

The joy of reading – reading aloud. A complex partnership

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Abstract:

Research of public libraries for children that was conducted in the National Library in 2008 [Lewandowicz-Nosal, G., 2012] has shown, that reading aloud was the most popular activity in public libraries for children. The activity was carried out by 46% of libraries examined. In those libraries 7024 meetings with over 130 000 participants took place. This is a very big change in comparison to the research from 2000 and also earlier findings [Lewandowicz G., 2003, Białkowska B., 1992]. Where does this change come from? Since 2002 the ABC XXI Foundation has started a nationwide campaign “All of Poland Reads to Kids” with its main slogan “Read to your child for 20 minutes a day – every day”. The campaign has taken place nationwide, not only in public libraries, but also in kindergartens and schools. The program required a private and public partnership, as well as cooperation from different social and local government organisations. It was read aloud not only in the library space, but also in the city area, on squares and during picnics. Adults of different jobs read aloud to children – from mayors, firefighters, policemen to priests. Major cooperative partnerships developed between schools and public librarians. One of the social campaigns to engage readership included a nationwide media (ad campaign on Polish television) and in the big newspapers. In 2002, it was read aloud in 150 cities, and by 2015 in 3400 cities. Thanks to this campaign, reading clubs been created in kindergartens and schools. Reading aloud has become a multigenerational activity (children, parents, grandparents). Since 2008, the campaign has been used in penitentiaries where reading aloud is encouraged as an activity for convicted mothers to do with their small children. This campaign was the forerunner which has led to the next step “National Reading”, which has the endorsement and participation of the Polish President.

Keywords: Reading aloud, children, partnership, children’s libraries, schools

Introduction

‘Reading aloud is a kind of a simple magic trick or a theater on one leg’
‘Głośne czytanie to coś w rodzaju prostej sztuczki magicznej czy teatrzyku na jednej nodze’ (Wędrych Z., 1994).

Children often ask spontaneously for an adult to *read to me* or *listen while I'll read* and it is considered bad parenting to ignore this request. The best times occur when reading aloud takes place at home in an atmosphere of joy, with the child sitting on the adult's lap and feeling protected. However, a library is also a good place for an adventure with words, language and stories.

Reading aloud is, next to storytelling, one of the oldest, most traditional forms of work in children libraries. Unfortunately, in Polish libraries in the 1980s and 1990s of the 20th century, reading aloud was an almost vanishing art form. In the 1986 only 4.9% of public libraries for children organized reading aloud sessions [Białkowska B., 1992]. The fascination with new technologies meant that reading aloud was viewed as old-fashioned and outdated. However, reading aloud is one of the most important aids in learning and improving reading. When we read aloud to children we help them to learn new words, we stimulate their imagination, improve their language skills, and demonstrate that reading can be fun and even joyful, especially, when we choose funny, often absurd rhymes or tongue-twisters. Reading aloud improves a child's ability to listen and concentrate. In schools teachers recognize very quickly the children who are read to regularly at home. These children have fewer problems with formulating statements, they handle problem solving better, are able to concentrate and focus longer on the work they are doing. Reading aloud takes away the difficulty of letter decoding from a recipient, it provides potential content interpretation, and makes it easier to struggle through more difficult parts of a book, such as wildlife descriptions or a character's emotional disturbance. Although we may not be able to read as well as professional actors, but we have this one superiority over them: they are far away, and we are *here and now*. During reading the key is to have connection with the listeners, which includes the fact of being together, having a common emotional involvement in story's content and experiencing it together. While reading we have the chance to explain words that are incomprehensible to a child, to wonder what is going to happen next (prediction) and after reading, to try to answer questions, for example, *what would happen if...*, *what would I do if I were him/her?* Reading aloud is important, because it enhances a child's development and facilitates the learning of new things which the child may not be able to assimilate easily.

All of Poland reads to kids

In order to make reading aloud popular with parents and children it is extremely important to make this an activity that is endorsed and advertised by famous people. In Poland since the beginning of the 21st century *Foundation ABC XXI – All of Poland Reads to Kids* has used this type of social campaign. *All of Poland Reads to Kids* (Cała Polska Czyta Dzieciom - CPCD) started on the 1st of June 2001. Its goal was to inform society of the extreme importance of reading aloud to children to enhance general health and well-being and to encourage complex development. The author of the poster for this campaign is a world famous graphic designer and painter, Rafał Olbiński. A major event, first organized in June 2002 was the *Nationwide Week of Reading to Kids*. For 15 years (in 2017 for the 16th time), in the first week of June in many cities and smaller towns, everyone is encouraged to participate in reading aloud. The beginnings were modest. During the first week in 2002, 150 cities and towns took part in this initiative. During the 10th year over 2600 cities took part, and during the 15th year, over 3400. Reading aloud was everywhere – in libraries, schools, kindergartens, theatres, community centers, after-school clubs, day-cares, museums, parks, squares, playgrounds, and orphanages. Each year the beginning of *Nationwide Week of Reading to Kids* week has its start in a different city.

However, reading aloud doesn't occur only during this one week of the year. While less spectacular than the widely publicized annual event, it is systematic approach that is more effective where reading aloud is conducted daily or weekly. The CPCD campaign has now replaced reading aloud. Many libraries now have *reading on a carpet* (czytanie na dywanie) or *good aura for reading in the summer house* (dobra aura na czytanie w altanie). The catchphrase of the campaign *Read to your child 20 minutes a day – every day* has been widely accepted.

Research of public libraries for children conducted in the National Library in 2008 [Lewandowicz-Nosal, G., 2012] reported that reading aloud was the most popular activity in public libraries for children. The activity was carried out by 46% of the examined libraries. Reading aloud in those libraries took place via 7,024 meetings with over 130,000 participants. This is a very big change in comparison to the research conducted in 2000 and also from earlier findings [Lewandowicz G., 2003, Białkowska B., 1992]. The newest public libraries for children research [2016] has also shown, that reading aloud is still a very popular activity. [53% of examined libraries conducted reading aloud sessions].

The CPCD campaign would not be possible without a network of local co-workers, coordinators and leaders. In 2004 there were 326 people in this capacity, but in 2016 this number grew to over 9000. These networks include people cooperating with the foundation and acting as local volunteers from all over the country. The CPCD initiative was accompanied by an intensive promotion campaign in media. Five TV shows, a series of 14 short films with famous celebrities reading to their children, 11 short films in which TV series actors read to their TV children, 8 short films with reading TV hosts. 2 music videos were also produced. In 2006, the foundation organized a 6-week-long billboard campaign. Since the beginning of the campaign printed materials posters, brochures, leaflets, calendars, bookmarks (e.g. a calendar for 2003 was brought out in 800,000 copies) have been widely distributed.

After the CPCD's success, another initiatives have appeared. For example, since 2003 there are programs promoting reading in schools and kindergartens. In 2016 the program *Reading Schools* was used in 3255 schools, while *Clubs of Reading kindergartens* occurred in 3825 kindergartens. These programs include reading aloud and also promoting this activity. In schools, not only adult teachers read to children, but also elders read to youngsters as part of voluntary service. In kindergartens, read aloud programs encourage parents, grandparents and caregivers to participate. Librarians from public libraries also visit school and kindergarten groups to attend reading aloud meetings.

Since 2008, a program *Family Reading* has been encouraging people to start *Clubs of Reading Families* – groups of parents and their families who meet in a bigger gathering to talk about books, exchange opinions and advice. Clubs are being created next to libraries, kindergartens, schools, family houses, local community centers and many other different places. By May 2017, 75 such clubs were working in Poland and abroad in Polish communities in Germany and the Netherlands). A Club must include a minimum of 3 families with children who read every day, and the meetings take place once a month.

In 2016 new activities were prepared to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the CPCD campaign. The focus this time was on men reading aloud, especially fathers. Working with his/her father gives a child the opportunity to gain a wider scale of experiences, develops new skills and looks at literature that appeals more to men. This literacy initiative aimed at fathers

does not reproduce similar initiatives involving woman, but allows for men to express their emotions in a different way (Ungeheuer-Gołąb, A. 2011, s. 98-99). This new focus has begun with the program *Reading – a manly thing. Pilots read to children*. The pilots read fairytales that are connected with aviation and space. Three big events in Krakow, Deblin and Warsaw were organized for children from different groups – kindergartens, schools, orphanages and foster families. The program also included disabled children. The basic goal of the campaign was to build a stronger tie between fathers and their child as a result of reading together.

What to read?

While it is important where, when, who and to whom a book is read, but is read is also important. Since the beginning of the program a golden list of books with advice about what to read with children at different stages of development was placed on the foundation's website. This list is systematically updated. Since 2006, the Astrid Lindgren biennial contest for a typescript of a modern children's book has been conducted. The works of contestants are published by well-known publishers once in every two years, alongside a weekly *Polityka*. Two collections of recommended titles for *All of Poland Reads to Kids* have since been published. In 2006, it was a series of 23 volumes, while the current collection published for the campaign's 15th anniversary to include 15 volumes.

Of course the importance of what is read, contradicts in the theory of reading a washing-machine manual by the famous actor Artur Barciś - *What does washing up have to do with reading?* This video proves that you can read whatever and whenever you like, what is important is to read at all. (Fundacja ABCXXI, 2016). Reading books and are not the only resources recommended by the campaign organizers. Librarians, teachers, educators, parents may read whatever they like, including what they choose to read to their children or what the youngsters choose by themselves. Texts often chosen depend on what the adult does for a living, for example a fireman may read a story about a fireman, a priest may a Christmas novelette or a history about a saint.

Organizers managed to encourage not only parents and teachers, but also representatives from practically all kinds of jobs including firemen and priests, policemen, doctors, city and village mayors and other local representatives. The President of Poland also joined the campaign and together with the First Lady, read parts of his favorite books to children (Duda, 2016).

Reading aloud action also reached groups which are usually socially excluded. In 2008, a collaboration with correctional facilities began, based on creating reading counters with books for children in visiting prison areas. 130 counters of this kind were created (out of the 156 prisons in Poland). Expansion of this collaboration included a series of activities in prisons for women in Grudziądz with little children up to 3 years old. Meetings were not based on reading aloud, although it was an important element of those classes. Courses on children's emotional needs, creating ties and drama lessons were also conducted. The project *Generations-creations. An art of the generations' dialogue* conducted since 2010, includes seniors and has concentrated around universities of the third age and orphanages, two very different age and social groups, where participation in culture is often limited or it does not even exist. In another project *Fairytales Europe connects generations* senior-volunteers read European fairytales to children.

Partnerships that focus on reading aloud have also included banks and the drug store chain Rossmann. During the Rossmann's Beauty Festival, reading counters were organized where

movie and TV stars read to children. Together with banks Citi Handlowy and the Kronenberg Foundation, reading events took place during the World Day for Communities. The foundation has also tried to internationalized its activities. For the campaign's 10th anniversary a program *All of Europe Reads to Kids* was announced on Polish-Czech the border in Cieszyn and in Czech Cieszyn joined similar organizations from the Czech Republic (*Celé Česko čte dětem*), Slovakia (*Celé Slovensko číta det'om*) and Lithuania (*Visa Lietuva skaito vaikams*). The popularity of the campaign is indicated by the fact, that it has been included in literature for children [Beręsewicz P., 2007], guidebooks for parents [Talko L., 2007] and cabaret programs (ipla TV. (2010).

A readership survey of Polish adults (above 15 years old) conducted by the National Library has shown that reading in childhood has a very strong and important impact on being a reader in adult life. [A report *Stan czytelnictwa w Polsce w 2015 r.*, 2016, s. 31-34, 84-87 - *The condition of readership in Poland in 2015*, 2016, p. 31-34, 84-87].

The campaign, which is currently in its 16th year may also have had an influence on PISA scores for Polish students at reading comprehension range. In the latest research from 2015, Polish students took fifth place in the European Union in reading and text interpretation (OECD, 2015). Undoubtedly, the campaign has made the social space for reading aloud friendly, and created broad acceptance for such activities not only at home, but also in libraries, schools, kindergartens, or simply everywhere. The idea of reading aloud encompassed not only families and education institutions, but it also in monasteries. In Rzeszow in a Dominican Order monastery conducted *Poczytalnia*, where books are read to children aged 5-10. Apart from reading, meetings include dramatisations, didactic plays, interviews with interesting people connected with literature (writers, illustrators, poets, actors). The initiative of reading aloud to children was also undertaken by pediatricians working around the monastery. After every meeting there is an open Clinic for Sick Toys. Reading aloud has also become one of the elements of a nationwide event called *Library Night* which has been organized for 3 years and is based on *Museums Night* by the Civic Education Centre (Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej).

Undoubtedly this idea of reading aloud has led to a broad social movement, the feeling of being together and community, and has become part of the nationwide action *National Reading* (Narodowe Czytanie) initiated by the Polish President. *National Reading* takes place every year in September and includes the reading of a Polish classics, selected as the focus of the campaign. The following titles have been read: *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz (2012); *Quo Vadis* by Henryk Sienkiewicz (2016); and this year (2017) Stanisław Wyspiański's drama, *Wesele*.

The foundation's activity continues to focus on the necessity of reading aloud to children and to draw joy from this fact. The campaign has turned out to be a complex partnership between many institutions and the Polish citizenry. This popularity is undoubtedly due to the consistent, long-term regular activities and at the same time, promotion the famous, known and liked such as actors, singers or sportsmen (Korona TV, 2016), as well as public personas, from village and city mayors to the Polish President and the First Lady. It is not without significance that there were also intense television and radio advertisements, billboards, book collections, and many advertising materials such as posters, leaflets, calendars, bookmarks, stamps, brochures. What seemed impossible just 20 years ago, has become possible, and this is the joy of reading aloud, being together, creating tie, that are intergenerational getting together to discuss and read books.

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