



A Study of Results of the "Reading Schools" and "Reading Kindergartens" Program

REPORT

(Abridged Version)



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Introduction

This report presents the results of the evaluation of the "Reading Schools" and "Reading Kindergartens" Program of the ABCXXI "All of Poland Reads to Kids" Foundation. The study was conducted by the evaluation center Ośrodek Ewaluacji in cooperation with the local Coordinators of the Programs.

Goals of the Program

The "Reading Schools" and "Reading Kindergartens" program is an educational program carried out as a part of the national campaign "All of Poland Reads to Kids."

The program is aimed at encouraging the following goals in both schools and kindergartens:

- improving language skills, increasing the understanding of texts and instructions;
- developing thinking skills;
- improving concentration, lengthening attention span;
- developing memory and imagination;
- improving the level of pupils' speaking and writing skills;
- encouraging a desire and readiness to learn
- increasing pupils' ability to reflect and to think critically;
- developing emotional intelligence;
- improving pupils' self-esteem;
- improving mutual relations between pupils;
- creating bonds between teachers and pupils;
- decreasing the amount of anti-social and delinquent behavior;
- increasing the involvement of parents in reading to children at home;
- increasing readership

A Description of the Study

The goal of the evaluation study was to determine the effects of reading aloud in schools and kindergartens participating in the program, in particular:

- 1 Determining which achievements by pupils (especially in the field of language skills) came as a result of participation in the program. It was important here to compare classes that took part in the program with classes that did not.
- 2 Determining the factors influencing the effects of the program.
- 3 Formulating conclusions and recommendations that may be used to improve the quality of the program.

When collecting data we used qualitative methods such as:

- 4 the observation of classroom activities (including reading aloud to children by the coordinator-researcher);
- 5 the analysis of the written work of pupils over 10 years of age on a given topic related to a text that they had read independently;
- 6 the analysis of pictures drawn by pupils under 10 years of age on a given topic related to a read text (pupils in elementary school received a text to read independently, while preschool children worked on the basis of a text that was read aloud to them);
- 7 the conduction of individual interviews with teachers;
- 8 the conduction of individual interviews with people whose task it was to read aloud;
- 9 the conduction of interviews with school librarians;
- 10 the organization of a moderated discussion with pupils and preschool children, carried out during the lesson, in which pupils listened to a passage from a text read by a coordinator-researcher.

The study covered 22 classes and kindergarten groups, each examined as a separate case. Classes and preschool groups selected for the research included both those that participated in the program and, to compare, those where the program was not conducted. The chart below shows the distribution of classes from particular types of institutions:

	Type of institution				total
	kindergarten	elementary school		middle school	
	Class "Zero" ¹	Class III ²	Class VI ³	Class II ⁴	
Number of classes	8	4	4	6	22

After having conducted our research in the schools and kindergartens, we were in the possession of the following material for the analysis:

- videotapes of classroom sessions – 22 videotapes (almost 30 hours of video);
- audiotapes of interviews with teachers and librarians – 37 interviews (almost 16 hours of recording);
- written work of pupils – 204 documents;
- drawings by pupils – 263 drawings;
- notes from observations prepared by coordinators – 22 sets of notes;
- notes from the study also prepared by coordinators – 18 sets of notes.

All the records of classroom sessions and of the written work produced by pupils from older classes were analyzed by one research group to enable the group to make comparisons and to identify general factors which could be extended beyond single classes. The analysis of the material by a single group also ensured that the data was treated as objectively as possible.

¹ Typical age 6-7.

² Typical age 9-10.

³ Typical age 12-13.

⁴ Typical age 14-15.

Summary of Results

The Effects of Reading Aloud

The program "Reading Schools" and "Reading Kindergartens" has a positive effect on children's development. The research reveals that the program leads to the achievement of the following results in both schools and kindergartens:

A significant improvement in the oral and written performance of pupils. This is proved by the greater ease with which pupils express their thoughts, by the fact that they cope better with longer oral and written tasks, by their increased inclination to use complex sentences, by their growing confidence to support their opinion with arguments. In addition, pupils following the program speak with greater fluency, make fewer language mistakes, have a richer active and passive vocabulary. Contact with the living word teaches children, especially younger ones, correct pronunciation and valid emphasis of particular sounds.

An increase in the understanding of texts and instructions which is confirmed by the fact that, throughout the study, the majority of students participating in the Program did not make mistakes while responding to questions about a passage from the book which they had listened to or had read themselves and were able to provide a more detailed account of the stories than the children from non-reading groups.

An improvement in concentration and a lengthened attention span: children from the groups participating in the Program showed considerably less frequent signs of boredom or disinterest when being read to aloud for a long period of time; their attention span stayed at a high level practically throughout the entire reading sessions and whilst discussing the passage of the book that they had just listened to. Furthermore, the fact that students from the reading groups were able to provide more examples from the read passage proves their greater ability to concentrate. This also demonstrates their better memory in comparison to children from groups that do not read.

An improvement in the reflective and critical thinking skills of pupils and preschoolers from the reading groups was demonstrated by their greater involvement in discussion over the read passage, going beyond the content of the story and referring to a broader context. It was also demonstrated by the fact that they held more frequent conversations with their peers.

An improvement in cause-and-effect thinking skills, proved by the quality of the oral and written performance of older children, and by the drawings of preschoolers.

An increase in ambition and motivation to act; visible in the greater willingness of children to participate in research lessons, in the higher level of involvement demonstrated by them. It was also shown by the fact that the children put more effort into completing their written assignments which were significantly longer than the assignments of pupils who did not participate in the Program. It is obvious that younger children are more motivated to learn to read, since listening to someone read aloud to them in a group creates a friendly learning atmosphere, which contributes to the development of the ability to read independently.

The acquisition of emotional problem-solving skills through the analysis of the problems of literary characters. This acquisition also comes as an effect of the skillful applying of examples from literature to situations in which children find themselves, by teachers.

An improvement in mutual relations between pupils. While being read to aloud, children also learn to communicate with each other which is shown by the fact that they are less inclined to interrupt others during discussions. Teachers working in classes where reading aloud was being practiced on a regular basis also noticed this effect. In addition, teachers said that they noticed a decrease in aggression and anti-social behavior among children.

The formation of closer relations and emotional bonds between the teachers who read aloud and the pupils listening to them, as reported by teachers participating in the program.

Greater openness of children to new situations and new people, as demonstrated by the fact that pupils from classes participating in the program approached the study with less reserve, more willingly took part in lessons, and established contacts with researchers more quickly.

The development of more sophisticated reading habits and taste, particularly in the case of middle-school students. According to reports by teachers and librarians, those participating in the program have their own favorite literary genres and favorite authors, and their reading preferences are extremely varied.

An increased amount of reading among children, as demonstrated by statistics gathered in school libraries, which clearly show that pupils from classes participating in the program

borrow more books per semester, on average, than classes that are not involved in the program.

A change in the attitude of children and adolescents toward books – books have become more important to them. Regular reading aloud led to both a greater interest in the content of books, and also to increased concern for the physical state of books.

Increased commitment of parents to reading to young children at home, according to the reports of children and parents gathered by preschool teachers.

Differences in Achieving the Effects of Reading Aloud

From the analysis of data collected during the study, it appears that different classes participating in the program achieved varying effects. These differences primarily involve the scale of the effects observed. We observed the greatest differences in the acquisition of skills encouraged by reading aloud between elementary school classes and kindergarten groups participating and not participating in the program. This demonstrates that the greatest effects can be achieved if children are read to aloud from an early age and if the program is carried out in kindergarten groups and elementary-school classes. In the case of middle-school classes, the differences are smaller, which demonstrates that the introduction of reading aloud at such a late stage of education gives effects of a lesser magnitude.

Presented below are the results of reading aloud we observed. We have divided the results according to age.

Pupils from Class "Zero"

The implementation of the program in kindergartens helped the preschoolers develop the following skills: fluency and correct pronunciation; the ability to listen, understand and remember details of the content heard; the ability to express own views and support own opinions, as well as the ability to calm and quieten down. It also led to an increase in the physical activity of preschoolers and to an enhanced willingness to act.

It should be emphasized that we observed differences in the development of these skills between groups carrying out the program and control groups, even though reading aloud was also practiced in all control groups. For this reason, we may formulate the conclusion that a systematic approach is conducive to the achievement of results – it is only in groups participating in the program that reading aloud is conducted every day, at a fixed time of

the day. The control groups did not take such a systematic approach. The second important factor influencing the effect of reading aloud is the necessity to underline the importance of reading. This is achieved by treating reading aloud as a full and balanced exercise, and not as an occasional break or an *ad hoc* way to fill time between other preschool exercises. The third factor is the fact that teachers must faithfully refer to the text when reading aloud, without replacing the words of the book with their own account of the story - this simplifies and impoverishes the presentation and thus hinders the children's ability to develop their language skills.

Elementary School Pupils

Realization of the program in the earlier classes of elementary school helps pupils develop concentration and imagination. There is also a visible growth in fluency and accuracy of expression, listening, understanding and remembering details of the content heard, expression of own views, support of own opinions, and cause-and-effect thinking.

In older elementary school classes, the program primarily helps children understand the content heard. In addition, it helps to instill in them the ability to provide support for their own thoughts and allows them to analyse issues from multiple perspectives. Thirdly, reading aloud helps pupils achieve linguistic competence. Pupils in the program manage better with oral and written expression and have a richer vocabulary than those outside the program.

Middle School Pupils

Realization of the program in middle school classes primarily helps to increase understanding of the contents heard. It also contributes to the development of reflection about a text and the skill of looking at an issue from many perspectives. In addition, the program has an influence on the development of language competencies, particularly on oral expression and on richness of vocabulary.

In the case of middle school classes, however, the differences in skills of pupils from the "reading" classes and the control groups were much less obvious than in the case of younger children. This demonstrates that the introduction of reading aloud later, in middle school, gives results of a lesser magnitude than in cases where the program is implemented at an earlier stage of a child's education. In our view, this results from the following:

Pupils at this stage of education are more developed than those from younger classes, and thus reading aloud to them has a lesser stimulus on their development (and thus the differences in skills between them and the pupils in classes not participating in the program are smaller). In addition, current middle schoolers did not have the chance to participate in the program when they were younger, when they would have been more susceptible to the program's effects.

Middle schoolers are going through a difficult period in their development and it is harder for teachers to form a close relationship with them that would be conducive to the achievement of the effects of reading aloud. Teachers themselves are not entirely at ease when reading aloud to young people, and feel embarrassed. They consider it more natural to read aloud to younger children. It should be pointed out in this regard that the ABCXXI "All of Poland Reads to Kids" Foundation consistently encourages reading even to older teenagers. The Golden List of books recommended by the Foundation also includes titles for young people over 16 years of age. Among those cooperating with the Foundation are teachers who manage very well when reading to middle-schoolers (for which we found evidence during our research), and even to students in vocational schools. In this respect, the problems that teachers have with reading to teenagers are rather a result of the stereotype which makes it clear that one should only read to younger children. This stereotype, rather than the unnaturalness of the situation, is the likely source of the teachers' embarrassment.

Teachers consider it more difficult to carry out the program in middle school than in younger classes because of organizational problems (lack of time for lessons). Middle school teachers often express the belief that the realization of the program is done "at the cost of" other teaching exercises. This attitude contributes to their obstinate resistance to the introduction of regular sessions of reading aloud to pupils. In addition, it is difficult for teachers to choose an appropriate text to read aloud, because middle school pupils have varied reading tastes and are less interested in hearing passages from books which do not belong to their preferred literary genres.

Lack of support from parents, who do not read to their older children.

In the case of middle schools, the clearest differences between classes participating in the program and the control groups occurred when both classes that were being observed came from the same school. The pupils thus moved in the same environment: they had contact with the same group of teachers, used the same library, and came from the same circles. In this respect we may infer that the most important variable distinguishing the two classes was that one of them participated in the program. On this basis we may draw

the conclusion that the greater ability to understand content, to approach issues from different perspectives, to discuss a read text, to feel at ease when expressing oneself in oral and written format, and to use a richer vocabulary demonstrated the pupils from the "reading" group is to a large degree a result of the implementation of the "Reading Schools" program.

In the other two pairs of classes studied, where differences were smaller, the classes came from different schools located in different parts of town. Nonetheless, despite additional analysis, we did not find significant external factors which would differentiate the classes studied. The schools did not differ, from the perspective of the study, in any specific way, with one exception: one of the classes participating in the program came from a school which did not have a library. Pupils from this class also showed the smallest differences in skills, compared to the control group. In this case we may thus say that the lack of a school library had a negative influence on achieving and solidifying the effects of the program by the pupils from the "reading" class.

Factors Influencing the Effects of the Program

The research conducted seems to show that the effects of carrying out the program are facilitated by the following factors:

Starting to read to children at an early stage of their development.

Reading systematically.

Selecting books on the basis of age suitability and graphic appeal.

Conducting discussions on the read text, so that listeners have a chance to share their emotions and impressions about the passage they have heard with others.

Selecting a reader with an agreeable personality - a warm person who inspires trust and provides a feeling of security achieves the program's aims most effectively..

The child's health and wellbeing, which depends on his/her good psychological and physical state (when the child is healthy, well-rested and well-nourished).

Agreeable conditions for reading – best effects are achieved in a place associated with quiet and concentration, where one can sit comfortably.

A specific atmosphere which allows the reader to feel moved or enraptured without constraint.

Access to books which children are interested in, in the classroom and in the school library.

The commitment of teachers and other workers at the schools. The interviews we conducted with teachers show that the program naturally fits into the work of kindergartens and into the work of younger classes in elementary schools. The Introduction of the program in older elementary-school classes and in middle schools, however, requires changing the attitude of teachers, who are often not convinced about the sense of reading aloud to older children.

Cooperation with parents and encouraging them to read aloud to their children frequently and systematically at home.

Recommendations

In light of the wealth of benefits that reading aloud provides to children, we recommend:

Extending the program to involve all preschoolers and pupils in elementary and middle schools so that the benefits are felt by as large a group of children as possible.

Promoting systematic reading aloud to the youngest children, because the program provides the greatest benefits when it is introduced at the earliest stage of education.

Continuing to carry out the program at successive stages of education, in order to develop and solidify the effects of the program and to help create good relationships among pupils and between pupils and teachers through common encounters with literature and through discussion. Improving relations within a group of children, as well as with teachers, is particularly important in the case of middle school youth, who are going through a difficult developmental period, which makes it hard for teachers to form a close bond with them.

Gradual introduction of reading aloud to all schools and kindergartens. It is important not to do this suddenly and by obligation, as then the effect may be the opposite of that intended and discourage teachers and pupils from reading exercises or even from reading in general.

The results of the study showed that the effects of reading aloud are influenced by factors such as systematic reading, friendly and comfortable reading conditions, the creation of an atmosphere of security, the conduction of discussions concerning the text read, the attitude of the teacher who is reading, his/her relationship with the class, and access to books. For these reasons, we recommend:

Conducting lessons involving reading aloud regularly, ideally at fixed times, because in this way the significance of reading is underlined, and children receive a clear message that contact with literature is important – a message which has a positive effect on their attitude towards books.

Separating reading aloud from lessons where pupils are evaluated, in order to create a secure and non-judgmental atmosphere, which is conducive to the achievement of better results from reading.

Conducting discussions (even brief ones) on the topic raised by the book passage read, so that preschoolers and pupils have a chance to share their reflections and to exercise their skills in communicating, constructing their own opinions, and in supporting their views.

Encouraging preschoolers and younger elementary school pupils to express themselves by drawing, in order to exercise, through various forms of work, concentration, thinking and association, and to stimulate the imagination and ability to think creatively. All these skills are formed as a result of systematic reading aloud and drawing. It is therefore worthwhile to seek a synergy of these benefits.

Providing pupils with access to books in every school.. The results of our study demonstrate that the availability of a rich and plentiful collection of books for pupils to use and borrow is an important factor influencing the achievement of the effects of reading aloud. Not all schools have libraries, and often, in those that do, the school's directors do not see the benefits of supporting the library and improving the school's collection of books.

Given the significant role, as demonstrated by the research, played by the people who are entrusted with the concept of reading aloud (teachers, librarians, after-school personnel), in the realization of this program, additional activities should be considered in order to support their efforts. In this respect we recommend:

The formation of a close cooperation with school directors in order to make them aware of the benefits provided by the program and in order to demonstrate methods in which the program can be carried out (primarily by recognizing the value of reading, the work of teachers reading aloud to pupils, and equipping the school library). Greater involvement in the program on the part of the school directors, and greater appreciation of their role, would surely raise the importance of reading aloud in the schools they manage, which would make it easier to implement the program in these schools.

The incorporation of lectures concerning reading aloud into the program for pedagogical purposes, in order to prepare teachers for this type of work with children. It is necessary for teachers to be aware of the positive influence that reading aloud has on children's development. Teachers should also be skilled at getting children wrapped up in the text being read, and should be able to create a good atmosphere around reading. Commitment and an enthusiastic approach of the person reading toward reading aloud are of crucial significance in shaping a child's positive attitude toward books, and may have a decisive influence on the achievement of the goals of the program. As demonstrated by the research, the relationships between pupils and the teacher, as well as the knowledge of the children that they are not being evaluated during lessons involving reading aloud, have an effect on the results of reading aloud. Pupils need to feel secure and accepted. Stress or anxiety which pupils associate with evaluation, or alternatively the skeptical attitude of the teacher toward the program may limit the positive influence that reading aloud has on pupils' development.

