

DOROTA GRABOWSKA
The Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies
University of Warsaw
e-mail: d.grabowska@uw.edu.pl

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING READERSHIP IN POLAND



Dorothea Grabowska, PhD, works at the Department for the Study of Libraries and Other Cultural Heritage Institutions of the Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies of the University of Warsaw. As a researcher, she is interested in the organisation and activity of public and school libraries, and especially in the forms and methods of working with users at libraries. She has been Secretary of *Przegląd Biblioteczny* [*The Library Review*] since 2013, and of *Poradnik Bibliotekarza* [*Librarian's Guidebook*] since 2003, while also forming part of the editorial board of the *Biblioteczka Poradnika Bibliotekarza* [*Librarian's Guidebook Essential Library*] series. She has published the following papers, among others: *Projekt jako metoda godna polecenia dla bibliotekarzy* [Project as a recommendable working method for librarians]. In: *Książka. Biblioteka, Informacja*. [The Book. The Library. Information] (Warsaw 2008); *Biblioteki szkolne w międzynarodowych wytycznych i aktach prawnych* [School libraries in international guidelines and legislation]. (*Poradnik Bibliotekarza* [*Librarian's Guidebook*] 2009); *Biblioteka publiczna miejscem komunikacji interkulturowej* [The public library as a place of inter-cultural communication]. In: *W dialogu języków i kultur III*. [In the Dialogue of Languages and Cultures III]. (Warsaw, 2013); *Najmłodszy czytelnicy w bibliotece: wybrane formy pracy* [Young readers at the library. Selected methods of work]. In: *Kultura czytelnicza dzieci i młodzieży początku XXI wieku: szkice bibliologiczne* [Readership culture among children and teenagers in the early 21st century. Sketches in bibliology]. (Łódź, 2013); *Formy i metody pracy z młodzieżą* [Forms and methods of working with young people]. In: *Czas przemian – czas wyzwań: rola bibliotek i ośrodków informacji w procesie kształtowania kompetencji współczesnego człowieka* [A time of transition – a time of challenges. The role of library and information centres in shaping the competencies of contemporary people] (Warsaw 2014).

KEYWORDS: Readership in Poland. Readership promotion. Public library.

ABSTRACT: **Purpose/thesis of the article** – The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of public libraries in promoting readership in Poland. **Methodology** – Available surveys showing the level of readership in Poland have been analysed. Documents that highlight the role of libraries in the promotion of reading as well as the social expectation that they undertake such activities have been summarised. To provide examples of good practices articles from the 2016 issue of *Poradnik Bibliotekarza* (*Librarian's Guidebook*) have also been

analysed discussing the libraries' activities aiming to promote readership. **Results/conclusions** – The level of readership in Poland is unsatisfactory. Action is being taken in order to remedy this situation. Public libraries join international and national actions as well as run their own campaigns to promote readership. The condition of readership in Poland is not satisfactory, as revealed by available readership surveys.

OVERVIEW OF READERSHIP IN POLAND BASED ON SELECTED RESEARCH

Surveys of the National Library of Poland

The decline in book readership is a consolidating trend in Poland, as revealed by surveys regularly conducted by the National Library. Before 2008, the proportion of readers as compared to non-readers oscillated around 3:5; today, this number has changed dramatically, reaching 2:5 (*Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2015 r.* [The Level of Readership in Poland in 2015], p. 12). The number of intensive readers (reading more than 12 books a year) has fallen by half. The National Library surveys are regularly conducted on nationwide samples of people over the age of 15. In 2015, the research sample consisted of 3,049 people. 37% of respondents reported having read at least one book (*Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2015 r.*, p. 4). The determining factors for reading are educational attainment and gender. People with a tertiary education read more, and women read more than men. The novel is the most popular genre, especially romantic, thriller, and fantasy fiction, the most read author being Henryk Sienkiewicz (as in the previous surveys). It is remarkable that reading practices tend to go together. For example, reading newspapers is usually accompanied by reading books, and those who read paper-based texts tend to read online ones as well. Family background is decisive for the formation of reading competencies. Parents who read bring up their children so that they read too. This is a broader phenomenon, as readers not only bring up new readers, but also socialise with other readers. Naturally though, the lack of family support can be compensated for. Other factors shaping reading competencies (apart from the family) include: the availability of libraries, influence of teachers, scrupulous adherence to required reading by schoolchildren, reading for pleasure and the development of reading habits (the more one reads, the more one enjoys reading). The books chosen by readers usually come from home collections, are borrowed from friends or are bought. Libraries also represent a significant source of books, used mostly by those who read 7 or more books a year. While libraries are also occasionally used by non-readers, the scale of this phenomenon is rather negligible (*Stan czytelnictwa...*, p. 6). The main reasons for visiting libraries are: access to books which are difficult to find otherwise, librarians' assistance in finding the right book, the atmosphere

at the library, activities organised, and the fact that the services are free of charge. Those respondents who do not use libraries explain that they have no need to do so as they can look up all the information they require online. They also tend to complain that library book collections are outdated, and dread overdue fines. According to available research, 2 in 3 Poles over the age of 15 use the Internet (*Stan czytelnictwa...*, p. 7). The respondents typically do so to look for practical tips and guidance as well as for information related to their job or studies, to check the press and the latest news, and to use online encyclopaedias.

The National Library surveys have clearly revealed a significant decline in book reading. 14% of respondents do not read any longer texts, nor do they use the Internet or even sporadically open a book, newspaper, or magazine. They openly admit to not reading books. Still, 22% of respondents declared practising all types of reading (*Stan czytelnictwa...*, p. 26).

This is not the only study showing that the level of readership in Poland is unsatisfactory.

Surveys of the Polish Chamber of Books

In the surveys carried out by the Polish Chamber of Books, readership was construed very broadly as any contact with written texts. The concept of *text diet* was introduced (*Książki w codziennym życiu Polaków* [Books in the Everyday Life of Poles], p. 15). Readership was not discussed exclusively in the context of leisure time, since reading was understood as one of the basic daily activities. Another factor considered was the accessibility of electronic devices providing access to distinct types of text. 94.8% of respondents declared they had access to such devices. These were usually mobile phones (67%), laptop computers (51.5%) and cable TV (49.6%). Only 5.2% of respondents said they had no access to any such devices altogether (*Książki w codziennym życiu...*, p. 23). Those who did use electronic devices providing access to diverse types of text were also Internet users (68.2%). The most frequent ways of using the Internet were: browsing websites (91.8%), sending and receiving emails (86.5%), listening to music (58.5%), and shopping online (49.3%) (*Książki w codziennym życiu...*, p. 28). When asked about what they had done the previous day, the respondents listed: watching TV (66%), spending time with their family (54.2%), having meals together (47.2%), making phone calls (42.5%), and using the Internet (40.9%). The most time-consuming activities were: professional work (23%), spending time with family (14.2%), and watching TV (12.3%) (*Książki w codziennym życiu...*, p. 48). The respondents were also asked about reading texts irrespective of their daily activities. 43.8% replied they had no contact with the printed word whatsoever. 20% read text messages and social network notifications, 18.2% read printed press, and 14.8% checked short

news stories online (*Książki w codziennym życiu...*, p. 49). 8.6% had had contact with books in some format (printed, e-books, audio books) the previous day. On the whole, the respondents stated they considered reading to be a pleasurable leisure activity (81.5%). The researchers understood readership as reading (either in whole or in part) or even just looking through any book (in printed, electronic, or audio format). 37.2% of respondents reported reading books in accordance with the above definition. The survey confirmed that educational attainment and gender were the determining factors for reading books. Reading is more widespread among people with a higher level of education and among women. The majority of readers are those who read less than 6 texts annually. The percentage of e-book and audio book readers was 4.2% and 1.6%, respectively. The factor that impeded reading was predominately the lack of time. However, 26% of respondents admitted they did not read even though they had time to do so. Actual readers typically read for pleasure, out of interest in a particular topic, or saw reading as their hobby. They selected texts according to their personal liking and the opinions of friends. A typical reader would read general, romance, thriller and fantasy fiction. Among non-literary texts, handbooks and biographies prevailed (*Książki w codziennym życiu...*, p. 63). 35% of respondents declared they acquired books through buying or through receiving them as gifts. 33% read books from their home collections, while 30.2% got them from libraries.

Electronic reading

The *Report on Book and E-book Readers* (*Raport z badania czytelników książek i e-booków*, the 'Report') investigated electronic reading as compared to reading traditional print. It cannot be considered representative even though the survey was conducted on a sample of 5,000 people, as it only included well-educated Internet users from big cities. It seems certain that, indeed, these people do read a great deal. 67.6% read over 15 books a year, 13% between 10 and 15, 8.9% between 7 and 10, and 4.5% between 6 and 7. Therefore, 94% of respondents can be considered actual readers. LEGIMI,¹ the company responsible for this survey, had intended to study the popularity of e-books. It confirmed that electronic books were predominately read by those who also read traditional books. 78% of respondents did read e-books, but 80% preferred paper books mainly for sentimental reasons (they preferred the contact with paper and appreciated its "smell", "touch" and "texture"), and 60% because they found it easier to focus on the text if it was printed on paper, they already had an ample collection of paper books at home, or had no device enabling them to read e-books.

¹ An e-book distributor.

E-books were mostly chosen due to their convenience (69%), accessibility (54%), and availability for purchase “without leaving home” (50%). The respondents read mostly fantasy, criminal, thriller, and horror fiction. 47% of respondents admitted they illegally downloaded e-books from the Internet. As the report concluded, “According to the readers, the end of the paper era is still far in the future, as paper editions are still regarded as a better investment” (*Report*, p. 4).

A research project known as “Shifts in the reading culture due to the emergence of e-texts and the devices providing access to them” (*“Zmiany kultur czytelniczej w kontekście wprowadzenia e-tekstów i urządzeń pozwalających z nich korzystać”*) was aimed at capturing the experience of reading in the digital environment (Kisilowska, Paul & Zając, 2016, p. 182). The increasing popularity of e-texts has been partially confirmed. It was highlighted that contact with such texts was patchy, happening at short intervals, and usually concerned with short, non-literary texts. Readers looked through them in their “spare moments”, something that had been made possible by electronic devices. Books and narrative texts were mostly read in paper format. What drew the researchers’ attention was that the readers were rather reluctant to share information or comment on the texts they had read in social media. The popularity of e-books depended on the variety of available titles and their quality as well as on the level of skills required to use them. In conclusion, the researchers stated that “paper print has ceased to be the dominant means of accessing text contents. The informed choice made between paper and e-text, as well as between various text types and genres (depending among other things on their length, quality, the level of concentration required and the purpose of reading) is made on the basis of certain external circumstances, such as economic standing, lifestyle, the amount of leisure time, the space available, the time of day, individual preferences and intensity of reading” (Kisilowska, Paul & Zając, 2016, pp. 185-186).

The reasons behind the unsatisfactory level of readership are diverse and do not always depend on the activity of public libraries. However, the latter can significantly influence some of them. Readership promotion is a case in point. One of the key tasks of public libraries specified in international guidelines is to “inform and develop reading habits among children from a very early age” (*Działalność bibliotek publicznych* [The Activity of Public Libraries], 2002, p. 100). Let us look at some examples of how public libraries in Poland explore this area.

READERSHIP PROMOTION AND LIBRARIES

Among the services provided to users by public libraries, the IFLA/UNESCO guidelines mention promoting reading and writing skills as well as readership (*Działalność bibliotek publicznych*, 2002, p. 49). Reading is consid-

ered an indispensable skill for active members of the society, as well as necessary for the use of modern communication systems. The Law on Public Libraries stipulates that “Public libraries shall respond to the educational, cultural and information needs of the society in general, as well as contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and culture” (Polish Act on Libraries of 27 June 1997, Art. 18.1). Hence, in the context of library activity, readership promotion shall be understood as encouraging the local community to participate in cultural life – which includes reading – and consequently to use libraries. Let us remember that the activity of public libraries brings tangible economic benefits to the society. “Thanks to the efforts of libraries, children develop their language skills in their leisure time, which helps them achieve better educational outcomes and get a better job in the future. With this, they consume and spend more, which increases the GDP. Therefore, the library is not just a cost, but a very good social investment” (Tubylewicz & Diduszko-Zyglewska (eds.) 2015, p. 56).

The role of libraries in promoting readership has been acknowledged in the National Programme for Readership Promotion (Resolution no. 180/2015). In 2015, the Council of Ministers adopted Resolution no. 180/2015 on establishing the multiannual “National Programme for Readership Promotion”. The purpose of the programme is to improve the level of readership in Poland, with the general objective to “strengthen the reading activity within the Polish society and support the development of libraries in Poland”. It stipulates that the role of public, school and pedagogical libraries shall be enhanced, so that they become local centres of community life, providing access to culture and knowledge. Three priorities have been set within the Programme: (1) purchasing new publications for public libraries, (2) improving the library infrastructure, and finally (3) promoting and supporting readership among children and teenagers in order to develop their interests. The Minister responsible for culture and national heritage conservation oversees the first two, with the National Library (Priority 1) and The Book Institute (Priority 2) acting on his/her behalf, while the Minister in charge of educational and pedagogical matters is responsible for Priority 3. The programme is to be implemented in the years 2016-2020. When defining its groundwork and objectives, special attention was paid to the fact that in order to stimulate readership, library book collections need to be constantly supplemented by the latest editions, sought after by the readers, and that major literary and research publications need to be presented and exhibited in libraries. It was emphasised that the problem was not the quantity, but the quality and structure of library holdings. Appealing collections are believed to make readership promotion easier.

Public libraries shall specialise in such promotion, understood as “a way to communicate with potential product recipients in order to make them purchase it” (*Aktywna biblioteka* [Active Library], 2010, p. 12).

Promotion of reading in public libraries in a nutshell

Even though public libraries are not-for-profit institutions, they use marketing tools such as the marketing mix (Kamińska, 2007, pp. 11-15). In the context of readership, this notably includes library products (holdings), i.e. what the library has to offer, as well as its services. Naturally, this is not the only meaningful element of the marketing mix. In fact, all its components are interconnected. Library promotion includes activities and tools enabling it to inform the society about its collections and services. This is a factor shaping the users' needs, stimulating and modelling demand (Sójka, 1994, pp. 62-63). The promotion of library collections is intended to show their diversity, usefulness, and appeal in order to stimulate interest (Kubów 2006, p. 11). This is of paramount importance in the present context, since "today it is no longer enough to have 'the only copy in town'... as perhaps soon no one will ask for it any more" (Radwański, 2007, p. 7). Readership promotion means influencing library users (current and potential) in such a way that they adopt behaviours that increase the level of readership. This can be done through information, showing benefits, encouragement, and persuasion. Such theoretical assumptions are translated into specific forms of works in public libraries that invite their users to have more contact with books.

Selected examples of readership promotion in Polish libraries

Many library activities aim to promote readership within the local community. In doing so, libraries have been joining international and national initiatives as well as launching their own projects.

Bookstart is an international program implemented by Polish libraries in many ways. It was first launched in Birmingham in 1992, and today is being taken up in 20 countries worldwide, such as Japan, Canada, New Zealand and South Korea. Each of these implements it in a slightly different way, depending on their capacities and specific circumstances (Zajac, p. 134). In Poland, the Municipal Public Library in Wrocław has been implementing its Bookstart project since 2010, known as *Na dobry początek* [Off to a Good Start]. In June 2016, its 6th edition was launched, co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (within the Accessible Culture programme), in collaboration with the Wrocław Puppet Theatre, the National Forum of Music, and the City Social Assistance Centre (*Na dobry początek* [Off to a good start]). In the library, starter packs can be collected, consisting of a book and educational materials for parents of children up to the age of 2 (a brochure with literary suggestions for this age group and guidelines on how to play with children using books). This is a reading layette, accompanied by the toddler's first library card. With this project, Poland

became one of the countries implementing programs inspired by *Bookstart*. A very similar social action has been run by the ABC XXI Foundation "All Poland Reads to Kids". Its title is "My Baby's First Book" (*Pierwsza książka mojego dziecka*). In December 2014, the Foundation distributed 82,000 free packs (including a book for parents with articles and poems to read to the child, and a DVD with an educational film and lullabies) to new mothers in over 90% of maternity hospitals in Poland.

Libraries also encourage book crossing, an idea initiated in the U.S. in 2001 by Ron Hornbaker, a software developer (*Bookcrossing* b). Its participants leave books they have read in public places, sometimes specifically designed for this purpose (bookcrossing shelves). Those interested can take the books and read them, then later pass them on again. In Poland, this idea first appeared in 2003. A bookcrossing shelf has been active in the Municipal Public Library in Jasło since 15 May 2010 (*Akcja [Action]*), which also celebrates the National Free Books Day each year. Such an action is also promoted by the Municipal Library of Kędzierzyn-Koźle (*Bookcrossing* a), and many others.

In 2012, the President of the Republic of Poland launched the National Reading Action, a nationwide series of sessions dedicated to public readings of Polish literary classics (*Narodowe Czytanie [National Reading]*). It started with *Master Thaddeus* by Adam Mickiewicz, in 2013 works by Aleksander Fredro were read, followed by the *Trilogy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (2014), *The Doll* by Bolesław Prus (2015) and *Quo Vadis* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (2016). Libraries also joined this nationwide action. In the Municipal Library of Bytów, *Quo Vadis* was read in the Portrait Hall of the town's castle, decorated for the occasion, with librarians dressed up in costumes reminiscent of Ancient Rome, where the novel was set. People were invited to join the event at the Bytów central square, and everyone could take part in the public reading. The volunteers included the town's vice-mayor, the editor-in-chief of a local weekly, the director of the local museum, and the director of the town's library (Prądzyński). The Municipal and County Library in Rybnik also held a public reading of *Quo Vadis* at the town's central square (Doliba, 2016, p. 29). The novel was read by Marcin Troński, the town mayor, the deputy mayors, the mayor's assistant, a parish priest, the Silesian Voivode, the library director and volunteers from the public who had gathered at the town square. The reading was accompanied by a Q&A session with the guests. The participants could also get a stamp for the occasion on their own copy of *Quo Vadis*. The Municipal Public Library in Brzeg similarly held a public reading session at Plac Polonii Amerykańskiej, in town centre. Librarians, staff of the Brzeg Cultural Centre, and local government representatives read to the public (Świetlicka, 2016, p. 17). The participants could listen to the pieces read as well as take part in games and activities or buy second-hand books at the book market.

Book Discussion Clubs are another notable initiative launched by The Book Institute and the British Council (*Dyskusyjne Kluby Książki* [Book Discussion Clubs]). In 2012, the number of official book clubs reached 1,027. Among them, 721 were for adults. They have over 7,000 members (Fabisińska, 2015, p. 208) who gather to select books according to their interest, read them, discuss and exchange their opinions. The clubs also organise literary soirées. In 2011, 914 such events were held (Fabisińska, 2015, p. 208). For its members, they are something “important” or even “very important”, sometimes providing a unique opportunity to meet an author (Niedziela & Kieżun, 2013, p. 2).

Since 2001, libraries from all over the country have been taking part in the “All Poland Reads to Kids” action of the ABC XXI Foundation. Some are organised by regional coordinators, as for example in Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Łódź, Lesser Poland, Masovian, Subcarpathian, Silesian and Greater Poland Voivodeships, while others act as local leaders and coordinators (*Cała Polska czyta dzieciom* [All Poland Reads to Kids]). The Municipal Public Library in Lubaczów, located in Basznia Dolna, began implementing a program entitled “All Municipality Reads” in 2017, in cooperation with the ABC XXI Foundation.

More and more libraries are joining the nationwide Library Night initiative. It has been held since 2015, when 600 libraries participated. One year later, their number grew to a thousand (*Noc Bibliotek 2017* [Library Night 2017]). The Municipal Library in Kluczbork held its Crime Fiction Night on 4 June 2016 (Gruszczyńska, 2016, p. 33). Participants had the opportunity to meet a forensic officer from the County Police Headquarters in Kluczbork, and to solve criminal cases in the library basement. Children could visit the Lasse and Maja Detective Agency, solve crime puzzles, and watch a film. A music band performed, and the participants could buy criminal books and vote for their favourite criminal fiction author, book, film, and TV show.

The Municipal Public Library in Dąbrowa Tarnowska joined the 1st Edition of the Social Action “Reading Polish Books”, a competition initiated by the Ravelo.pl bookshop and the Foundation of the Polish Academy of Sciences. This action was aimed at promoting Polish literature and its authors (Kusior, 2016).

Libraries are encouraged to participate in such activities by the Polish Librarians’ Association through a competition entitled “Master of Readership Promotion”. It has been held since 2009 (Gwadera, p. 550). In 2016, its 9th edition took place (candidates could submit their applications by 17 March 2017) (*Mistrz* [Master]). In 2015, the 1st prize went to the Municipal Public Library known as *Biblioteka pod Atlantami* in Wałbrzych, which organised over 1,380 events with about 24,000 participants. The jury substantiated their decision by emphasising that the library had not only “actively participated in nationwide events promoting readership” (National

Reading, Book Discussion Club), but also had numerous original ideas for promoting readership. Among them was the “Magic of Reading” project addressed to various groups of users. It consisted of 139 events, such as: “The Fantasy Bench” – reading to children in outdoor spaces, parks and gardens; “In Trzszczydłów, or Reading Crackling Rhymes in Wałbrzych”, a reading marathon; “Reading Fairy Tales in Chełmiec”, an inter-generational outdoor event; “A Night with the Legends of Wałbrzych”; competitions such as “Polish Poets Write for Children”, “Book Fashion”, and “Master of Beautiful Reading”; the 1st Review of Literary Works by Children and Teenagers of Wałbrzych; regular actions such as “Booktalking” or “Reading Out Loud on the Carpet” (monthly meetings fostering readership among children as well as promoting new releases); and a series of literary sessions for middle school students entitled “Literary Mornings at the Library. The Life and Work of Authors from the School Reading List”. Adults could take part in sessions such as “Multi-cultural Wałbrzych” or “A Life More Colourful than a Novel. The Story of my Family”. The *Master of Readership Promotion* award is granted not only for joining nationwide initiatives, but also for organising local activities responding to specific needs of the community where the library operates.

Local initiatives aimed at promoting reading include the Lesser Poland Reading Aloud Contest organised by the Provincial Public Library in Cracow and the Cracow Division of the Association of Polish Schools’ Teachers-Librarians (Będkowska). The purpose of the contest is to “improve reading aloud skills, and develop reading culture, creative talents and interest in the region as well as the students’ knowledge of the region’s literary culture” (10. *Małopolski Konkurs Pięknego Czytania – Regulamin* [Regulations of the 10th Lesser Poland Reading Aloud Contest]). In 2017, the 10th edition was held, engaging students of primary, middle and secondary schools as well as those from the Special Educational Centre for Blind and Visually Impaired Children in Cracow.

The Book Gallery Library in Oświęcim ran a project known as “A Tailor-made Legend. The 21st Century Legend of Oświęcim” (Dejko, 2016, p. 39). Its purpose was to show over 800 years of Oświęcim’s history to young people. A walking tour was organised along with a film session, local legends were analysed and a contemporary one created. Based on the latter, the participants came up with a film scenario and shot a video. The library set up its own Writers’ Alley to commemorate eminent living authors, who personally participate in inaugurating their memorial plaques with their autographs and fragments of their works. In 2016, *New Wave* poet Ryszard Krynicki was honoured in this way (*Dziewiąta odłona...* [The 9th chapter...], 2016, p. 27).

The Silesian Library in Katowice followed with its *Book Coolture* project (Kapustka-Olejniczak, 2016). It held a literary picnic with the participation

of children's authors such as Marcin Pałasz, Wojciech Widłak and Joanna Olech. The young participants were divided into editorial teams charged with creating a magazine with columns such as: Latest News, Opinions & Comments, Interviews, or Books and New Releases. A new ending was added to a short story by Marcin Pałasz, Wojciech Widłak was interviewed, and a news story covering the event was written, while author Joanna Olech supervised the visual side of the magazine.

CONCLUSION

It seems nearly impossible to list all the initiatives pursued by public libraries in Poland to promote readership. This article is limited to those shared by librarians in the review *Poradnik Bibliotekarza* [Librarian's Guidebook] in 2016. Public libraries take part in international and national programs as well as initiating local activities. Each of them operates in a specific environment, forming a part of the local public space. This means that they must take into consideration the needs of the local community and provide favourable conditions for those needs to be met, as well as stimulating demand and, if possible, setting new trends. As Jacek Wojciechowski accurately remarked, "The repertoire of library activities needs to be constantly developed. Whoever fails to do this will, I am afraid, fail to survive" (Wojciechowski, 2014, p. 188).

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