READING AND READERSHIP IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AT THE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FROM THE VIEW OF TEACHERS

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Abstract

Results of the international researches, in which the Czech Republic engages regularly, are not
satisfying. There is not precisely inserted the issue of the reading literacy in the Czech curricular
document. Nevertheless, teachers are trying to support and develop readership within the target
categories. Conditions for the development of the readership in the Czech Republic are very favorable
and the availability of the literal and professional texts or the other texts is excellent. Also from this
reasons many projects emerge in the Czech Republic, which are trying to support reading
competences across the whole educational spectrum. Within pedagogical practices in the field of
Teaching for the elementary school through the questionnaire investigation, but also through the
controlled interviews with the teachers, is longterm observed how begin to realization of support of
reading and readership from the side of teachers. Through the longterm research we are trying to find
out how pedagogues participate in positive relationship to the reading and reading literacy at the
students at the elementary school. The another controlled aim is about which genres students prefer.

Keywords: the Czech Republic, education, curricular document, reading, reading skills, reading
literacy, research, questionnaire, interview, elementary school, student.

1 INTRODUCTION

Through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, the Czech Republic is regularly involved in
international comparative research studies PISA and PIRLS. These research studies assess the
results of elementary school students in the area of reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and natural
sciences. The present paper focuses on the results in the area of reading literacy, because the
comparisons are not favourable for the Czech Republic. The changes in the curricular documents and
the concept of education in the Czech Republic suggest a slight improvement in reading literacy, but
this area still needs to be focused on.

1.1 Concept of reading literacy in the Czech Republic

The importance of reading literacy is irreplaceable in education, because it is a means of acquiring
information and facilitates successful inclusion in society, but primarily is a source of satisfaction
during leisure activities. A higher level of reading literacy enables better orientation in the world and
offers a better position on the labour market.

For example, the PISA final report, as stated by J. Straková defines reading literacy “as the ability to
understand, use, and reflect on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s
knowledge and potential, and to participate in society”[6].

These definitions suggest that the need for training reading is not only of a constructive nature
(understanding and application of written speech used by the society), but also of a functional nature
(used as a tool of gaining knowledge and functioning in the society), as reported by Doležalová [1].

In this context, some opinions suggest that the current definitions are inaccurate because reading
literacy is defined as an ‘ability’, although this concept determines individual potential of a person to do
some activity in the future. If the concept of reading literacy is confronted in the context of the PISA
and PIRLS studies, reading literacy is then “a set of lifelong-developing knowledge, skills, abilities,
attitudes and values of a person required for using all kinds of texts in different individual and social
contexts”[5]. Therefore, reading literacy is considered a competence, which is acquired for example by
students in the course of education, or through their individual activities [3].

In the development of a high quality educational system in all developed countries, reading literacy is
one of the priorities. In the international PISA research study, reading literacy was defined by means
of three aspects [6]:

Proceedings of EDULEARN19 Conference
1st-3rd July 2019, Palma, Mallorca, Spain

ISBN: 978-84-09-12031-4

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Procedures – activities that students use in working with texts. This includes general text comprehension, obtaining information from texts, text interpretation, assessment of text content, and assessment of text form.

Content – types of texts that people use throughout their lives. These are continuous texts (narration, description, explication, instruction) and non-continuous texts (forms, advertisements, tables, images, etc.)

Situations – written texts that should be used according to their purpose (personal, public, occupational, educational).

The basics of reading must be developed in the educational system already in pre-primary education through pre-reading literacy. In the Czech Republic, this issue has been addressed by many projects, through which pre-literacy is developed and the conditions are provided for further application of these projects and follow-up activities aimed at children in primary school.

Schools are involved in various projects and support their students’ reading skills. Some projects also involve parents and support reading of parents, teachers and children. This intent is pursued by a charitable organization called ‘Every Czech Reads to Kids’. The ‘Every Czech Reads to Kids’ project is not an original Czech project; it was inspired not only in Poland through Irena Koźmińska, who worked in the USA and in 2001 launched a campaign in Poland called ‘Cała Polska czyta dzieciom’, but especially by the founder of the project Jim Trelease, an American promoter of reading aloud to children. A teacher and author, born in 1941 in Oregon, USA, who emphasizes that reading aloud encourages children’s love for literature. From 1979 to 2008 he gave lectures to school groups at educational events across the United States. He was first interested in books for young people, later he appreciated the importance of a young reader throughout the educational process, eventually he became involved in children's literature. J. Trelease explains the principles of reading aloud:

- Why read aloud,
- When read aloud,
- Stages of reading aloud,
- How to do it [8].

Trelease encourages parents to read aloud to children irrespective of the amount of work they have. He is convinced that through joint reading aloud parents show children their love to a large extent and prepare them for future life [3].

In the Czech Republic, experts are looking for ways of developing and supporting reading skills not only in formal education but also in the context of family upbringing. It is generally acknowledged that if a positive attitude to reading is not established in the family, the effort of primary teachers is useless and will have a negligible effect. One of the ways that appears viable and competitive is participation of parents in the life of the school by means of reading aloud involving children, parents and teachers. This activity should not be left only to children but they should be assisted in this activity. This applies especially to students who have yet not adopted the appropriate reading aloud technique. This involves not only primary and pre-primary children, but also older learners, for example fifteen-year olds, because joint reading aloud results in:

- Strengthening and development of family relationships;
- Development of vocabulary, development of communication skills;
- Satisfaction of emotional needs;
- Development of cognitive thinking;
- Strengthening and development of writing and reading competence;
- Independent thinking, promotion of creativity;
- Prevention of pathological phenomena;
- Shaping of positive human values;
- Reading experience used in everyday life.

For these reasons, the main motto of the campaign is “Read to kids for 20 minutes a day. Every day!” The project is promoted by charitable organizations and celebrities in the Czech Republic from the field of culture, politics, and public life. The project is also supported by other organizations such as
the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic, National Library of the Czech Republic or UNICEF, the UN Children’s Fund [3].

Since 2011, the Faculty of Education, Palacký University has investigated the degree to which parents are involved in the development of a positive attitude of their children to reading. This investigation is facilitated by a teacher training methodologist and involves students on continuous practical teacher training. One of the partial objectives was to determine the extent to which the development of reading literacy and especially the attitude to reading is supported by teacher activities. Regarding the fact that the research is of a longitudinal nature, the aim is to monitor the development of reading in the Czech Republic from the perspective of both parents and teachers, and to focus on children’s reading portfolio.

2 METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

2.1 Results of the research study

This part presents the results of a research study carried out in 2018 that focused on primary teachers. These results are compared with the 2017 results in order to identify any significant changes.

The objective of the research study was to determine whether there has been a significant change in the promotion of reading and reading literacy among children and students by their teachers.

1 A partial objective of the research study was to identify the ways teachers support children’s and students’ positive attitudes to reading and reading literacy.

2 A partial objective of the research study was to identify the genres of reading that children and students prefer.

For the purposes of a clear comparison of the results, the research method used was a non-standardized questionnaire, which the authors have used since 2011 and now again in 2018.

2.2 Description of the research sample

A total of 135 elementary school teachers across the Czech Republic were asked to participate in the study. The teachers were chosen deliberately in schools where the students were placed on their teaching practice. However, many questionnaires had to be excluded due to incorrect completion. The resulting number of questionnaires for the final analysis was 95. The research involved teachers from almost all regions in the Czech Republic.

2.3 Analysis of results and data interpretation

In the questionnaire survey the respondents answered 11 questions relating to reading skills among primary school children. The questions focused on libraries, favourite reading, favourite genres, etc.

1 Do you read with students or read aloud to students on a usual day in your school?

Of the 95 respondents, an affirmative answer was indicated by 80, which equals 84.2%. Compared with 2017, there has been a decrease by 12%. The respondents were teachers in primary schools. It is obvious that teachers in grades 1 to 3 help students read and read aloud to a large extent. During this period, children gain their first reading skills, learn proper reading techniques and gain reading experience. However, during this period the attitude to reading is formed and developed, and the teacher’s role is crucial for successful acquisition of reading competences.

2 What is your inspiration for the selection of reading for your children in your school?

Compared with 2017, these results are not surprising, on the contrary, they confirm that most information about books comes from the Internet. IT technology is used by an increasing number of teachers. This may also be caused by the fact that the age category of teachers has changed and that contemporary elementary school teachers were educated by means of these technologies. 75% of teachers look for relevant information on the Internet. This is probably due to the increasing availability and decreasing costs of these technologies, as well as the increasing literacy of teachers in this field. Another source (20%) was information provided by librarians who collaborate with the school, followed by recommendations given by friends.
3 Do you have a library in your school building?

The responses to this question have not changed at all compared with the previous research study (88%). Almost every school has a teachers’ as well as students’ library. This may also be caused by the requirements specified in the Framework educational programme for elementary education, which defines the key competences as the target categories of education, and these competences are used to develop reading literacy. Otherwise, there are almost no references to reading literacy in the curriculum.

4 Do you visit the school library or a public library with your children?

The results of the study suggest that both libraries (school and public) are visited by 59% of teachers and students. This result is again comparable with the previous research study, which suggested 56% of positive responses. Reading literacy is an aspect increasingly emphasised by the Czech School Inspectorate as well as the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic, following the results of international comparisons that the Czech Republic is involved in. In order to achieve the best possible results in international comparisons, school directors give their maximum support to collaboration between elementary schools and libraries of all types. In particular, teachers and their students attend various events held by libraries.

5 How often do you visit one of the libraries mentioned above with your children?

In this area the results have slightly improved. In 2017, regular visits to libraries were reported by 51% of the respondents; in 2018 the proportion increased to 65%. Frequent visits to libraries increased as well: from 29% to 31%. The authors of the present study believe that this is caused by schools’ efforts to include visits to libraries every week as regular part of the timetable (as is usual in other countries) in order to strengthen reading skills and especially motivation for reading.

6 How much time on a usual day do children in your school spend joint reading or reading aloud?

Compared with the previous study, reading aloud up to 60 minutes significantly increased from 17% to 25%. This is considered a good result. Even the longer period of 1 to 2 hours increased from 7% to 12%. A decrease was observed in readings aloud up to 30 from 49% to 45%, which is a slight decrease but regarding the increase in other items, the total time of teachers reading aloud to their students increased, which is a positive finding. The authors of the present study are convinced about increasing pressure of the society on educational institutions to achieve better results in international comparisons.

7 Which part of the day do you usually use for reading or reading aloud?

Compared with 2017, when teachers read aloud to children especially in the afternoon (59% in the afternoon and only 30% in the morning), in 2018 reading aloud in the morning and in the afternoon is almost balanced. 45% read aloud in the morning and 50% in the afternoon. This change is probably due to the fact that teachers have understood that it is possible to teach students also through fiction or teachers’ own texts instead of focusing on textbooks and scientific texts. Reading fiction prepares students for life, which is one of the objectives of the curriculum, and motivates them for further reading in their free time. The research in 2017 also involved kindergarten teachers, as a result of which the proportion of afternoon reading aloud increased. The research in 2018 involved only elementary school teachers.

8 How often do you read with children or read aloud to children?

Also in this question the authors observed a significant change compared with the previous research study. In 2018, 42% of teachers pursue daily reading or reading aloud; at the same time, 58% suggest that they read or read aloud several times a day. Compared with the 2017 results, teachers have increased the intensity of reading and reading aloud to several times a day. This suggests a more positive attitude to reading and improved motivation and reading skills. Another consequence is a need for reading not only in school but also at home. In this way, teachers achieve the objectives of the educational policy.
9 Do you inform parents about the latest books?

Also in this question the authors observed a slight increase from 53% to 55%. This gradual increase is probably the result of projects and joint events that elementary schools organize also for parents and in this way involve them in the life of the school. On project days teachers and parents share information and teaching practices that can also be used at home.

10 Do you think that parents read aloud to their children sufficiently?

The respondents believe that parents read aloud to their children rarely (35%) and occasionally (39%). The responses suggest that only 10% of parents read aloud to their children on a regular basis and 16% frequently. Again, an increase has been observed in the items of regularly and frequently and a decrease in the items of rarely and occasionally. This is due to increased involvement of parents in the life of the school and their awareness about the issue of education in primary school. The habits adopted in school including interest in reading are successfully transferred into the home environment.

Another partial objective of the research study defined for the questionnaire survey was to identify the genres or books that children and students like.

There have been no significant changes in this area. One of the most popular literary genres for joint reading and reading aloud as seen by teachers is the fairy-tale (indicated by 35% of teachers). The second most popular is sci-fi literature and adventure literature (20% of responses); the third place is occupied by nature literature (13% of responses). The least popular literary genre as seen by the respondents is biographies and travel books, where a slight increase was observed (2% of responses). It is obvious that the popularity of literary genre is closely associated with developmental peculiarities of each child in various ontogenetic stages [7]. The current system of literary genres for children and youth is a result of historical development; from a general perspective, genres for children can be understood as “sets of specific structural features, artistic practices and means corresponding with specific types of children’s reading and understanding reality, and therefore implying a possibility to affect and influence children” [7]. These arguments also support the results of the last research item, which monitored the popularity of specific books [3]. According to some responses, children expect action and flow of events from books. Otherwise, books are of little interest and do not attract the readers’ attention. This corresponds with the selection of genres and is also related to the development of society and technology.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the repeated research was to identify the changes in teachers’ attitudes to the development of reading in primary education. A comparison was made with research studies carried out between 2011 and 2017. Only one specific part of the research was selected for publication because the whole research covered multiple areas including the perspectives of teachers, parents and learners.

A questionnaire survey was used to address teachers across the Czech Republic by means of students of the Faculty of Education, Palacký University in Olomouc. Regarding the fact that the research sample was not extensive, the researchers are aware that these results cannot be generalized to include all teachers in the whole Czech Republic. Similarly, the research instrument is not standardised, which makes it impossible to formulate general assumptions. Nevertheless, the authors have monitored teachers in a longitudinal way and observed an increase in the development of reading and reading skills in primary schools in the Czech Republic.

The results of the research suggest that teachers are aware of the fact that reading literacy among learners in primary school is the basis of all other literacies and that they focus especially on achieving successful results in international comparisons in which the Czech Republic is involved.

Modern technology plays a crucial role in teachers’ work. This is also confirmed by the results of the research, because the information that teachers search for mostly come from the Internet. This can be explained by the fact that graduates from faculties of education already have competences and knowledge of information technology. A significant aspect is availability of this technology in schools. The authors also observed more frequent visits of teachers together with children and students to libraries, which might serve as positive motivation for further learning, as for example defined in foreign curricular documents. The duration of reading aloud has changed and morning and afternoon reading aloud are now balanced, which is good for learners because teachers now focus more on
fiction than just learning from textbooks. In this way, teachers have made literature available to learners adequately to their age. Teachers’ opinion about reading aloud in the family has not changed. Compared with the results of the previous research study, regular reading aloud in the family has increased. This is probably caused by projects and activities that schools provide not only for students but also their parents. At these occasions, teachers can show how to work with children at home and at the same time develop their reading skills.

The preferences of genres in the children’s reading portfolio is not surprising. The most popular genre in primary school is the fairy-tale. A surprising finding is an increase in sci-fi literature and fantasy literature. This may be due to the fact that children require action and originality. To a large extent, children are affected by film adaptations and computer games.

In terms of modern technology used in the development of reading, it is absolutely necessary to regulate the use of mass media and modern information technology, on the other hand, it is desirable to use multimedia to promote children’s reading and children’s interest in information technology and use them to expand those forms of reading that combine traditional reading and modern tools, such as e-books. The authors believe that audiobooks are also of great importance, as they complement reading and support the development of education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The paper was supported by the following project: IGA_PdF_2019_003: “Aspects of pupils reading in the second class of primary school”.

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