, as will be described in the methodological section.

2.2 Children of the second age group in Slovenian public kindergartens

The Slovenian Kindergarten Act (Uradni List RS, 2005) divides pre-school education into two age groups. In the first age group there are children aged from one to three years, and in the second age group, there are children aged from three to six years old, up to the time of entering primary school. In practice it is not uncommon that in the same group the age-span is two years (three to four/five, and four to five/six).

In terms of children's verbal competences the kindergarten curriculum (Kurikulum za vrtce, 2009) states that children of the second age group are already capable of independent storytelling, participating in various speaking situations, starting a conversation and introducing new topics. They can also participate in communication in smaller groups or in pairs and in conversation with adults as well as with children. In their speech interaction with pre-school children, adults should tell and read stories, fairy tales, riddles, poems and stage puppet shows, thereby allowing children contact with the literary language already in this period. They must show that they appreciate verbal communication and should seize opportunities for in-depth conversation with children. Adults should also offer them opportunity to participate in a dialogue, where children could talk about their experiences and people they encounter at home and in kindergarten (Kurikulum za vrtce, 2009).

2.3 Children's early reading and literacy skills

The results of studies with children are extremely important since they help gain insight into the field of development of early reading skills and early literacy. Certain skills are most successfully gained in early childhood, such as perception, imagination, understanding and representation, which form the basis for successful functioning in society and in the field of education (IFLA, 2010). An attitude towards reading, which is part of early literacy, is essentially influenced by some factors, such as exposure to reading material, children's experience and confidence in reading, a model of adult who reads and experiences in reading (and being read to) (Wang, 2000; IFLA, 2007). Without these results, it would not be possible to create, change and adapt high-quality curricula and activities, which would allow children to develop these essential competences. Marjanovič Umek *et al.* (2002) examined the impact of adults on children's language development through reading children's books. The sample included 70 children, divided into two groups. In the first group, the children had an additional programme of planned and systematic reading to children twice a week, while in the latter group the work was done according to the national curriculum, without additional activities. The problem lies in the fact that the curriculum emphasizes the importance of children's books; however, the derivation at the level of activities is not detailed. Researchers in this case decided to use several research methods to identify and verify the differences between the two groups. To interpret the results, they used a scale of language development by Vane (1975), which contains two scales: language comprehension and language expression. For the second approach for testing children's language competence a non-standardized test of the narration of story has been chosen, which was followed by a questionnaire for parents, to examine a quality of language education in a child's family (material conditions) and the activities of a family that encourage language development. The results showed significant differences between two groups: the first group showed significantly better developed language skills on comprehension and expression area. There was also statistically significant relationship between results from used scales and mother's education, material conditions and home activities, related to reading. This fact again speaks in favour of frequent reading to children (Marjanovič Umek *et al.*, 2002).

Dresang and Campana (2010) also found similar results in a library context, and also confirmed how important it is to educate adults (parents, educators, librarians), who work with the children in developing their early reading skills.

Büyüктаşkapu (2012) also sought to verify the similar hypothesis in her longitudinal study. She wanted to confirm that child's early information literacy, which primarily depends on his/her environment, crucially influences his/her reading skills in the future thus having enormous influence on their future learning achievements. There were 25 six-year-old children in the experimental group, who participated in a Family Supported Pre-Reading Programme, and 25 children in the control group, who have not participated in this programme. The results showed a significant difference among reading skills of children who participated in the programme and those who did not. The first group showed significantly better results. The author concluded that family environment has a major impact on the children's reading skills. She also pointed out that we should perform reading activities also within a family, not only in the school environment, to develop those skills. Her findings support the recommendations in the guidelines by IFLA (IFLA, 2010, 2003, 2007) and many other professional documents.

2.4 Reading preferences and information behaviour of pre-school children

A review of the literature in the field of children's reading preferences and information behaviour shows that there are a relatively small number of studies, which involve younger (pre-school) children. One reason could be of methodological nature, as we already discussed in the methodological section of this literature review. As argued by Spink and Heinström (2011), information behaviour ability seems to first emerge between three and five years of age, as there is no evidence of information behaviour before the age of three. Spink *et al.* (2010) found that young children at the age of five and six are capable of engaging in complex web searches, utilize keyword searching and browsing, formulate and reformulate queries and consequently engage in successive searches, perform relevance judgments, information multitasking and collaborative behaviours in solving complex information problems.

Havigerová and colleagues (Burešová *et al.*, 2012; Havigerová and Haviger, 2014; Burešová and Havigerová, 2015) studied how pre-schoolers obtained information, linking it to their cognitive dispositions (IQ) and coming to two major findings: that overall children use many information sources and that gifted children use a greater variety of sources. Deák and colleagues (Deák and Bauer, 1995, 1996; Deák *et al.*, 2002) studied how pre-school children categorize information. They found that children are able to categorize information already at the age of four, and that their sorting preferences are significantly influenced by training and instruction. Similarly, Cooper (2004) found that pre-school children's categorization is very dynamic and develops together with other cognitive functions, moves from concrete to abstract, thematic to taxonomic and is shaped by social interaction. As argued by McKeechnie (2005) and supported by the findings of Kuhlthau (2004), Kuhlthau *et al.* (2007) and Todd (2006a, b), the development of information skills highly depends on appropriate and timely interventions from relevant adults, for example parents, teachers, librarians.

In terms of reading preferences, it has been known that gender differences can be observed. Girls on average are supposed to be more motivated to read than boys. According to a survey with primary school children girls' motivation is associated with reading female-oriented or gender neutral books, while boys' reading motivation was significantly associated with the desire to read male-oriented books (McGeown, 2012). Some studies show, that kindergartners enjoy reading fiction and also non-fiction texts,

where boys are more likely to choose non-fiction than girls (Correia, 2011). While some studies report that younger readers prefer fiction (Moss and McDonald, 2004), others indicate that they are most likely to choose non-fiction, which serves as a window to the world around them (Mohr, 2006). According to International Reading Association, pre-schoolers like stories about animals, stories with funny-sounding words, non-fiction books, books with pictures that tell the story, even without the words, etc. (International Reading Association, 2008). Additionally, studies provide a confirmation how important visual elements of a book are to small children when deciding what they like (Danko-McGhee and Slutsky, 2011).

3. Research

3.1 Problem definition

Children come into contact with books quite early, if not in their families, then usually in kindergarten or day-care. Reading-related activities are mentioned in many places in the kindergarten curriculums. Studies have shown that regular reading helps children develop certain competencies and that it has a positive effect on their language development.

The study had two aims. Our first research goal was of methodological nature: we wanted to verify whether the selected adapted method is suitable for research with children under the age of six. Second, we aimed at determining the attitudes of pre-school children of the second age group towards books, book-related places and reading, using our adapted research method. Above all, we were interested to see what kind of books they prefer to read (or listen to), how often and who reads to them, how often they visit libraries and bookstores, etc.

3.1.1 Research questions. For the purpose of this research, we posed two types of research questions: the first one, of methodological nature, and four additional research questions (*RQ 2-RQ5*) of content nature. The latter were intended to test the methodology, as we envisaged it:

RQ1. Is it possible to use focus group interviews, in a form adapted for very young children, to obtain data in this type of research?

Our motivation here stems from the fact that there are very few studies of preferences of information behaviour investigating very young children. Therefore, we would like to verify or refuse claims by some researchers that very young children are unsuitable for direct study due to their incapability to express themselves clearly enough:

RQ2. What kind of books do children of the second age group prefer to read (listen to)?

With the first research question, we are verifying literature references, which show that among children the most popular (and of course, the most known) are picture books (International Reading Association, 2008) and that boys prefer different stories than girls (Correia, 2011; McGeown, 2012):

RQ3. How well do children of the second age group know libraries and bookstores?

This research question deals with the topical issue of circumstances of developing reading and pre-reading skills/literacy, where libraries and bookstores play an important role. We are testing assumptions that children are visiting both, but more often libraries than bookstores:

RQ4. How many books do children of second age group have at home, and do they own their favourite book?

Quantity and quality of the reading material, which is surrounding children, is one of the most important factors in their development of reading. Therefore, this research question tests the assumption that children have many books at home and that among them there is their favourite:

RQ5. How much and when do adults read to children of the second age group?

Example of an adult, who reads, and reading to the child, are further two important factors in the development of reading skills, as emphasized by IFLA (*Guidelines for Library Services for Babies and Toddlers*; IFLA, 2007). Therefore, we want to find out who reads to children most (we assume that these are their parents), the most common reading time (we assume that this is bedtime) and, last but not least, that teachers read to them more than librarians in public libraries (it is important to note that these children do not have a school – or better, kindergarten – library).

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Method. An adapted form of focus group interview, which also includes elements of group interview, was used as the research method. The main difference is that participants in a group interview normally respond sequentially, while there is interaction between participants in a focus group, where the responses of the individual affect the responses of other participants (Đurić *et al.*, 2010). For the purpose of this research, one of the authors (Jug, T.) wrote a story about Teddy bear Jake, who loves books and loves to read. It is a combination of the story and interview, the aim of which was to maintain children's attention, offer them further explanation of the questions they have to answer and maintain the focus of the research, to be able to provide us with answers to our research questions. Appendix 1 illustrates the course of the interview and also contains the story. The author of the story also acted as the moderator. While moderator was telling a story to the children, she animated them with a plush teddy bear to which they were actually answering, not paying any attention to the moderator herself. The reason for choice of the teddy bear as animating toy was also the name of the kindergarten where the research took place, Kindergarten Medo (Teddy Bear in English).

It is important to get to know children before the actual interviews. We can start interaction by, for example, playing with children until they feel comfortable (Kortesluoma *et al.*, 2003). The moderator started the research with an introduction of herself and of the teddy bear. After the children got comfortable, she continued with an introduction to the story which included conversation and gradually, with the story unfolding, included questions. The story was composed of several questions, among which were some linking-type-questions. Their purpose was to loosen and warm up the participants. There were 12 questions intended for obtaining information which could resolve research questions on attitude towards books, reading and book-related places. The story was prepared in a flexible manner so it tolerated alternatives and variations that could be used according to the answers of the participants.

Pilot interviews add to the reliability and validity of the actual interviews because it is possible to learn to ask the kinds of questions that are suitable in terms of the reliability of the data (Kortesluoma *et al.*, 2003). Our method had been previously tested with a pilot study including three children between ages three and six. Based on the pilot study we established what complications could occur during the study and tested whether the duration and length of research are appropriate. We defined the areas where conversation could be diverted from the main topic, the possibility of vague responses

and consequently the unintended impact of the moderator when trying to obtain additional data from the participants. Some parts of the story and some questions, which participants did not understand or could interpret differently than intended, were grammatically and stylistically revised.

3.2.2 Sample and methods of data collection. We used non-probability convenience sampling technique by deciding to carry out the research in one kindergarten group of the second age group in one of the public kindergartens which carries out their programme according to the national legislation and guidelines described in Section 2.2. Our additional reason was minimal interruption of the children's daily routine thus providing as authentic setting as possible. The survey was carried out on 4 January 2013 with 13 pre-school children (six girls and seven boys aged four and five) in kindergarten Medo (Teddy Bear) in Prevoje. This was the total number of children of the second age group in that kindergarten.

Before starting the survey, we asked the kindergarten headmistress for permission to carry out the research. On arrival at the kindergarten, the researcher waited within the group that children got used to her presence, and then began the research. It took place in the classroom (in the environment that is most familiar to children) where we set up chairs in a circle. Participating children were used to this practice, as every day they used to have an activity named "morning circle", i.e. they sit with their teacher to be read to or to discuss something. In this case, our research was a replacement for this activity for the day.

The conversation was audio recorded and later content analysed by the researchers. The interview was also observed by two pre-school teachers who took notes which helped in both, interpretation of answers and the overall content analysis. In addition, they helped to motivate the participants and to interpret some of the answers, for example, they clarified the titles of the books mentioned by children. This kind of practice is highly recommended, as children relax more easily in the presence of known adults, who may also additionally help the researchers to understand some of the answers (Gibson, 2012). At this point, the researcher should be very careful that the presence of adults does not affect the answers and behaviour of children, and must consider this when processing the acquired data and interpreting the results (Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005). An official part of focus group lasted for 25 minutes, while socializing with children before and after the study lasted more than an hour.

4. Results and discussion

In Section 4.1 we present the results and discussion of the first research question, which was of methodological nature. The remaining four research questions (*RQ2-RQ5*) are dealt within Section 4.2.

4.1 Usefulness of the adapted research method

In our first RQ we asked whether adaptation of the focus group interview method is useful in working with very young respondents. Our adaptation proved to be very successful in both aspects: the flow of the research and obtaining results. The focus group interview with pre-school children went on very smoothly, without pauses or interruptions, and also did not require any omissions or shortening (which was one of our initial assumptions provided that we researched with such young children). Despite the fact that some experts describe a short attention span for this age group (Kortessluoma *et al.*, 2003; Shaw *et al.*, 2011) and limited capability to handle information

(Spink and Heinström, 2011), this did not happen in our situation. The focus group interview itself lasted 25 minutes, but due the participants' enthusiasm, moderator at the end asked through the mouth of the Teddy Bear Jake, if they would like the teacher to read a book to them. The suggestion was warmly welcomed by the children. Even after the end of that storytelling, the children expected that the bear would continue with his story and questions which means that their attention was maintained for over an hour.

From this we conclude that the use of a toy in the survey was a welcome contribution to the openness and eloquence of children, as well as a good means to maintain their attention, although this conclusion remains open because we did not have a control group without the use of a toy. Another positive observation regarding the toy was that the majority of the children completely ignored the moderator, who was holding the teddy bear, and responded only to the toy. The boy who sat nearest to the moderator was particularly interesting, as he was an exception. Unlike other children, he paid little attention to the bear. Instead, he watched the moderator for most of the time and was the least talkative child. We assume that his behaviour could be influenced by the researcher's proximity or position (see Figure 1), which is a consideration for future research with this method. It was also interesting that during the listing of their favourite books a girl mentioned the book "Doktor medved"[1]. Their teacher mentioned that they had been listening to that story recently, but we cannot know for sure, whether the children would mention it, had a different toy been used to animate them.

Our approach also enabled demonstration of the children's communication skills (e.g. talking, listening) and their encouragement when/where it was needed. Although they occasionally gave their answers simultaneously (talked one over another), they also justified their answers and were willing to tell more about the subject. While someone talked about his or her experiences, the others were listening, waiting to get the word and then told about their experience. We also found out, that the most talkative children in our research have more experience with books. At the end of research a teacher told us that parents read a lot to one of the most talkative girls and

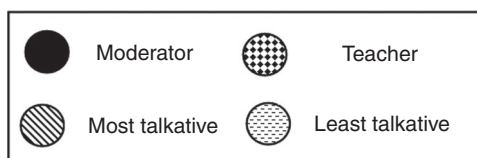
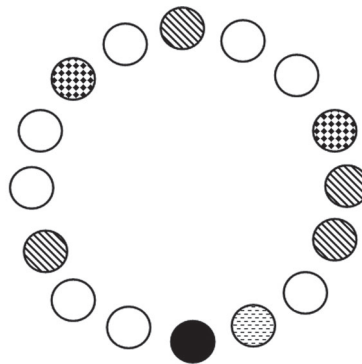


Figure 1.
Seating and children's communication activity during the research

the most cooperative boy told us, that he can already read a little; also he was the only one, who had been to a bookstore. Some of the children needed more encouragement to participate in discussion, but more interesting is the fact that the most talkative individuals sat opposite and pair spaces away from the moderator.

From Figure 1, we can see the seating and children's communication activity during the research.

The presence of children's teachers has proven to be particularly useful. They spend a lot of time with this group of children, so they knew how to motivate individuals to participate. In addition, they created the homely environment which children are used to. They also helped to interpret the responses of the participants and were a great help, providing us with additional useful information, such as exact titles of the book, details and background of some statements, etc. Thus, we found out that the argument (e.g. by Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978; Punch, 2002), that it is sometimes difficult to interpret the responses of young children, is not unjustified. Nevertheless, the core of our study was to determine attitudes towards books and reading, not the actual numbers and titles of books, owned by children, the number of visits to libraries and bookstores, etc.

To sum up, we found that our adapted method enabled the participants to independently participate and logically respond to questions – their answers met our research problem also without teachers' interpretations, although the interpretations and comments were a welcome addition. We therefore confirmed that such method is useful for collecting data from pre-school children.

4.2 Attitudes towards books, reading and book-related places

The successful methodological approach also meant that we were able to gather data to answer the remaining four research questions. The responses of the participants confirmed our predictions in the *RQ2* that they like to read or listen to stories, especially those with pictures. In total, 12 children, when asked which their favourite books were, listed picture story books, not non-fiction books although they are familiar with those as well. The girls said they prefer stories about fairies and the Smurfs, and, as mentioned before, one brought up the book "Doktor medved". Boys like more adventurous stories such as Cars and Spider man.

In regard to *RQ3*, all participants have enthusiastically said that they had already been in a library and that they liked it there. Recently they have been there with their teachers. Everybody who responded on this topic (majority, i.e. 11 children) has also visited a library with their parents. They also listed in which libraries they have already been and explained that this is a place where you can borrow books. On the contrary, the atmosphere in the group changed, when bookstores were mentioned. There were only three participants who knew those. Despite the fact that they may have been in a bookstore, it was not adequately presented to them and it was clear that they see it as another shop. Here is an example of the conversation:

MODERATOR: Has anyone ever been in a bookstore?

(Silence, a little confusion)

GIRL: They sell books there.

MODERATOR: That is correct. In a library, we can borrow books while we can buy them in bookstores and keep them forever.

BOY: Yeah, I have already been in a bookstore. I bought Cicido[2].

Moderator: Cicido is a magazine, but we can also buy it in a bookstore. What about the rest? Have you ever been in a bookstore where your parents bought a book which you could keep?

CHILDREN: Nooooo!

When asked, how many books they have at home, which was the content of *RQ4*, once again a vigorous debate was sparked, although the opinions and experiences were fairly similar. The opinion of 12 children was that they have many books at home (they even used terms like “too much”, “the whole shelf” [...]). The children also commented that they had read all of their books and some even explained where they are stored in a shelf and that they must be kept neat. One girl mentioned that she wanted more books. According to the responses, all of the participants (13) have their favourite book at home.

In regard to *RQ5*, most participants (ten) answered that usually parents read to them and one boy said that also grandparents read to him. They read most often before bedtime or rest (nine responses). One child is being read to when he comes home from kindergarten. Some of them (three) attend story-time in a local public library; stories are read to them also in the kindergarten every day before the daily rest (13 answers).

This means that in terms of the content results, we found the following: we confirmed that children prefer picture books, as already found by International Reading Association (2008) and Danko-McGhee and Slutsky (2011). This is probably also due to the fact that this is the form of material best known to them and the reading material with which they are mainly in contact. We also confirmed that boys prefer different topics and characters than girls (McGeown, 2012). Boys are more enthusiastic about themes and characters related to adventure, technology and supernatural powers, while girls like milder, fairy-tale themes. The issue at this point is that we do not know to what degree this is the influence and selection of adults, who read to them, not the actual taste of the children.

Based on the answers, we found out, that children visit a library more often than a bookstore and that the majority of participants have never been in a bookstore. According to the responses only three of the 13 children have been in a bookstore, while for some participants it was not clear if they even know what a bookstore is. The reason probably lies in the fact that the children of kindergarten Medo Prevoje had recently visited the nearby public library with their teacher, but not a bookstore. Curriculum for kindergartens (Kurikulum za vrtce, 2009) states that the children of the second age group should become acquainted with libraries and commercial providers of books (this also includes bookstores, although they are not directly mentioned). The second reason could be that the nearest bookstore is located further away from their homes than the library.

The lively responses and a debate which followed the question about the amount of books that the children have at home, suggested that the children have many of them. At this point it seems worth to point out that the children’s opinions of the quantity of books are primarily subjective. Nevertheless, it is clear that children are surrounded by books, which is one of the three crucial factors for the development of early literacy skills and later reading skills (as emphasized by the IFLA, 2007 *Guidelines for Library Services for Babies and Toddlers*), and hold a good attitude towards them. Based on the justified responses, it can be also concluded that the children have at home their favourite book.

According to the children’s opinions, it is mostly their parents who read to them, but it was also clear from the conversation that also pre-school teachers read to them every day. The fact that they perceive kindergarten reading differently would require further investigation. This is another important prerequisite for the development of

reading skills (IFLA, 2007 Guidelines for Library Services for Babies and Toddlers). This could indicate the differences in the perceptions and attitudes towards reading when different people read to children. Bus (2003) claims that the process of learning to understand books in the early stages of reading development strongly depends on the social-emotional qualities of the parent-child interaction and on the way parents mediate stories to their children. He concludes that the emotional qualities of reading sessions with relatively inexperienced children seem more important than content-related aspects (Bus, 2003). Therefore, children could perceive reading time with family as more important, even if they are read to in a day-care more frequently.

We have also found out that the parents most commonly read to children in the evening, before bedtime, while their teachers also read to them before the afternoon rest. The reasons are that reading calms the children, helping them to fall asleep, helps maintain a daily routine and also contributes to pleasant time which adults share with the children. Only a few of the participants said that they attend story-time in the public library. Therefore, it is quite logical that the children perceive parents as most frequent readers, since librarians and educators indeed do not have equal opportunities to read to the children; in the latter case especially considering the fact, that the kindergarten does not have its own library. On the other hand, IFLA (2003) emphasize the importance of linking libraries with other organizations in a local community, such as health centres, schools and kindergartens, in a way that promotes reading and satisfies the needs for library resources, if these organizations are not capable to do this by themselves. This means that the nearby libraries could also do the first step and organize activities to encourage children in kindergartens to visit the library, borrow books and to evolve good attitude towards reading.

5. Conclusion

It is possible to say that we are satisfied with the adaptation of the research method and convinced that it can be used in further research. We have demonstrated that it enables the execution of the study involving very young participants. It highly motivates the children to participate in the discussion, gives them opportunities to express themselves, and, most importantly, enables the collection of their opinions, perceptions and preferences. With that we can overcome a frequent problem of studies with young children: indirect collection of data through opinions and perceptions of adults. We collected all desired responses, despite the doubts of researchers and certain beliefs about underdeveloped speaking abilities of young children. Of course, there are still further improvements possible. For an even better data collecting, a video camera should be used to record the focus group interview with such a big group of children. Because answering is often disorganized, it is impossible to track all the data just by recording sound and writing down the answers. Of course, when recording the focus group interview, we should, at least initially, expect some influence on the children's behaviour, which can bring new problems and to some extent distort the real picture of the situation. However, this is an issue in all such studies. Certain considerations should also be given to the position of the moderator and use of animation toys. Nevertheless, we believe that such adaptations of valid research methods to suit other populations should be a welcome methodological enhancement of LIS area.

Based on the results regarding content, we conclude that vast majority of pre-school children of second age group have a positive attitude towards books, book-related places and reading. To this probably contributes a fact that adults read to children a lot, both at home and in kindergarten, usually before bedtime. From the responses it was indirectly indicated that the children perceive the situation differently when they

are listening to stories at home or in the kindergarten. Despite the fact that the teachers read to them every day, the participants believe that it is mostly their parents who read to them. All participants have already visited the library and gained positive experience. On the contrary, they are not well acquainted with bookstores. The reason could be found in the fact that bookstores are, opposite to libraries, market-oriented and are as such simply perceived as shops.

Of course, we must step back from the conclusiveness of our results, as they come from a small-scale study which in fact had a different primary purpose, namely testing of the methodology. Our results cannot be generalized to the whole population of pre-schoolers. In order to gain more comprehensive results, further and wider research is needed. However, we did prove that our approach is useful for collecting data from pre-school children. As such, our study is a contribution to the body of knowledge of information behaviour research with small children, which is, as argued by Spink and Heinström (2011) in its infancy and offers numerous possibilities for further development. Our findings can be used as a basis for further research with very young children, also on other experience-related and opinion-related topics.

Notes

1. Doctor Bear
2. Educational magazine for children aged two to five years.

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Appendix 1. The content of the adapted focus group interview

Starts moderator

Hello children!

My name is Tjaša, and I'm attending a very interesting school, where we learn about books. I am accompanied by a good friend of mine who wants to meet you and talk to you. His name is Jake and he is a very special teddy bear. Like me, he loves books. I think it will be better to let him talk now.

Teddy bear Jake continues

Hi kids, how are you today?

I asked my friend Tjaša if she could bring me here with a very special purpose: I want to talk to you about books that recently became my friends. It was a beautiful sunny summer day when I was walking in the park and I was wondering where I could find some delicious honey. Then I discovered something strange on the bench near the sandbox. It was square-shaped and very colourful. When I picked it up with my paws, it opened and beautiful colourful images with straight and curved black lines below appeared. What do you think I found there?

Yes, yes, you are absolutely correct! At that time, I had no idea, but that was my first book. I was so fascinated by the pictures that I took the book home to my lair and I totally forgot about the honey, that I had been searching for a little bit earlier. I stared at beautiful pictures for a few days and I imagined a story that was in front of me. There was a lovely girl, some kind of bad wolf and a grandmother [...] However, that is all that I knew. I began to wonder, what actually happened there. When I was visiting my friend Tjaša, I noticed many such books on the shelf in her room. She explained to me, that each book tells a very special story and that she could read some of them to me, if I wanted. Of course, I wanted! Therefore, I began to visit Tjaša every day and she read to me a lot. First, we read my book, which has the title "Little Red Riding Hood" and then she started to read her own books to me. Through stories, I meet Snow White and Sleeping Beauty as well as Tip the Mouse and Noddy. Do you know any of them?

Oh really? And which books are your favourites? What kind of stories do you prefer to listen?

Yes, we also read some of those with Tjaša. But then, something terrible happened! Suddenly we had read all the books on Tjaša's shelf. I became very sad, because I wanted to hear even more exciting stories. Tjaša caressed my head and told me that there are many places around the world where more books can be found, even so many that we could be reading them all our life but we will never succeed to read all of them! Do you have any idea where this could be?

These are libraries and bookstores. When Tjaša took me to the library for the first time, my heart burst with happiness. How many shelves and beautiful books! What about you? Have you ever been in a library?

Did you enjoy it?

In a library, we can borrow books, but we must also bring them back later, and I liked some of them so much, that I wanted to have them forever. That is the reason that Tjaša took me to a bookstore one day, where I chose a book and then she bought it for me. Have you ever been in a bookstore?

And where have you been with your parents more often? In a library or a bookstore?

Yes, so have I! (However) Tjaša often takes me to a bookstore or buys me a book for my birthday and this year I also put books on a wish list for Santa Claus. Tell me, how many books do you have at home?

I have a lot of them, a whole shelf! However, there is one that I'm particularly fond of. Do you remember the book I found in the park? Despite the fact that Tjaša read it to me many times, this is still my favourite book. Do you have your favourite book at home?

Which one is it?

Now these are very nice books! Do you know what I also discovered in my journeys through libraries, bookstores, kindergartens and schools? That anyone, such as mom, dad, grandpa, grandma, teacher and even a librarian, can read stories to us. Who usually reads to you?

At what time do they usually read to you (when you get home from school, in the evening, before you go to sleep)?

Oh, how quickly I fall asleep when Tjaša reads me a bedtime story. After this I dream about princesses and heroes and sometimes I am one of them myself.

What about in a library? Have you ever been to story-time in a library?

And in kindergarten? Do teachers sometimes also read to you?

Where are they reading to you more often?

Oh all this conversation about books and reading. I wish that we could hear a story right now!

- May be if we ask the teacher very nicely, she will read us a story!
- I think I will leave now and on the way home stop in our library where I will borrow a book about honey. Have a nice day, goodbye!

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