

The role of children's reading in the globalized information society

Lenka Václavíková Helšusová

Abstract. The report talks about the necessary context of children's motivation toward proper reading abilities and habits. Firstly, it refers to the importance of reading skills and literacy in today's society. Secondly, we talk about the role of family and its cultural and socio-economic characteristics. The last part refers to sociological research conducted in the Czech Republic last year by Gabal, Analysis & Consulting, focused on children ages 10 to 14 as well as their parents. The results bring specific information about today's Czech children reading in context of the role of family background, children's free time activities and school involvement.

1. Introduction

Modern society is based on information and work with information not only by analysts and experts but by ordinary citizens. One could not even understand the use of everyday life instruments without the ability to read and understand printed information. This is part of the phenomenon which we call functional literacy – the ability to read and write which enables a person to be effectively integrated into all the activities in which his or her country or group usually expects literacy. [Rabušicová, 2002]

It is necessary for today's children to be skilled not only in reading but also in understanding the information. It is necessary for their work, for their lives, for their security. The basis of creating this ability is in the hundreds of hours which children spend on their own reading.

2. Information and globalized society

Modern society is often called *information society*, which refers to the dominant role of information in everyday life [Toffler, 1990]. Information can be bought or sold, kept or given, utilized or laid waste. Anyway, we need to be informed, meaning to be up to date. Our lives, our satisfaction, our social and work success and our security depend on our ability to be informed and work with gained information. Globalization gives the information perspective new dimension. The speed of getting and giving information and the availability

of information without regard to its verity or objectivity is tremendous from an historical perspective. [Bauman, 1999] With tons of information easily reached, we need to be able select the right information, analyse it and use it properly. We need to know how to choose the right source of information and how to work with it. Even adults often have trouble managing this. We need to prepare children to avoid any information confusion; they have to learn to use information and effectively process it. One of the most important ways is the development of reading and understanding ability.

3. Children's reading as a social phenomenon

Children's reading is one of those activities which belong dominantly to families. Parents need to prepare their children in early childhood for contact with books by showing them how to handle them and what might be attractive about a book that would make a child open it and try to read. The probability of intensity or even existence of this parental behaviour depends on several characteristics of the family.

One of the most important is the education of the parents [Riordan, 2003, DeBruin-Parecki, Krol-Sinclair, 2003, etc.] Highly educated parents can provide their children with better care in early reading motivation and also continue with advice and discussions about books after that. More highly educated parents also read more often and give their child patterns which have a significant role in developing the reading habits of the child. The social-economic background of a family, which means not only education of parents, but also their position at work and salary, is related to a child's success at school and his or her reading habits.

Bourdieu defines cultural capital of families on a more common level as the degree of adoption of certain types of behaviour and life style necessary for communication and participation in the dominant status culture, which is also present at school. [Bourdieu, 1998:14] This kind of capital provides a child with many advantages which he or she uses later at school. School and education are then more friendly and easy for him or her. We are talking about a better chance to get books; better chances to talk with parents about issues discussed at school, and have already mentioned better utilization of reading and working with information.

What other authors call the social capital of a family – the capacity of a family to “invest” a wealth of attention, advice, support, interest, values, and care in children - is one of those effects which is confirmed by all research done in this area. The intergenerational communication, reading to children, helping them with homework or discussing with them their problems is tremendously reflected in a child's achievement in reading and literacy. [Riordan, 2003:72]

On the other hand there are more children who share the more or less insufficient socio-economic background of their family and need help at school. Schools are supposed to assist children to overcome those differences but sometimes can hardly manage it.

4. Situation in the Czech Republic – Survey Results

In the year 2003 a survey was conducted on children's reading by private company Gabal, Analysis & Consulting. It was focused on children ages 11 – 14 years old.¹ Children and one of their parents were asked about their reading activities, free time, school and other issues connected with their family bases. The main task of the survey was to explore the presence of reading in the everyday lives of children who should already know how to read and to use reading as a tool for getting information and understanding issues learned at school. The other task of the survey focused on the broad context of creating children's reading habits.

The survey was interesting in its methodology, because it studied children's reading habits according to the family and through the family and not the school. Information was collected from the child and his or her parent in their household.² Therefore the questions were far from giving any impression of a test. Thus we have added new information to results that have up to now been gained mainly in schools.

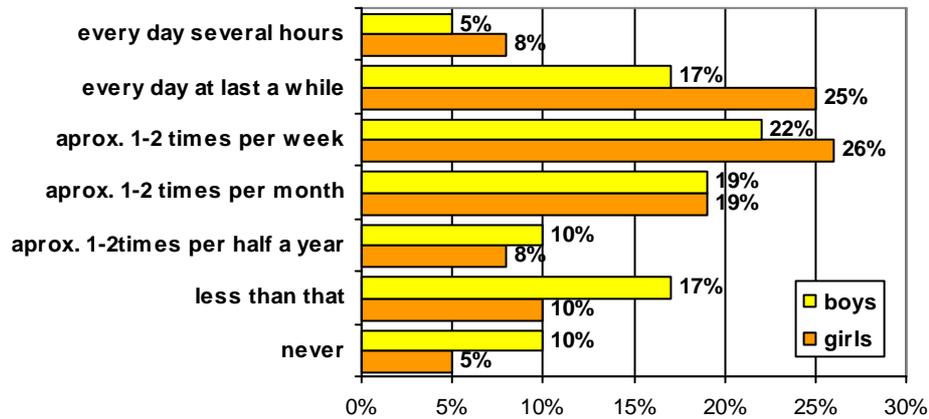
4.1 Reading

The central information is the frequency of reading in children's everyday lives today. 7% of children read books several hours per day, 21% read for a while at least on a daily basis. Thus, almost one third of children take a book in their hand to read every day. 24% of children read one or two times per week. Almost one fourth of children practically do not read at all. Reading interests and habits differ according to gender and school character – books are read mostly by girls and by children from high schools.

¹ Sample counting 1090 children and 1090 parents is representative for Czech children in age 10 - 14 years old according to age of children, region, size of city, type of child school and parents' education level.

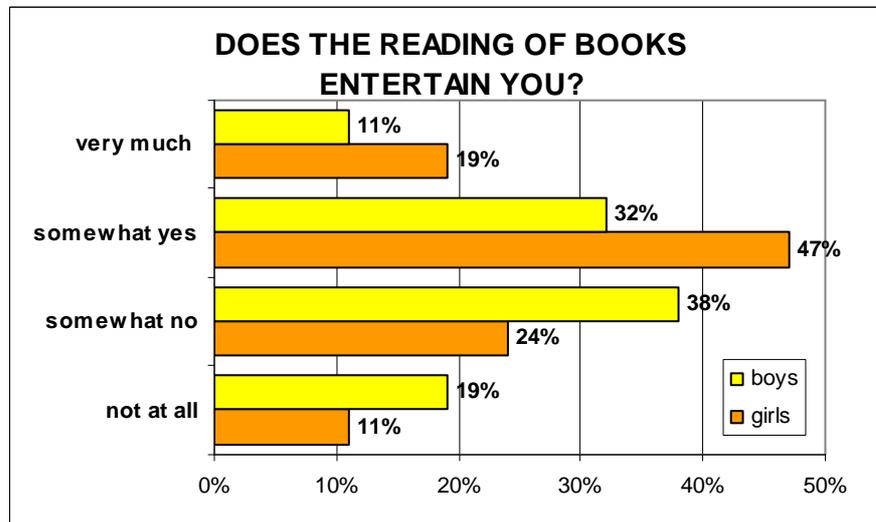
² This kind of survey is mostly conducted in schools with children.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU READ BOOKS IN YOUR FREE TIME?



The rates at which children finish reading books parallel these statistics. 27% of children do not finish reading even one book per month. 43% declare finishing about one book per month. The rest of children (20%) finish reading more than one book per month.

Except for behavioral questions we also need to know the evaluation of reading by children. 54% of children say that reading entertains them, they like it. On the other hand there are 15% of children who frankly say that reading does not entertain them at all.



4.2 Who is the reader?

We consider as “readers” those children who finish reading at least one book per month (73%), read books for entertainment (69%) and edification (43%), not only books recommended by or mandatory for school, and read on a regular basis – 1 or 2 times per week at least (52%). They also consider reading

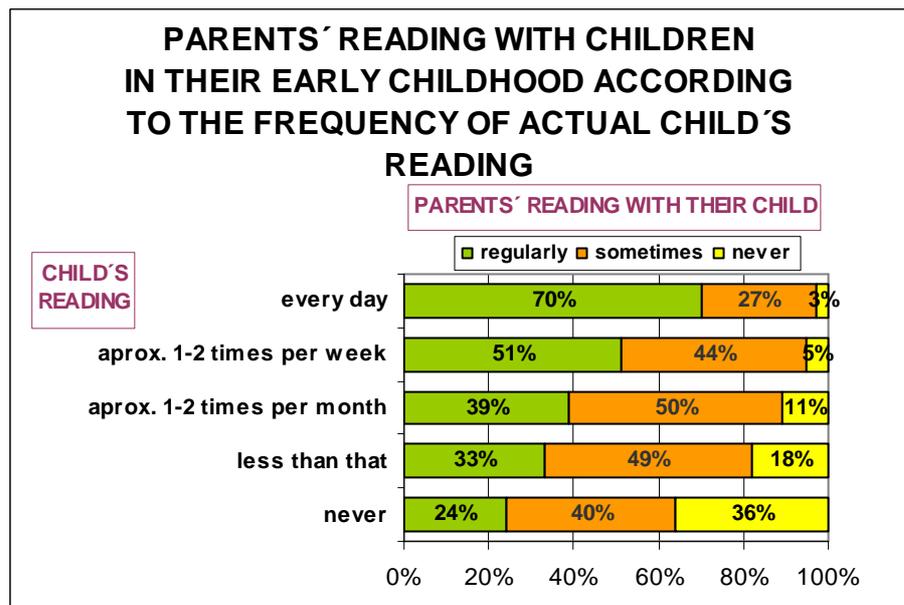
entertaining (54%). From this point of view less than one half of children 10 to 14 years old are *regular readers*.

One third we can label as *mature readers*, who enjoy reading and use it effectively not only for entertainment but also for education. For them reading means a specific world enriching their everyday life. It is known that a child needs to spend hundreds of hours reading in order to gain reading and comprehension ability. Keeping this fact on our minds the above mentioned figure is not high enough. Although the figure is relatively low it surpasses many pessimistic expectations.

4.3 Family effects

The most powerful player in encouraging a child to read is the family. Analysis shows that we could number its influence as three times stronger than the influence of the school. The intensity of the presence of reading in a child's everyday life is positively stimulated by the reading climate in family, general family communication climate and free time spent together. Also dominant are the socio-economic characteristics of the family such as the higher education of the parents, their position at work and also the resulting higher income of the family.

Time which parents spend reading together with their child in his or her early age positively influences the child's reading habits. This fact is reflected in both the Czech data and in research from other countries. 70% of children with whom parents have regularly read books in their early childhood today read everyday on their own. On the other hand children who do not read at all today are those with whom parents did not read in their early childhood or only occasionally.



Parents' reading activities which improve their attitude toward books, their own use of books in their free time and also the complex family climate are important for children's reading. Children who see their parents read and study also read often.

An important parameter of the family environment is the communication between parents and children, not only about books but also on a common level. Half of the asked parents declare that they talk with their child almost every day. It is difficult to define what parents consider "talking with their child" but children confirm this amount of time in their answers too. It means both sides perceive communication in the family with the same intensity. One quarter of parents talk with their child once per week about the child's reading. This is one of the most important factors strongly connected with children's reading habits. Communication about books happens more often with girls than boys.

4.4 School

School motivates the child mainly through work with children's reading in school lessons, homework in reading and following reflection of homework back at school in lessons. Although some schools are very active in work with books, approximately one quarter of schools do not give their pupils proper impulses for reading and leave the building of the reading habits of the child only in the hands of family. This is bad for those children who do not have sufficient conditions for education at home. Also it can mean a big lose for the school – children who like reading like their school as well. Preparation for lessons is easier for them. Schools could profit from good and stable children's reading habits. Giving homework in reading and sufficient reflection of it back in school brings successful improvement in children's reading habits.

One of the issues often discussed in the Czech Republic is the list of recommended or mandatory books which children might get in school from their teacher. Some people consider it a necessary part of education, others regret it. Data from the survey shows serious problems with a lack of recommendations for children. Every teacher, every specialist knows that one of the very important roles in bringing a child to reading could be just opening the right book at the right time. A Child should be lead by parents and teachers to the proper literature, meaning understandable and suitable books for his interests and age. When more than one quarter of children in the Czech Republic do not get any recommendation of books then there is a significant gap in potential motivation for reading. Children who get a list of mandatory or recommended books read more often in their free time and easily build habits necessary for further ability and skills for studying.

If a school works intensively with a child on his or her creation of reading habits the child could overcome the eventual insufficiency of his or her family

background. Schools do not take advantage of this fact as often as they could. Teachers have in their hands many active instruments for improvement and fixation of children's reading habits and also for overcoming strong inequalities in family background as for its influence on reading habits. Unfortunately, school mostly involves family social differences into class work through reading. Teacher more likely positively evaluates and values the abilities in reading of those children that have a family reading background than children burdened by a reading deficit in their family. Now-a-days schools in the Czech Republic reproduce and strengthen the social inequalities in their origins rather than reduce them.

Children readers mostly like school, like lessons of Czech language and literature; they have good marks in school. All this belongs to the positive relationship of a child to education, to which context reading strongly belongs. Support for children's reading is repaid to schools through the fact that by reading and its use, children improve their relationship to school and education.

4.5 Media

The last aspect I would like to mention is the impact of media, especially TV, on children's reading. One of the most important and powerful competitors of reading is watching TV. An absolute majority of children watch TV. The difference is in the amount of time which a child spends in front of the TV. We more often found a small reader in those families where time spent watching TV is regulated by parents or where the child is motivated to do many other free time activities and thus does not have too much time to watch TV. The risk that a child never takes any book in his or her hand in free time rises with the presence of a TV in the child's room. In such case there is no control over the time or program watched on TV and TV dominates the free time of such a child. TV is the most important "enemy" of reading in this way.

On the contrary, work on computer does not have this direct negative impact as watching TV. Today's children in the Czech Republic labor with computer on regular basis (55% of children have a computer at home) and a child spending time with computer is more often the one who reads books than vice versa. It is partly caused by the fact that computer is more often to be found in households of people with higher education. But also there is the fact that in order to use a computer you need skills of reading and using information.

5. Conclusion

Insistent question of quality of education in the Czech Republic and still a small number of people having higher degree of education refers not only to the insufficiency of the education system but also to the ability of Czech students to

work critically with information and use it properly. There is a lack of chances to study at universities but the problem of skills needed for everyday life is caused by less effective functioning of lower level of educational system and its cooperation with families. This is a quality which should start to be developed in families by bringing a child to reading books and communicate about them. This task is much urgent in a globalized information society as described above.

References

- DeBruin-Parecki, Andrea and Krol-Sinclair, Barbara (2003) *Family Literacy: From Theory to Practice*. Delaware: International Reading Association.
- Taylor, Denny (1997) *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Pinciples*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Riordan, Cornelius (2003) *Equality and Achievement*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- Gabal, Ivan and Václavíková Helšusová, Lenka (2003) *Jak čtou dětské děti?* Praha: Gabal, Analysis and Consulting.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1999) *Globalizace*. Praha: Mladá fronta.
- Toffler, Alvin (1990) *The Third Wave*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1998) *Teorie jednání*. Praha: Karolinum.
- Rabušicová, Milada (2002) *Gramotnost: staré téma v novém pohledu*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita & Georgetown.

(Mrs.) PhDr. Lenka Václavíková Helšusová
Phone: +420 723 668 652
E-mail: lenka.vaclavikova@vslib.cz
<http://www.fp.vslib.cz>