

ADVANTAGES OF USING LITERARY TEXTS IN INTEGRATION

Mirjana Stakić¹, Boško Milovanović²

¹University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Education, Užice, Serbia, e-mail: mirjanastakic073@gmail.com

²University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica, Teacher Education Faculty, Prizren–Leposavić, Serbia,
e-mail: bosko.milovanovic@pr.ac.rs



Abstract: In integrative teaching, which is based on the holistic principles of integration as the connection of knowledge from different areas of human life, the starting points that enable such connection play an important role. Literary texts, due to the inexhaustible richness and complexity of their subject matter, can play the role of important integrative starting points in teaching. This way of working has numerous advantages because it contributes to the acquisition of practical, applicable knowledge, and in the paper are determined the benefits provided by literary texts as a starting point in integration when it comes to encouraging students: 1) activities in class; 2) desire to read; 3) desire for independent research and 4) developing imagination and creativity. The mentioned advantages were examined from the perspective of classroom teachers, who are the most called upon to implement integration in practice and are a segment of a wider research that included 225 practitioners in the Republic of Serbia during 2021 and 2022. The results show that the largest number of teachers have very positive attitudes about all the previously mentioned advantages of using literary texts, as over 80% of respondents fully or partially agree with them. Practitioners most positively value the contribution that the use of literary texts in integration has when it comes to developing students' imagination and creativity and increasing their activity in class (88,0%), then the contribution to encouraging students' desire to read (83,5%) and in the end, although highly valued, the contribution reflected in the encouragement of students' desire for independent research (80,9%). The results are an indication that the theoretical and methodological efforts that promote integration and the role that literary texts play in it are recognized in practice and raise the issue of further implementation of this way of working in teaching.

Keywords: integration, Serbian language teaching, Serbian language teaching methodology.

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

The methodological approach advocating for the introduction of integration into the teaching process is based on the need for students to acquire functional knowledge. These are the kinds of knowledge that are necessary when solving problems, the causes of which may originate from different sources. Addressing these requires combining knowledge from different fields, which essentially represents the core of integrative learning (Stakić, 2021; 2023a, 2023b). However, in order for such learning to be successful, it is important to encourage “personal motivation, awakening of the spirit of inquiry, desire for knowledge, and curiosity” in students (Stakić, 2023a, p. 187). This methodological stance also contains some of the positive effects of applying literary texts in integration. Incorporating literature into teaching enables the development of students' intellectual potential, as well as their imagination and creativity. Literary texts serve a psychological-pedagogical function and have an “emotional aspect” (Irina, 2021, p. 187). Jelena Bobkina and Svetlana Stefanova emphasize that incorporating the analysis of literary works “in the process of foreign language acquisition offers a unique opportunity for students to explore, interpret, and understand the world around them,” and advocate for the need for “critical reading,” where readers engage in the “active evaluation not only of linguistic items, but also of a variety of meanings and viewpoints” (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016, p. 677). In this way, students are encouraged to engage in research and critical thinking, which are essential not only for language learning but also for navigating the modern world, where the sheer volume of information has grown to the point that it can sometimes be difficult to separate what is important from what is presented as such. Furthermore, by reading literary texts, students become familiar with history, philosophy, customs, culture, religion, ethics, and social norms. This list is far from exhaustive, as it is almost impossible to list all the areas of knowledge, sciences, and scientific disciplines that can be explored through literary texts, whose potential themes are complex and rich, since they can encompass everything that makes up human life (Stakić, 2021; 2023b). For this reason, we wanted to examine how practitioners assess the advantages that literary texts provide as starting points in integrative teaching.

¹Corresponding author: mirjanastakic073@gmail.com



2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The subject of the research is the advantages that literary texts provide as starting points for integration. The goal was to determine the views of practitioners regarding the potential benefits of using literary texts as a basis for integration, specifically in terms of encouraging students to: 1) engage actively in class; 2) develop a desire to read; 3) cultivate a desire for independent research; and 4) stimulate imagination and creativity. The examined segments are part of a larger study that involved 225 elementary school teachers in the Republic of Serbia during 2021 and 2022. The independent variables in the study were the teachers' years of service and the grade level in which they teach (Table 1).

Table 1. Teacher's professional experience (years of service) and the grade level of primary school in which they teach

Teachers' professional experience								Grade level of primary school in which they teach															
0–5 years		5–10 years		10–20 years		over 20 years		1st grade		2nd grade		3rd grade		4th grade									
f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p	f	p								
27	12,0	39	17,3	71	31,6	88	39,1	60	26,7	59	26,2	50	22,2	56	24,9								
TOTAL NUMBER OF TEACHERS								f								225							
								p								100							

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović (Stakić, 2023b; Stakić & Milovanović, in press)

In examining the potential advantages of literary texts as starting points for integration, a descriptive method and scaling technique were applied, with a questionnaire constructed as the instrument. The chi-square test (χ^2) was used to assess the impact of variables, and the criterion for statistical significance was set at $p < 0,01$. Data analysis also included frequencies (f) and percentages (%), and the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software was used for data processing.

3. RESULTS AND DISKUSIONS

Literary material is a tool that allows students to "be active participants, whose curiosity, imagination, and emotions, combined with the intuition and inventiveness of the teacher, create a fertile ground for the development of creativity and an appropriate attitude toward themselves and others as subjects" (Milovanović, 2020, p. 351). Texts motivate students to engage, and motivation is one of the key factors in encouraging students to acquire knowledge (Motevalli, Perveen & Michael, 2020, p. 64). Our research into the contribution of literary texts as starting points for integration in increasing student activity in the classroom has shown that teachers positively assessed this contribution (see Table 2) and that there was no statistically significant impact of the independent variables, such as teaching experience (see Table 3) and the grade level in which they teach (see Table 4), on their attitudes.

Table 2. The impact of literary texts in integration on increasing student activity in the classroom

Students are more active when a literary text is used as a starting point for integration in the classroom.			
Attitudes		f	%
Strongly agree		114	50,7
Mostly agree		84	37,3
Undecided		20	8,9
Mostly disagree		5	2,2
Strongly disagree		2	0,9
Total		225	100

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

Table 3. The impact of literary texts in integration on increasing student activity in the classroom with regard to the variable years of teaching experience

Students are more active when a literary text is used as a starting point for integration in the classroom.

Years of experience	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Up to 5 years	16	59,3	9	33,3	2	7,4	0	0	0	0	27	12,0
5–10 years	20	51,3	14	35,9	2	5,1	1	2,6	2	5,1	39	17,3
10–20 years	34	47,9	29	40,8	8	11,3	0	0	0	0	71	31,6
Over 20 years	44	50,0	32	36,4	8	9,1	4	4,5	0	0	88	39,1
Total	114	50,7	84	37,3	20	8,9	5	2,2	2	0,9	225	100

$$\chi^2 = 15,924 \quad df = 12 \quad p = 0,195$$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

Table 4. The impact of literary texts in integration on increasing student activity in the classroom with regard to the variable grade level

Students are more active when a literary text is used as a starting point for integration in the classroom.

Grade level	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 st grade	31	51,7	21	35,0	7	11,7	1	1,7	0	0	60	26,7
2 nd grade	29	49,2	22	37,3	6	10,2	2	3,4	0	0	59	26,2
3 rd grade	24	48,0	20	40,0	5	10,0	1	2,0	0	0	50	22,2
4 th grade	30	53,6	21	37,5	2	3,6	1	1,8	2	3,6	56	24,9
Total	114	50,7	84	37,3	20	8,9	5	2,2	2	0,9	225	100

$$\chi^2 = 9,406 \quad df = 12 \quad p = 0,668$$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

The data presented in Table 2 show that 88% of teachers agree (50,7% strongly agree and 37,3% mostly agree) with the statement that the use of literary texts as an integration starting point positively influences increased student activity in the classroom. 8,9% of respondents were undecided, and only 3,1% expressed disagreement (2,2% mostly disagree and 0,9% strongly disagree). Regarding the influence of independent variables, although there were no statistically significant differences, the results show that the largest number of teachers (4,5%) who expressed that they mostly disagree with the contribution of literary texts to increasing student activity have more than 20 years of teaching experience. This could be explained by the innovation of teaching models compared to the ones they learned about during their studies. Interestingly, in the group of respondents with up to 5 years of experience, no one expressed disagreement with the contribution of literary texts to increasing student activity.

However, since personal factors can also play a role in the application of texts in integration (Maričić & Stakić, 2024), drawing any conclusions of this kind should be preceded by further examination of the reasons for disagreement. It is particularly important to consider that only in the group of respondents with 5–10 years of experience, 25,6% of practitioners strongly disagreed with the statement that using literary texts in integration positively influences student activity in the classroom.

Encouraging students to read “must be inspired by a need for literature and internal motivation” (Dragić & Ilić, 2020, p. 283), and our study on the contribution of literary texts in integration to stimulating students’ desire to read shows that the respondents had positive attitudes toward this contribution (see Table 5).

Table 5. The impact of literary texts in integration on stimulating students' desire to read
Literary texts as a starting point for integration stimulate students' desire to read.

Attitudes	f	%
Strongly agree	102	45,3
Mostly agree	86	38,2
Undecided	31	13,8
Mostly disagree	4	1,8
Strongly disagree	2	0,9
Total	225	100

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

The data presented in Table 5 show that the majority of teachers (83,5%) agree with the statement that using literary texts as a starting point for integration stimulates students' desire to read. Specifically, 45,3% strongly agree, and 38,2% mostly agree with this view. Recognizing this potential within integrated learning is highly significant. As Fuad, Suryanto & Muhammad (2021, p. 41) state, "Reading is an important learning," and, in addition, reading literary texts "extensively exposes learners to a variety of cultural viewpoints, situations, and experiences" (Rahman & Muhamad, 2023, p. 2596). In relation to this contribution, 13,8% of respondents were undecided, 1,8% mostly disagreed, and only 0,9% strongly disagreed with the benefit of literary texts in integration.

The study on the impact of independent variables such as years of teaching experience and the grade level in which the respondents teach showed that no statistically significant differences were found in the attitudes of respondents regarding the impact of the variable grade level in which they teach (see Table 7), but that significant differences were observed when considering the variable years of teaching experience (see Table 6).

Table 6. The impact of literary texts in integration on stimulating students' desire to read, with regard to the variable years of teaching experience

Literary texts as a starting point for integration stimulate students' desire to read.

Years of experience	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Up to 5 years	12	44,4	13	48,1	2	7,4	0	0	0	0	27	12,0
5–10 years	22	56,4	10	25,6	4	10,3	1	2,6	2	5,1	39	17,3
10–20 years	30	42,3	27	38,0	14	19,7	0	0	0	0	71	31,6
Over 20 years	38	43,2	36	40,9	11	12,5	3	3,4	0	0	88	39,1
Total	102	45,3	86	38,2	31	13,8	4	1,8	2	0,9	225	100

$\chi^2 = 19,579$ $df = 12$ $p = 0,075$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

Table 7. The impact of literary texts in integration on stimulating students' desire to read, with regard to the variable grade level

Literary texts as a starting point for integration stimulate students' desire to read.

Grade level	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 st grade	28	46,7	22	36,7	9	15,0	1	1,7	0	0	60	26,7
2 nd grade	24	40,7	25	42,4	10	16,9	0	0	0	0	59	26,2
3 rd grade	21	42,0	18	36,0	8	16,0	3	6,0	0	0	50	22,2
4 th grade	29	51,8	21	37,5	4	7,1	0	0	2	3,6	56	24,9
Total	102	45,3	86	38,2	31	13,8	4	1,8	2	0,9	225	100

$\chi^2 = 16,881$ $df = 12$ $p = 0,154$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

The examination of the impact of years of professional experience on the respondents' attitudes revealed that the greatest differences exist in the category of respondents with 5–10 years of experience. In this category, the highest number of respondents completely agree with the statement that literary texts increase students' motivation for reading (56,4%), but the lowest number mostly agree with this claim (25,6%). Additionally, this is the only category of respondents where there is a noticeable complete disagreement with the stated advantage (5,1%). This polarization could be a result of the respondents' personal preferences for using literary texts in integration, as evidenced by the previously mentioned result that this is the only category in which 5,1% of practitioners expressed complete disagreement with the idea that using literary texts in integration increases student activity in the classroom.

Regarding the impact of the variable grade level in which respondents teach, although there is no significant difference, it is noted that respondents who disagreed with the idea that using literary texts as a starting point for integration increases students' desire to read teach in the third and fourth grades of primary school. Whether their answers reflect personal experience with a decline in students' reading curiosity in these grades, or whether they are due to other factors, requires further research.

In the third research task, we aimed to determine how practitioners assess the impact of literary texts as integrative starting points on increasing students' desire for independent research. The results showed that the respondents have positive attitudes towards this advantage (see Table 8) and that there is no statistically significant impact of the variables work experience (see Table 9) and the grade level in which they teach (see Table 10) on their attitudes.

Table 8. The impact of literary texts in integration on stimulating students' desire to read
The use of literary texts as a starting point for integration encourages students' desire to engage in independent research.

Attitudes	f	%
Strongly agree	95	42,2
Mostly agree	87	38,7
Undecided	36	16,0
Mostly disagree	4	1,8
Strongly disagree	3	1,3
Total	225	100

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

Table 9. The impact of literary texts in integration on encouraging students' desire for research with regard to the variable years of experience
The use of literary texts as a starting point for integration encourages students' desire to engage in independent research.

Years of experience	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Up to 5 years	12	44,4	10	37,0	4	14,8	0	0	1	3,7	27	12,0
5–10 years	17	43,6	15	38,5	4	10,3	1	2,6	2	5,1	39	17,3
10–20 years	26	36,6	29	40,8	14	19,7	2	2,8	0	0	71	31,6
Over 20 years	40	45,5	33	37,5	14	15,9	1	1,1	0	0	88	39,1
Total	95	42,2	87	38,7	36	16,0	4	1,8	3	1,3	225	100

$$\chi^2 = 11,094 \quad df = 12 \quad p = 0,521$$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

Table 10. The impact of literary texts in integration on encouraging students' desire for research in relation to the variable grade level

The use of literary texts as a starting point for integration encourages students' desire to engage in independent research.

Grade level	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 st grade	26	43,3	23	38,3	7	11,7	3	5,0	1	1,7	60	26,7
2 nd grade	21	35,6	28	47,5	10	16,9	0	0	0	0	59	26,2
3 rd grade	24	48,0	15	30,0	10	20,0	1	2,0	0	0	50	22,2
4 th grade	24	42,9	21	37,5	9	16,1	0	0	2	3,6	56	24,9
Total	95	42,2	87	38,7	36	16,0	4	1,8	3	1,3	225	100

$$\chi^2 = 13,011 \quad df = 12 \quad p = 0,326$$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

The data presented in Table 8 show that 80.9% of respondents agree (42,2% strongly agree, and 38,7% mostly agree) that the use of literary texts in integration encourages students' desire for research. This result indicates that practitioners have experientially confirmed the claims made by experts in the 1990s, suggesting that students' interaction with literary texts can support research processes such as "making connections to life experiences, finding focused questions to research, searching for facts and ideas related to inquiry questions, engaging in in-depth discussions, introducing new perspectives and connections, and sharing ideas with others" (Short & Armstrong, 1993, p. 97).

The pedagogical literature promotes the view that reading and analyzing literary works encourages children's development. "Discussions about literary texts encourage children's reasoning, development of research skills, establishing cause and effect, critical analysis and evaluation, imagining literary characters and the chronotopes in which they are situated" (Vučković, 2017, p. 34). This perspective highlights not only cognitive development but also the importance of reading and analyzing literary texts in stimulating children's imagination. "Imagination is a powerful factor to be stimulated and developed in teaching literature. It offers many ways of understanding and analyzing works of art" (Marwa, 2014, p. 1656). Imagination and creativity lie at the core of one's creative relationship with the world and the discovery of the new. In teaching, it is important to strive toward this, and literary texts encourage students to dream and imagine, to put themselves in the role of heroes, and to continue enjoying their imagined adventures long after they have finished reading the literary work. This potential that literature possesses is significant in integration, and the results of our research have shown that it is recognized by practitioners as well (see Table 11).

Table 11. The impact of literary texts in integration on the development of imagination and creativity
The use of literary texts as a starting point for an integrative approach contributes to the development of students' imagination and creativity.

Attitudes	f	%
Strongly agree	136	60,4
Mostly agree	52	27,6
Undecided	23	10,2
Mostly disagree	2	0,9
Strongly disagree	2	0,9
Total	225	100

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

The data presented in Table 11 show that the majority of respondents (88,0%) agree with the statement that using literary texts as a starting point for an integrative approach in teaching contributes to the development of students' imagination and creativity (60,4% strongly agree, and 27,6% mostly agree). At the same time, this is the statement with the least disagreement (0,9% mostly disagree and 0,9% partially disagree), while 10,2% were undecided. The results indicate that there is no statistically

significant impact of the variables work experience (see Table 12) and the grade level in which they teach (see Table 13) on their attitudes.

Table 12. The impact of literary texts in integration on the development of imagination and creativity in relation to the variable years of experience

The use of literary texts as a starting point for an integrative approach contributes to the development of students' imagination and creativity.

Years of experience	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Up to 5 years	15	55,6	10	37,0	2	7,4	0	0	0	0	27	12,0
5–10 years	22	56,4	11	28,2	4	10,3	0	0	2	5,1	39	17,3
10–20 years	46	64,8	17	23,9	8	11,3	0	0	0	0	71	31,6
Over 20 years	53	60,2	24	27,3	9	10,2	2	2,3	0	0	88	39,1
Total	136	60,4	62	27,6	23	10,2	2	0,9	2	0,9	225	100

$\chi^2 = 14,597$ $df = 12$ $p = 0,264$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

Table 13. The impact of literary texts in integration on the development of imagination and creativity in relation to the variable grade level

The use of literary texts as a starting point for an integrative approach contributes to the development of students' imagination and creativity.

Grade level	Attitudes										Total	
	Strongly agree		Mostly agree		Undecided		Mostly disagree		Strongly disagree			
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 st grade	38	63,3	15	25,0	6	10,0	1	1,7	0	0	60	26,7
2 nd grade	31	52,5	20	33,9	8	13,6	0	0	0	0	59	26,2
3 rd grade	31	62,0	12	24,0	6	12,0	1	2,0	0	0	50	22,2
4 th grade	36	64,3	15	26,8	3	5,4	0	0	2	0,9	56	24,9
Total	136	60,4	62	27,6	23	10,2	2	0,9	2	0,9	225	100

$\chi^2 = 12,352$ $df = 12$ $p = 0,418$

Source: Research authors Stakić & Milovanović

Although there is no significant impact of the variables, the data presented in Table 12 show that respondents who mostly disagree with the statement that the use of literary texts in integration contributes to the development of imagination and creativity have more than 20 years of work experience, while those who completely disagree with this contribution have 5–10 years of professional experience. When it comes to the grade level, only one respondent teaching in the first grade and one respondent teaching in the third grade mostly disagree with the contribution to the development of imagination and creativity, while two respondents teaching in the fourth grade completely disagree. However, the largest percentage of respondents who fully agree with this contribution teach in the fourth grade (64,3%). A similar situation was observed when examining the impact of this variable on stimulating students' desire for reading, which may be explained by the personal preferences and professional expertise of teachers in applying this approach. The results of previous research also imply a “need for different forms of professional development for teachers in this area” (Stakić, 2023b, p. 44). However, considering that the percentage of disagreement is negligible (0,9% mostly disagree and 0,9% completely disagree), the results of our research confirm the pedagogical view that literary texts represent “one of the main means of improving the creativity of students”, and attention is given to analysis that contributes to its development (Mamyrova & Kurbanalieva, 2023, p. 447).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of our research showed that a high percentage of practitioners believe that using

literary texts as a starting point for integrative connections contributes to the development of students' imagination and creativity (88%), positively impacts their activity (88%), and also has other benefits, such as stimulating the desire to read (83,5%) and motivating students to engage in independent research (80,9%). It is noteworthy that the research potential of literary texts in integration is rated lower than their ability to stimulate activity, the desire for reading, and the development of imagination and creativity. However, it cannot be concluded that practitioners do not recognize this potential. For literary texts to achieve their full potential, they should not be viewed merely as content that covers a specific topic and facilitates better understanding of it, but also as content that supports exploration and the construction of new meanings. Additionally, “cross-curricular reading instruction lets students contemplate problems and situations that reflect the world as they know it” (Aslan, 2016, p. 1800), which also serves as an encouragement for research that can be sparked by literary texts. The lower rating of this statement compared to all others may indicate the need for further education of the segment of the teaching staff who do not recognize the research potential of literary materials.

The results of our research confirm the findings that “literature can have a powerful effect on children's understandings of content area themes” (Short & Armstrong, 1993, p. 97). One of the central pedagogical implications of this study is that such an approach should be promoted in teaching, i.e., literary texts should be used in integration, especially considering that contemporary research results (Stakić, 2021; 2023b; Stakić & Milovanović, in press) also support the earlier views of researchers that “the potential offered by literature often has not been realized” (Short & Armstrong, 1993, p. 97).

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