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The Reading Matters: Children Readership in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

There is something unusual going on with reading and literacy among the Czech children. International assessment of reading literacy shows that the results of Czech children are poor as compared with other countries. Over the last few decades, Czech children read books less and less. There is a strong connection between the reading behaviour, reading literacy and the results in assessments from education. Children who are strong readers are also more successful learners and gain more possibilities to become applicable members of modern society. The aim of this paper is to describe the state of reading among Czech learners, find its strengths and weaknesses, raise reading literacy awareness and make the results a starting point for other researchers. The researchers use the quantitative method. The questionnaire collects an extensive range of data from target population of 8-15 years old learners of primary and lower-secondary schools.

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1. Introduction

Reading and reading literacy is currently the main point of interest of many experts of Czech and international public. This concern is entirely justified by the fact that reading literacy is a key to success in education and better social life. The ability to decode the information is needed in many areas of human life. According to the published International Educational Achievement (IEA - PISA, PIRLS, NCES, IES, OECD) and the annual report of the Czech School Inspection 2009/2010, the level of reading literacy of Czech pupils constantly worsens. Research in reading in the last decade shows that children read less and less (Gabárová 2003, Ronková 2014, Richter 2013). These

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findings alarm the experts to do new research and analyses of the current state of knowledge. It is necessary to constantly look for new ways to halt this decline and to teach the reading literacy more effectively. Children who are good readers are often more successful in education and at the same time they have a wider range of options to become a useful member of the modern society (Wildová, 2014).

2. The objective of the study

The aim of the study is to describe the image of reading of Czech students, to find its strengths and weaknesses, to compare the trends and share the new findings with the wider public.

3. Methodology

The research was quantitative, statistical, using a questionnaire with 28 questions. The questioning took place during the IT classes, pupils filled in the online form under their teacher’s assistance. Filling in the questionnaire took about 20 minutes, it contained closed questions, where students chose from a number of options, and open questions, which offered space for self-expression. In some questions, it was allowed to choose only one option, in others, it was possible to choose several alternatives. The diversity of the questionnaire included scale or yes/no answers. The research sample was constructed so that everyone had the same probability to participate in the research. Since this is a school-oriented research, the recruiting is divided into two phases. The first phase is to choose a school and the second to choose a particular class. Schools are selected using a systematic random selection from a publicly available school database. From each of the selected schools, a list of classes was provided and then 2 classes were randomly selected using the random class beginning (which is different in each school) and included into the sample. According to the data character, it contains three types of variables: nominal (categorical), ordinal (serial) and metric (ratio and interval), (Škaloudová 1998).

4. Results

For this article’s purposes, we only focus on some of the research results. The PISA 2003 research (Kelblová 2006, Palečková & Tomášek 2005) examines the correlation between the relationship to reading and reading literacy by international investigation. In all participating countries, it shows that the closer the student’s relationship is to reading, the better results on tests of reading literacy are achieved. The substantial factor that affects reading literacy and leads to improving reading skills is therefore a positive attitude to reading. It is necessary to realize this fact, convert it and use it effectively in educational reality. In our research, we ask about the positive attitude to reading as well.

4.1 Do children enjoy reading?

Many studies show that girls’ interest in reading is higher than the interest of boys. Let us see what it is compared to the interest of girls in reading in our country. At the same time, girls achieve better results in Czech pupils’ reading literacy tests than boys. This dependency cannot be confirmed by this research, we can say, however, that interest in reading is probably one of the factors that influence the success of students in reading literacy. David Greger (2005), in his research thesis The Possibilities of Detection and Measurement of Text Difficulty, found out that gender has an impact on the success of comprehension testing. Is there a connection between the interest in reading and gender? Is the dependency of the interest in reading and gender statistically significant? Chi square on research data has shown that the dependency exists and is significant at the 0.05% level of significance, \( \alpha = 0.05 \).

We can thus say that our alternative hypothesis was confirmed at 0.05% significance level, while confirming the hypothesis that girls enjoy reading more than boys, and we reject \( H_0 \), that girls do not enjoy reading more than boys.

First, it is good to ask whether children from third to ninth grade enjoy reading. Unfortunately, a large percentage of children belong to those who do not enjoy reading. This information is alarming for teachers, parents and us researchers in the area of reading. Nearly a 1/3 of pupils do not enjoy reading. According to the PIRLS 2001
(Kramplová; Potužníková 2005), which, inter alia, dealt with reading, 23% of pupils do not enjoy reading in the fourth grade of elementary schools and our country is ranked among the countries with the lowest interest in reading among fourth grade students. Our research on nearly 5000 pupils from different regions of the Czech Republic shows 14% of fourth grade students who do not enjoy reading. It can be said that the popularity of reading among fourth graders has risen in our country since 2001.

Fig. 1. Do you enjoy reading?

70% of Czech children enjoy reading. The popularity of reading depends on gender and age; generally, girls enjoy reading more (80%) than boys (59%), with the increasing age the popularity of reading decreases in both boys and girls. 93% 8-9-year-old girls like reading, but among 14-15-year-old boys, it is only 35%. The number of children who read daily or almost daily decreases from 10-11 years, in four years, it will be reduced from 39% to 18%.

Fig. 2. The frequency of reading the classics by age
The chart shows a declining popularity of reading with higher age categories.

4.2 Why children not read?

There is a great gender difference between children when it comes to reading. Boys read twice less than girls. It also depends on age; pupils aged 14-15 (34%) read three times less than pupils aged 8-9 years (10%). The graph in terms of reading clearly decreases with increasing age to 15 years. The cause of this decline is probably a big difference of the family influence on children’s reading. Small children are more read to and are lead to regular reading, while teenage students are turning to other sources of entertainment, that are attractive for them. As for adults, it shows that economic activity, employment, work has no effect on reading (Trávníček 2007). Therefore, people, who are economically active read about as often as those economically inactive (2% difference). Both adults and children consistently report not having enough time (56%) as one of the main reasons why they do not read, and also children’s having to do their homework paradoxically hinders them from reading books (29%). However, if economic activity does not affect reading, we can consider claims that there is not enough time for reading socially acceptable excuses. Children most often declare that they would read more if they had more time, both boys and girls. Other reasons are approximately equally represented. Boys and girls differ significantly in response “I would not read more in any case” - 6% of girls but 14% of boys chose this answer. Boys are more resolute in rejecting to read and they are not afraid to express their attitude. Moreover, the group of oldest children stands out of the data, because they chose answers “I would read more if I was not on the computer so much” and “I would read more if I didn’t watch television so much” more often than other children.

The influence of the size of the place of residence or the region of the Czech Republic is not statistically significant.

4.3 Reason why a book is considered favourite...

- The most important thing when it comes to choosing a favourite book is the theme and whether the content is delivered in a witty, entertaining way.
- What themes are popular among children? In an open question, typically girly themes appeared: horses, magic, vampires (mystery), while typically boys’ theme is soccer, and among gender-unrelated themes are animals and dogs.

5. Discussion

Průcha (1987) divided the characteristics of a reader into four groups: cognitive skills, language skills, interest and motivational characteristics and communication conditions of word processing. Cognitive competencies of readers include their existing knowledge and experience.
70% of children find reading to be fun - girls (80%) more than boys (59%) and the popularity of reading decreases with increasing age. It is very important to keep kids reading from an early age, when they are more “malleable” and can be influenced by parental example. The most effective is the direct experience of a child - if the child sees that people around him or her like to read or talk about books in their spare time and that they like books. If you can share this joy with children, for example while reading to each other, buying new books, visiting book festivals, going to the library together, you have almost won. Reading habits are built in the primary school, and even though children put books off in adolescence, research on adults (Trávníček 2007) shows that they eventually come back to them.

Reading taste of children, particularly the youngest readers, is very diverse. Let us not thus try to surprise them and let them choose instead. The three most popular books of Czech children are Harry Potter, Diary of a Wimpy Kid and Twilight (but all of them reach to less than 10%).

Despite the rapidly increasing number of e-book readers, tablets and smart phones on the market, kids still prefer traditional printed books. Such book can still be a nice gift (choice in conformity with the taste of the child). In the case of the older boys (12-15 years), it is good to motivate them to read from e-book readers, tablets and smart phones.

Half of the children read 4 and less books per year, which is a reason to motivate children to read more. If they are not motivated by their families, it is often effective to find another informal way to motivate them, something that will offer them to experience the passion, emotions and share experiences (book clubs, friends who read - peers, younger children, elderly people ...). Motivation can be mediated through appropriate “opinion makers” - athletes for older boys, singers for older girls reading a book must be cool.

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