

ZOFIA ZASACKA ORCID: 0000-0002-3437-5578  
National Library, Educational Research Institute

## My Friend Eeyore or to Be Like Coraline – Training in Reading Engagement

**Abstract:** Socialization to reading in early childhood is necessary to make reading an obvious, giving pleasure activity. It can be strengthened through literary socialization, for example by reading together with caregivers, browsing through books and talking about them with the child as a pastime at home or in a kindergarten, playing pretend or make-believe games based on a text that was read, etc. The child should be an active participant in all strategies of socialization to reading – autonomous in evaluation and interpretation of the text. The studies on social reading attitudes and motivation prove that reading experiences build intrinsic motivation in reading. When reading is an important, attractive, obvious practice for children, their will to read comes from the conviction that reading brings pleasure and satisfaction, it means that they are intrinsically motivated to reading and they become engaged readers. The author of the paper will describe the process of socialization to reading based on emotions evoked during literary reading and responsible for improving reader's Theory of Mind. Engagement will be also analyzed through emotions awakening during the reading process in relation to the literary characters, as well as the reader's participation in the game designed by the plot's author. Such emotions unleash cognitive processes, self-reference memory, and anticipation, such as figuring personality traits of a literary character, or free empathy-related emotions, for example wanting to become friends with a literary protagonist. Readers follow the narrator into a fictional world, which allows them to experiment with their own states of mind, train their empathy and identify with the character. Theoretical and empirical studies of reader's response in the context of socialization to engagement in reading will be discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** socialization to reading, reading engagement, children reader's response, literary protagonists, children reading culture

Reading is a process of constructing meaning from a written text. It can be viewed as an element of literacy where the attention is focused on the circumstances of reading practices that account for situational and functional variability (Barton and Hamilton 2000). From the perspective of cultural anthropology and sociology, literacy is considered a type of related habits such as an internalized universe of cultural experiences attributed to reading practices (Bourdieu 1984) that stresses the processes of a culturalization and parental reading social-

ization (Kraaykamp 2003). Socialization to reading in early childhood is necessary if reading is to become an obvious, pleasure-giving activity. Reading as obvious, pleasurable activity can be strengthened through literary socialization and literacy activities. For example, reading together with the child, browsing through books and talking about them with the child as a pastime at home or in the kindergarten, playing pretend or make-believe games based on the text that was just read, etc. (Zasacka 2017, in print; Dobbs-Oates, Pentimonti, Kasdevarek 2015). The child should be an active participant in all these strategies of socialization to reading – autonomous in evaluation and interpretation of the text.

#### TO BE A LIFE-LONG READER ONE NEEDS TO BE AN ENGAGED READER

There is a tendency in Polish society to give up reading once formal education has ended (Michalak et al. 2016; Dawidowicz, Chymkowska 2015). A growing proportion of Polish adults, even university graduates, do not have the habit of reading books. On the other hand, the majority of school students consider compulsory reading of literary classics dull. This is partially caused by the level of difficulty of most texts, as well as the inability of young readers to identify with characters who are significantly different from themselves and the protagonists of books they chose to read (Zasacka 2014). Making space for the student's active role as a reader at school and eliminating situations where literature teachers ignore the role of emotions in reading by organizing classes in such a way as to pursue a predetermined interpretation and meaning of the studied text is necessary to foster a love of reading (Koziołek 2017).

Socialization to reading is also a crucial method of training life-long readers (Marinak, Gambrell and Mazzoni 2013). I believe that engagement in reading during early childhood, correlated with deliberate involvement with literary text, fosters adult interest in fiction and the representational arts (Bus, Ijzendoorn, Pellgrini 1995). Enjoyment and involvement are preconditions for intrinsic motivation and engagement in reading. I define engagement in two ways. The first aspect are the effects of socialization by considering the habits and routines of everyday life that occur when reading is taken for granted. The second aspect is intrinsic motivation or the positive feelings evoked by reading and initiated by the satisfying feeling of reading.

#### EMOTIONS AND ENGAGEMENT IN READING

As Alan Wigfield and John Guthrie have put it, engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read by a variety of personal goals. They are strategic in their reading behaviour, experienced in constructing new understandings from the text they read. The will to read comes from the conviction that reading brings pleasure and

satisfaction and they are socially interactive about their reading activity (Guthrie and Wigfield 1997; Guthrie and Wigfield 2000; Dunston and Gambrell 2009). Engagement is built by mutual support of motivations, strategies, and conceptual knowledge (Guthrie, Anderson, Alao, Reinehart 1999). This definition ensues from the theory of motivation to reading constructed by Wigfield and Guthrie. It takes into account the dimensions of goals and reasons to read and predictors of the amount of reading (Dunston, Gambrell 2009). One of the reasons to read, crucial if engagement and emotions are to be taken into account, is curiosity – desire to learn through reading more about a topic that interests us. Another aspect of consideration is the belief in the importance of reading because it is useful to the reader – it is relevant to his life. Next aspect is involvement which occurs as a result of experiencing beauty through language, art, and other functions of literary reading. Involvement depends on emotions that arises during reading, especially narrative literary texts. Emotions help to focus the reader's attention on constructing meaning and sense from the text; they enable to relate fictional or poetic situations to episodes in the reader's own past. Emotions will most likely occur unconsciously. We often do not know why we feel emotional pain or pleasure at a particular moment of reading. When we read, we become emotionally involved with the literary characters and participate in the game designed by the author of the plot (Mar, Oatley 2008; Miall 2011). Emotions unleash cognitive processes of self-reference memory and anticipation; such as figuring out personality traits of a literary character, or free empathy-related emotions, such as wanting to become friends with a literary protagonist (Miall 2011, 323). Readers follow the narrator into a fictional world, which allows them to experiment with their own states of mind, increase their empathy, and identify with the character. Some emotions evoked during literary reading are responsible for improving the reader's Theory of Mind. They also help develop his or her understanding of other people's emotions (Djikic, Oatley and Moldoveanu 2013). David Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) have proven that reading literary fiction develops the reader's Theory of Mind. This process does not happen in the case of popular genre fiction, which allows us to immediately understand what is going on. Only original, artistically valuable literary texts have such potential. Another aspect of literary reading responsible for involvement is the experience of being transported into another realm, which is the ability of a literary text to attract the reader and hold his or her attention (Gerrig 1993).

#### THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL BACKGROUND, MOTIVATION, AND INVOLVEMENT IN READING – EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

How is deep involvement in reading and intrinsic motivation to read associated with the social background and socio-demographic characteristics of the child or teenage reader?

The reading motivation and its social and demographic differentiation were measured in a Polish national representative survey on reading habits and attitudes of children and teens (Zasacka 2014, 2016, 2015). The aim of the study was to identify the reading experiences and attitudes of Polish school students, differences in the way they read for personal pleasure and for school, and the underlying motivations. Study subjects were twelve- and fifteen-year-olds (Zasacka 2014), which enabled the researchers to observe changes in reading attitudes as teenagers grew and presented the dynamics of the forming of literacy skills and reading for pleasure. The analysis of the responses allowed us to describe reading methods practiced by teenagers and their social and demographic diversity. In this mixed methods study, the quantitative part was based on an auditorium survey of students in the sixth grade of primary school and the third grade of junior high school. The survey was conducted in 2013 in 202 schools throughout Poland and consisted of 100 primary schools and 102 junior high schools. There were 3537 students in total: 1721 from primary schools and 1816 from junior high schools.

To measure the reading motivation, the authors of the study applied the theory and the empirical method developed by Alan Wigfield and John Guthrie, who suggested four major factors that affect reading (Guthrie, Wigfield 2000; Wigfield, Guthrie 1997; Wigfield 1997; Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, Wigfield 2012). The first factor is the individual's belief that he is competent and efficient at reading; the second lies in achievement values and goals (intrinsic motivation: reading curiosity, involvement, importance of reading); the third factor is extrinsic motivation (recognition, competition, reading for grades); and the fourth factor lies in the individual's social reasons for reading. When we analyze the emotions involved in literary reading, intrinsic motivation is crucial.

The analysis of the results of this study proved that children's and teens' reading motivation depends on the social and cultural family background. In the case of extrinsic motivation, the correlation is weaker, intrinsic motivation and involvement in reading literary narratives depend on prior socialization to reading in the family. Teenagers growing up in families with lower cultural and educational capital have a weaker reading intrinsic motivation measured by the capability to become involved in narrative fiction. Girls – who are more active readers than boys – felt a stronger reading intrinsic motivation. This means that girls become involved in what they read easier and more eagerly. They prefer interesting texts even if this means having to cope with reading difficulties. Further, girls enjoy reading long and complicated fictional stories more than boys. Girls befriend literary characters easier, can imagine stories, believe in them easier than boys. Girls' prevalence in terms of reading motivation grows stronger, primarily because boys' intrinsic motivation weakens quicker. In observing how involvement in reading a literary text depends on age, we can see that when children read less as they get older, their reading motivation grows weaker, especially their extrinsic motivation, i.e. reading for

grades. For example: 44% of 13-year-old girls, 34% of 15-year-old girls, and 30% of 13-year-old boys, 18% of 15-year-olds agreed with the statement that “I feel like I make friends with people in good books.” The social dimension of reading is more important for girls than for boys – girls like to share literacy events with family and friends. For example: 43% of 13-old-girls and 47% of 15-old-girls and only 21% of 13-year-old boys and 18% of 15-year-old boys declared that they like to trade things to read with friends.

The results compel us to turn our attention to boys, particularly older ones who come from families where reading is not an obvious practice and where home libraries are scarce. Special strategies are critical in supporting and stimulating their reading motivation, especially their intrinsic motivation. Some of these strategies should train their ability to become involved in reading – emotions accompanying literary reading could be very helpful here.

#### BEFRIEND A LITERARY CHARACTER – TRAINING TO BECOME AN ENGAGED READER

The multifaceted character of feelings connected to literary reading has been summarized by David Miall and Don Kuiken (2001, 2002: 223). They outlined four types of feelings:

- 1) “evaluative feelings toward the text, such as the overall enjoyment, pleasure, or satisfaction of reading a short story”;
- 2) “narrative feelings toward specific aspects of the fictional event sequence, such as empathy with a character or resonance with the mood of a setting”;
- 3) “aesthetic feelings in response to the formal (generic, narrative, or stylistic) components of a text, such as being struck by an apt metaphor”;
- 4) “self-modifying feelings that restructure the reader’s understanding of the textual narrative and, simultaneously, the reader’s sense of self”.

When socialization to reading is taken into account, I propose enhancing its effects by one helpful strategy: the possibility of befriending a literary protagonist. Becoming emotionally closed to a literary character depends on the second type of feelings listed by Miall and Kuiken. It can happen in situations where the reader is willing to play with a literary text that is being read. Research showed that readers who identified with characters in the story they read through personal experiences were more likely to report changes in self-perception (Kuiken et al. 2004). Empirical studies (Kuiken, Miall, Sikora 2004) prove that readers’ personal experiences of emotional response patterns provoke sympathy towards the characters, especially as readers identify with the characters’ goals and plans. Readers’ judgments about the realism of the characters are supposed to have an impact on identification, whereas the similarity of the reader and the character is widely believed to promote identification

(Maslej, Oatley, Mar 2017). There are many aspects of the ways and effects of identification with literary protagonists that have not yet been tested in controlled experiments, but all those tested so far have shown that several functions of these processes are useful to readers as they increase their curiosity and involvement in the reception of literature or in developing a para-social relationship (Mar, Oatley 2008).

I would like to suggest two examples of literary protagonists who could become the child-reader's friends. The first one is the permanently pessimistic, always unhappy, Eeyore, the donkey in A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* books. Eeyore is generally described as a gloomy, depressed, hedonic, old, grey, stuffed donkey who is a friend of the title character – *Winnie-the-Pooh*. He could become the reader's friend as well, because he has a poor opinion of other animals in the story, describing them as *having no brain, clumsy*. The young reader can feel sorry for Eeyore, imagine ways of helping him. Everyone has felt sad and helpless just as Eeyore does, especially when they were very young. He is an unusual hero, a hero who proves that one does not always have to be clever and brave.

The second character is Coraline, the eponymous heroine of Neil Gaiman's novel published in 2002. The story is very original, as it does not fit any established genre. It combines elements of dark fantasy and horror with a creepy and scary atmosphere (albeit seemingly delightful at first). The story manages to maintain its supernatural and whimsical mood, perfectly drawn by Gaiman. Coraline feels that her parents do not pay her enough attention and sometimes even downright neglect her. It is a situation that helps the reader to identify with the character. At one point Coraline feels bored and decides to explore the old house where she lives. Similar to a fairy tale, the protagonist unexpectedly takes a hidden passageway into an alternative world where she meets her other parents who do want to satisfy all her needs. She finds a different world and, initially, marvels at it. Just like Alice from Lewis Carroll's novels. But then this newly found world turns into a grim and terrifying place. Coraline, locked in a dangerous and scary trap, is brave enough to escape. She remains calm and wise, managing to be strong under frightening circumstances. The reader can easily empathize with her. Although the story is horrifying, there is a consolation at the end and the narrative shows how Coraline has matured by gaining wisdom and courage by facing the dark opposite of her expectations. It gives young readers a valuable lesson that a person who seems weak and faces a terrible situation can find inner strength and wisdom to find a way out of it. All of the terrible things that happened to Coraline made her understand the value of her family, her neighbours and her house.

It is easy for a reader who empathizes and sympathizes with a literary character to become close to or even to fall in love with him or her. A fictional literary companion evokes real interest and emotions. Mar and Oatley described what happens to readers in this situation:

Whereas sympathy is now defined as a feeling of concern, compassion, or sorrow for a feeling the emotions of another person to some extent [...] Empathy with others emerges in preschool children, and both sympathy and identification with protagonists in fiction stories probably derive from it [...]. Because emotions are activated in ourselves during the empathic process, we have (in life and in art) a feeling of intimacy with the person for whom we are feeling. (Mar, Oatley 2008: 180)

#### FINDING PLEASURE IN NEGATIVE FEELINGS

Literary texts deal with feelings of discomfort, anxiety, dismay, loss, and other negative states (Caroll 1997). When this happens, literary reading allows us to recognize and live with negative feelings of others, a relatively uncommon experience in daily life. More importantly, contact with fictional characters can allow us to experience their difficulties, struggles, and growth (Miall 2001). The pleasure of literary reading may thus centrally implicate the re-experiencing of negative feelings from ordinary life, but within a context in which these feelings can be developed, contextualized and brought into relation with other feelings.

Fiction pays close attention to distant worlds. Moreover, a literary narrative allows us to re-experience rare situations. In much of literature, the authors challenge the readers to empathize with individuals who differ drastically from themselves (Mar, Oatley 2008). Transportation into a narrative can help us learn to empathize with types of individuals with whom we have no personal experience. Within the simulation of narrative worlds, the idea of character can become more elaborate than it is in the case of our usual everyday ideas. If children live in a happy family, a literary text can help them befriend someone in a less favourable situation, understand unhappiness and widen their own experience. The reader's main access to social information embedded in a story is through its characters. In so doing the reader may come to like the character and then become somewhat more like the character (Mar, Oatley 2008). Martha Nussbaum (2001) put the cognitive yield of the tragic spectacle: we take pleasure in the negative emotions of a tragedy because we come to understand something, and coming to understand is always a pleasure. As Mar and Oatley (2008) conclude, although narrative is entertaining, its function is not one of mere entertainment:

We found that identification with a main character increased literary involvement as measured by the number of emotions readers experienced while reading the stories. The degree of involvement was correlated significantly with increased insight. Thus, understanding characters in a story is a means through which we can come to better understand our selves and others. (187)



The latest Polish study on cultural practices and preferences of parents and caregivers (Żakowska 2017) showed that when they choose books or any other cultural products, they first take into account the price and the child's taste. They prefer literature and books which are nice, cozy, ignore the difficulties of life, sorrow, loneliness, etc. Parents prefer light literature for their children because they assume that children do not like sad and scary stories. They do not understand how useful and necessary dark emotions can be.

## CONCLUSIONS

Empirical research on reading practices in Poland reveals that abandoning book reading after the completion of compulsory education persists as a tendency among Poles. The reading audience among young adults is falling, particularly among teenagers who read for pleasure. I consider the role of engagement in reading in the development of reading habits in childhood and in the upbringing of life-long readers. The concept of engagement in reading is treated as a crucial dimension of reading attitude and motivation. "Engaged readers" are intrinsically motivated: they read to get emotionally involved, to experience, to find pleasure or excitement. Such motivation can be enhanced through socialization of very young children to literary reading. Children and teens, especially boys from environments located at the bottom of the social strata, need support from educational institutions to remedy their shortcomings in reading socialization. As mentioned earlier, steps should be taken within this intervention to awaken young student's desire to gain satisfaction from reading and to make reading a habit. Reading in childhood, both at home and the kindergarten, plays a crucial role in creating the habit of reading books. It also teaches children the capacity of emotional involvement in the literary text. The reading motivation can be developed through reading socialization, among others by reading together with caregivers, browsing through books and talking about them, stimulating dramatic play, playing pretend or make-believe games, etc. Developing the ability of getting pleasure from listening to and imagining a discovered story or poem is a long process. Here are the emotions triggered by joint reading: there are two kinds – the first relates to the reception of a specific text, i.e. emotions associated with the contents of the work itself. By listening to stories being read to them, children learned to imagine the world described in the story and to identify with the characters. If at an early age they were exercised in becoming involved in the world presented in literature, they will have developed intrinsic motivation – the conviction that reading certain texts brings satisfaction. For example, stories that were read stimulated dreams, pleasant thoughts before falling asleep. Children would invent a sequel to the story or have thoughts about a new friend – the literary protagonist (Roskos, Christie 2011). The second aspect has to do with emotions and the mood that accompanies joint reading.



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