

# Projects Supporting the Development of the Pre-reading Skills of Children from an Early Age

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**Abstract:** Reading and, particularly, literacy are an essential part of the basic education of a modern person and to be well informed in today's constantly and rapidly changing world and in education is more than ever an essential factor for any individual wishing to assert themselves in society. It is necessary to seek ways of forming pre-reading skills and a positive attitude towards reading for children from early childhood. One of the motivating factors might be the reading development projects proposed by the author. Their use is suitable for children with special educational needs (e.g. children with dyslexia), who very often dislike reading and do it grudgingly. Their basic principle can easily be modified for use in the family and in school/preschool, and may very well take into account regional specifics (e.g. legends of the area).

**Key words:** Reading development projects, reading, primary literacy

## Introduction

The declining literacy skills of Czech children are mentioned not only by teachers but also in the results of many surveys. What are particularly alarming are the figures for literacy of boys aged fifteen and their deteriorating performance in reading literacy in the past decade, signalling the steadily declining level of Czech children.<sup>1</sup>

The situation is serious; surveys show that the problem of declining reading skills (and, as a result, impaired levels of literacy) exists not only in Europe but all over the world. This is particularly true in the case of children with disabilities (cf. e.g. Goncharova, 2006, 2013). For these children we offer below projects that can be used as an important motivating factor, used in practice for children with severe disabilities (cardiac defects) and

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<sup>1</sup> See the results of PISA (2003, 2006, 2009) in Palečková et al. (2005, 2007, 2010).

children with learning and behavioural disorders (ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities).

The aim of the proposed projects implemented in families/schools/kindergartens is the preparation of situations in which the child gains new experiences, which can be used as an important motivational factor in forming positive attitudes to reading and the development of reading as a key pillar of literacy.

There have been interesting surveys in, for example, Germany, the United States (e.g. Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004; Sullivan, Nichols, & Bradshaw, 2007; Gioia, 2004) and in Australia (e.g. Nielsen, 2001), where a series of surveys is focused mainly on traditional reading rather than the area of literacy, but what is not monitored is the respondent's work with texts, the extent of their understanding (cf. Goncharova & Dmitrieva, 2007), and the implementation of existing knowledge and experience and metacognitive processes. Many of these surveys actually map the relationship of the respondents towards reading as an activity, as a way of spending free time. The situation is very closely monitored by ILA and its branches in each country.

As already mentioned, the decline of literacy shown in studies also points out that children are distracted from reading, which can be considered one of the pillars of literacy. This underlines the need to respond to the implementation of appropriate educational projects both

in schools and the choice of appropriate ways of developing areas monitored in family education. One of the innovative projects aiming to form a positive attitude towards a child's reading from early childhood is Projects Developing Reading by Markéta Švamberg Šauerová (cf. 2013, 2015a, 2015b). The author prepares a project specifically for a client (a particular family, a particular class) with respect to the needs of the clients. On the basis of experience, she subsequently published projects designed for different age groups as examples of project implementation. The projects are based on intensive communication with a child's parents/teachers, thus also acting to increase social interaction. A lack of interaction can have a negative impact on the quality of literacy of children (cf. Šauerová, 2012; Matějček, 2004).

The projects are mainly based on using experiential pedagogy (experiential learning) in natural surroundings, in the real environment in which the plot of the book takes place. In this way the influence of the environment itself (in the form of many dimensions at once) and the benefits of the psychological effects of the outdoor environment are all used in education/re-education dealing with different difficulties (cf. Faber & Kuo, 2004, 2009; Švamberg Šauerová, 2016; Neuman, 2007). In addition to encouraging reading, these projects may have a certain effect on the prevention of children's inactivity. Overall, projects

developing reading can be seen as comprehensive and with psychological and health benefits, affecting not only the future level of literacy of the child, but also affecting their quality of life through forming an overall positive attitude towards a healthy lifestyle – active leisure in natural surroundings, an accent on communication and interaction, and a choice of passive cultural-aesthetic forms of leisure – reading, planning, teamwork.

## Aim

The proposed projects implemented in families/schools/kindergartens involve the preparation of situations in which the child gains new experiences, which can be used as an important motivational factor in forming positive attitudes towards reading and the development of reading as a key pillar of literacy.

## Methodics

In order to compile a particular project it was always necessary to use historical sources and the analysis of literary works for children and young people; the compilation of the educational project was based on the author's practical experience with the principles of project

learning,<sup>2</sup> especially with home-made projects.<sup>3</sup>

To target the projects well it was also necessary to study background information on the children for whom the projects were designed and subsequently implemented with, including data about the environment (region) which they live in.

Each project was evaluated; the content analysis of a structured interview, analysis of the children's work (reading diary, diary of experiences, school notebooks, stamps), and an analysis of the school's evaluation of the child were used for the evaluation of the project.

This contribution focused its attention on the general characteristics of projects outlined in a general form for children from early childhood through adolescence – the text offers three proposals of a general project for preschool, junior, and secondary school ages.

Projects are formed in a way that can be prepared by every parent and is highly adaptable with respect to the conditions of the region, the interests of the child and the family, and the type of school facilities with regard to the possible limits/specifics of the school talents or skills of the child, including any handicaps (dyslexia, dysphasia, ADHD).

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Kašová (1995, 2008); Havlíková (1994); Valenta (1993); Kasíková (2007), Tomková, Kašová, & Dvořáková (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Valenta (2003).

## General characteristics of the projects

The initial impetus for the projects is a book whose plot is set in a specific environment which can be used in the project to visit and perform different motivational tasks there. The appropriate selection of the book with regard to the age of the child is very important. For preschool children a fairytale or a legend (which always take place in the real world) can be chosen, while for younger children we choose fantasy books and adventure stories (for example, the world-famous author Eduard Štorch and his books *Minehava* or *Mammoth Hunters* – the plot is set near the Kokořín valley, near Prague), and for teenagers, we choose the life stories of other people (we also can find a lot of books taking place in a real environment – a particular city, mountains ...). The basis of an effective real environment is to compete with the virtual environment of television and computers, the real effect of scent, touch, sound, and even taste (picking raspberries, like *Maruška* – main literary character from the Czech fairy tale “The Twelve Months”). The impact of the outdoor environment brings a number of benefits in the field of cognitive parameters – improving memory, concentration, attention, and a proven effect on mental calming. The effects of the colour green have an influence, too. Many studies demonstrate higher effici-

ency compared to activities implemented in an indoor environment (the home or the classroom). Reading is very nicely done in natural surroundings and can be suitably supplemented with a variety of interesting activities which can make reading in itself attractive in today’s modern times. Some projects might be connected, in the event of interest on the part of the family, with, for example, geocaching, and therefore also linked with the effects of modern technologies. The projects are extremely versatile thanks to the precise interconnection of the needs and interests of individuals and families (school classes/any group). Outdoor implementation is not a precondition; the author connected some projects with activities in theatres or museums, all with regard to the interests of the child.

It is appropriate to combine the effect of a particular environment with well-chosen educational tasks (What could *Maruška* be thinking while enjoying the raspberries? How did *Minehava* feel as she lay sick on the shores of the lake?). Some families prepared a nice picnic in those locations, some created beautiful poems, while others brought painting materials with them and painted there, some went to the museum or the nearby cemetery to discover the final resting place of the author, and others went to collect flints, similarly to the *Hunters*. Everybody can do anything during the project. Trying to walk a part of the

track to compare today's countryside and the countryside described in the book, whether the little shop with cupcakes and cakes is in that town, looking to see if that huge tree on the hill is still standing there, or asking residents where, according to the legend, this or that hill could be. Children are hungry for knowledge and enthusiastic about similar activities. They draw maps, look, invent...they just need space and help "to turn off" the temptations of the modern world. Activities may also be interrupted in the projects (not completed - e.g. beginning reading) and then the Zeigarnik effect can be used. Projects can easily be modified with regard to regional conditions; a deeper knowledge of literature is not necessary. The projects can even be prepared and managed by parents during the normal upbringing of their child. When the projects are realized it is advisable to follow the basic phases of a project - motivation, implementation, evaluation.

These projects are based on the above principles and the Czech regional environment. All of them could be modified with respect to the appropriate region. For example, a Danish mother living near Copenhagen may use the story of the Little Mermaid by Andersen as the springboard for her project (a trip to Copenhagen to see the statue of the mermaid, a walk along the Nyhavn Canal near the house where Andersen lived, a trip to Odense to Andersen's birthplace).

For the child the story and the author become something real. Meeting the Little Mermaid is also fascinating for adults; she is sitting on her stone, staring into the distance, still waiting for her prince. For Danish teenagers we can pick the play Hamlet - and a visit to Kronborg Castle. In the Russian cultural environment it is recommended to link literary work with the theatrical environment (the libretto for the ballet Swan Lake, for example), Russian national fairytales (fairytales about animals) can be combined with a visit to the zoo, possibly using specifically named regional legends ('epics' - legends with the heroic deeds of the mighty rich).

For children of preschool age - use of a fairytale

The project "From fairytale to fairytale"

### ***Motivational phase***

Each project is based on a thorough analysis of the interests and personality traits of the child (playing the flute, fondness for drawing and painting, handicrafts, singing, a dislike of walking). This project was prepared for a five-year-old girl, and is strongly emotionally based. The project is based on work with imagination.

The basic literature used to plan very short trips was fairy stories that the girl was fond of. Every trip was initiated with a motivational phase of reading or telling the particular story.

***Implementation phase***

In the implementation phase specific short trips to places connected to some of the fairytales were planned. There were several component parts associated with fairytale elements. Such partial activities included e.g. a trip to Jičín, the town where it was possible to visit the “birthplace of Rumcajs”, the Zebín hill, and the forest of Řáholec; the trip was connected with reading the book about Rumcajs, Manka, and Cipisek. Next was a trip to Hrusice called “Following in the Footsteps of the Tomcat Mikeš” (here a hiking trail “In the Footsteps of the Tomcat Mikeš” is already prepared and you can visit the memorial of Josef Lada and buy a book about the Tomcat Mikeš). An evening tour of Prague organized by the Museum of Horrors – “With ghosts to ghosts”, which was appropriately connected with legends of the Old and New Town of Prague – was an interesting activity.

At the same time, to support the girl’s reading in the spirit of the project “From fairytale to fairytale” (and in accordance with the exceptional musical interests of the girl) frequent visits to theatre performances appropriate to her age were recommended to her family, trips to performances such as Cinderella, The Nutcracker – A Christmas Story, The Magic Flute, Rusalka, The Devil and Kate, and Swan Lake. In most cases it was recommended to motivate the child by means of the book *Stories, Legends, and Fairytales of Lady Music* (Hostomská, 2007), in

which the plots of the most famous operas, operettas, and ballets are presented to children in a comprehensible form.

***Fixation phase***

The child started her own diary of activities, in which simply using pictures acted to make notes about her visits and activities. The diary in this case has become a work of art; the child’s relationship to working on her diary is positive. She was recommended to buy the *Tourist Journal*, available from tourist centres in the Czech Republic (cf. Šauerová, 2015b), into which the girl could put stickers as a reward for having visited the site. During the interview she said that she loves looking at the miniature photos and the sticker acts as motivation for her to go and reach a particular destination.

***Evaluation phase – Analysis of the girl’s reading diary as part of the project evaluation***

From the interview with the girl we can see an interest in emotionally rich short stories and tales. The situation has improved in the family; the child has begun to ask her parents to read aloud to her and enjoys moments of reading. She has begun to look forward to school and learning to read. Her favourite book in this period was *Katie and Skubánek* (the name of the dog which Katie has), possibly because the girl is also named Catherine (Katie).

For a junior school child – the use of adventure literature

Project “In the Footsteps of Eduard Štorch”

### ***Project objective***

The primary objective of the project was to stimulate the interest in reading of a particular child.

At the beginning of the project the boy’s family was particularly interested in changing his negative attitudes to reading.

The negative attitude of the boy to reading (which almost amounted to resistance) could primarily have arisen as a result of his respiratory problems (arising from cardiac and asthmatic problems) while practising reading aloud at school. While he was reading his verbal expression was often not understandable, and the teacher was not willing to accept the recommendations of a special educator to minimize his reading aloud. This situation led to mockery from other children. At the time of the initiation of the project, the boy was nine years old. For the project it was necessary to take into account the boy’s medical condition.

### ***Preparatory phase***

The preparatory phase was focused on proposing alternatives for the implemen-

tation of a specific type of family holiday, finding suitable accommodation, and planning activities with regard to the overall plan – to raise the child’s interest in reading, and thus increase his level of reading skills. A thorough analysis of the background data and health status of the boy was performed (Tetralogy of Fallot, condition after surgery) and the child’s interests and the interests of other family members were ascertained.

Eduard Štorch, whose work deals with accessible regions, thus making it possible to connect a fictional story with the real experience of the child and to arouse the child’s interest in literary stories, was chosen as a basis for the project.

### ***Motivational phase***

For the motivational phase a film adaptation of the first part of a film trilogy – Settlement of Crows – was used. Another motivational step was the selection of books for reading. The storylines of the books were associated with the film that was watched – in this case, the book *Minehava* was selected.<sup>4</sup> Every day, at a regular time, his parents set the boy a section of the book to read. Attention was paid to creating a pleasant atmosphere, often speaking about the part that had been read after reading, and creating the storyline along the way.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mertin (2004).

Another part of the motivational phase was a scheduled trip to “Pokličky” – the “Lids” (a rock formation – it looks like several lids from pots) – which is located in the region of Kokořín (sandstone rocks), which is the setting of the scene from the story that was read.

### **Implementation phase**

The project itself followed the previous phase. The principle was to create an atmosphere full of experiences related to the story, with opportunities to move around in the same environment as the heroes of the book. The basis of the plan was a week-long family holiday that took place in the same location as the hike in the motivational stage (because of its links with the book’s plot and the life of Eduard Štorch, the region of Kokořín was selected again). The child was told that they would go to places where the story in the book that was being read at the moment took place. The boy was asked to suggest what places appealed to him and what he would like to see; further proposals were prepared by the author of the project.

The child incorporated the Pšovka springs (this river is often mentioned in the book) into his plans and also wanted back to Pokličky, and was interested in trying to go looking for flints. The boy

also wanted to visit the Pusty (“Desolate”) hill (in reality it is the Lobeč hill).

At this stage intensive cooperation started between the author and the family, so that the project could be tailored to the family’s interests as far as possible.

For each day of the week-long holiday a specific hiking route, which always led to a place that the child had had an opportunity to learn about while reading the book, was planned. At the same time another family interest – geocaching<sup>5</sup> – was involved, so that every trip involved a plan to find a cache (mystery cache, multicache, children’s cache); this part was planned by the family.

On individual routes locations for a “picnic” were identified, to enable the family to stop together and narrate actively – development of the imagination, creation of poetry, painting, inventing a story from the life of the hero Sokol (Falcon), etc. In the stories the parents were advised to take advantage of what is called the Zeigarnik effect (Zeigarnik, 1938), which proves that unfinished tasks/stories make people more likely to go back to the tasks/stories.

The parents included their own activities in the project.

### **Fixation phase**

The fixation phase was focused on the

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<sup>5</sup> More e.g. in Šauerová, Špačková, & Nechlebová (2012).

<sup>6</sup> More in Šauerová (2011).



processing of experiences<sup>6</sup> in the form of notes in a diary of experiences; furthermore, the boy working alone, created a small photobook using a program called “In the Footsteps of Eduard Štorch” and prepared a tip for a trip with the same title for the AZ family server. He prepared a school paper for literary education about the writer with rich photographic documentation.

After a subsequent interview and overall assessment, we can observe that the boy was excited; he chose another book and, after mild initial difficulties, began to read. Difficulties arose in the first phase as a result of poor concentration, losing the context of the plot, and some unknown words. It was obvious how a badly learned technique, specifically, poorly mastered reading competences, stopped the child from establishing communication with the text.<sup>7</sup>

His parents were advised to read in pairs and chat frequently about the section of the book that had been read after that. This part was an important motivator for the child; his confidence was strengthened in the sense of his being an important family member who passed on interesting information that other family members did not know. After overcoming these difficulties his reading skills started to improve; he was able to focus better after beginning

reading, motivated by the need to know how the story ended. After reading the book the boy himself chose another book according to the analysis of its content published in advertising material from a bookshop. At the same time the boy expressed a wish to possibly buy these books for his home library, because his current reading was related to books borrowed from the school and city libraries. This interest was greatly appreciated by his parents, as a great number of books by Štorch with a very nice layout and overall design have recently become available on the market.

### ***Evaluation phase***

The project elicited a positive response from the child, but rather on the level of motivation regarding reading as an activity than a possible significant change in his attitudes towards reading. The family decided to continue with similar projects, continuing on a regular basis since 2008, and they have become more less a part of the family’s rituals and traditions. A change in the boy’s attitude to reading occurred after the completion of a second project (From Prehistory to Prehistory).

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. the concept of readership of Lederbuchová (2004).

## Recommendations for Practice

Basic ways to educate parents how to realise similar projects, or how to encourage parents to search for ways to develop reading in their children, involve, in particular, strengthening cooperation between the family and school and the use of proactive and creative teachers who will seek increasing cooperation with parents and create discussions and workshops at which parents can learn possibilities for the development of reading and literacy skills.

Another option is to appeal to the magazines targeting this group of parents, and in the form of entertaining education, offering parents project proposals as tips for trips.

Another possibility is to organize series of workshops in community centres and counselling sessions as part of the broader educational-psychological counselling<sup>8</sup> which is part of the care for child clients with learning disabilities (behaviour), etc.

## Conclusion

Completed projects can easily be modified with respect to the specific needs of the family and are a good complement to supporting literacy. There are no requirements of deeper knowledge of literature and every family is dealt with according to their needs.

It is advisable to motivate the child to read in an enjoyable way, e.g. with the help of proposed projects which are based on the importance of experience in the life of a child and also support the interaction between parents and children.

To support reading is, for a child, undoubtedly the basis for the development of literacy. In addition to activities with high-quality emotional experience that support a positive relationship to reading, it is advisable that parents also participate in school activities and projects involving local and regional libraries.

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<sup>8</sup> Currently, we are implementing similar projects in seven families whose children are in the care of the author; they use modified projects - cycling and after the first project, they continue with similarly oriented activities. The attitudes of the children towards reading are improving, with significant shifts in their schools' evaluation of them and performance of school duties. Children with dyslexic difficulties are showing a noticeable improvement (while using re-education processes and tools).

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