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A Gift that Keeps on Giving : the Idea Behind the Bookstart Programme

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A GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING – – THE IDEA BEHIND THE BOOKSTART PROGRAMME

It is safe to say we all have this one special book from our childhood that we forced our parents to read to us over and over again. The protagonists became our friends, the adventures were relived and reenacted, and the dialogues memorized. It might have been a volume that belonged to our parents or a hand-me-down from friends. No matter the source, the feelings evoked remained the same – eagerness to listen to the story and the will to be able to put those mysterious black signs together and read it all by ourselves. Without a doubt, being introduced to the world of literature and the culture of reading at an early stage of a child's life goes a long way and benefits a child immensely. Having that in mind, it will come as no surprise that state, as well as local authorities, should facilitate and support the process of literary education of its youngest citizens. This is not an easy process – be it logically or financially speaking.

In 2011 the Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency has released a report "Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices" (*Euridyce*) that has presented a comprehensive study of methods and aids helping the literacy level in Europe. What has been proven throughout the study was the pupils who have acquired a large set of vocabulary "can be expected to improve in reading and comprehension, while those who do not have certain words in their oral vocabulary may not understand them when they appear in print" (*Eurydice*). It is also stated that the amount of vocabulary that a child has at the end of first grade is a reliable predictor of a child reading abilities ten years later.

A book that is appropriate for a child needs to be a coherent unit that takes into account child's psychological development, their attention span and comprehension abilities characteristic for a given developmental stage.

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The respect for a particular age group needs to be reflected in the lexical stratum of a book. For each stage of a child's life the vocabulary child acquires has to be 'served' in a proper manner as the cognitive capacities of a child are inextricably connected to child's linguistic development. It does indeed constitute a biological feedback of a kind. A well-written book with an adequately selected vocabulary is a foundation on which children are able to build crucial skills such as critical thinking, the ability to compare and contrast, to classify and evaluate. Furthermore, it grants children an advantage when it comes to written and oral performance as the wider the range of one's vocabulary, the greater the confidence while expressing one's thoughts and opinions. This clearly goes hand in hand with better writing skills that echo once encountered syntax structure, word order, and lexical stratum. Such skills are easily translated into confidence while speaking in public as children used to reading master language to a point where fewer mistakes are made. These qualities are direct results of developing a linguistic scope of a child. This may come to a surprise as even though children's literature is rich in different vocabulary sets, "books written for children use well-formed, relatively short sentences" (Dickinson, Griffith, Michnick, Golinkoff, Hirsh, Pasek, 2012). Nonetheless such a confined space does allow for improvement of a young reader's competencies. One of the latter ones that in my view is pivotal for the future of an individual is the social development. Even though this might not be an immediate effect of finishing a book, it should prove to be fruitful further in a child's life as there has been a study of pre-school children that established a relationship between low level of language and behavioral problems (Kaiser, Mc Leod, 2010, p. 153).

Another important matter to be raised while discussing benefits of a child reading is the deepening of a parent/carer – child bond. Spending quality time with a parent and reading together helps their attention spans and focus as it builds a healthy environment without distractive factors. Such milieu instills a good behavioral pattern in connection to both – social bonds and processes of reading. The latter is rendered more efficient as the language acquisition requires stress-free frameworks and, what is more, "parent reports of shared reading were a robust predictor of children's receptive and expressive vocabulary" (Senechal, 2014, p. 403). An additional profit of reading together is "dialogic reading" (Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, 1988, p. 552-559) which takes place when a child and a parent (or a caretaker) analyze the stories and the characters as the book they are reading is a point of departure for further discussion. In "Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices" one learns of the importance of parental engagement in reading and its positive effects on a child's literacy skills. What may come a surprise, the report's findings suggest that it is not only the time spent together with children reading but also it is the participation in various reading events and activities that

result in shaping positive reading patterns in a child (Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, 1988, pp. 552-559; *Eurydice*, p. 29). Undoubtedly the will to read and the pleasure derived from it needs to be triggered at home. It is the parents' habits that set an example for young readers and even though the national level plays an important role in maintaining these habits, it has to begin at home. For this reason some of the programmes and campaigns in Europe provide training and advice for the parents and caretakers highlighting the importance of reading out loud to children long before they start school education.

The above-mentioned report presents a study that confirms a strong connection between a parental involvement in reading to a child and a child's improved intellectual development (Harris, Goodall, 2007). What might be able to facilitate this process is the way in which the children's literature is designed and published – usually, the fonts are bold, the colors bright, and characters entertaining. Moreover, because of the static nature of a book as an object reading asks for a slower pace in a otherwise hectic life.

Most the research on the subject on young readers has been conducted based on a European programme *Bookstart*. It is not the only one programme that aims at promoting reading to children. There is *The Cradle Club* developed in co-operation with *Bookstart* and its goal is to organize meetings in libraries where children may read or listen to fairy-tales. Another one is *Babies Need Books* that spreads information at health centers and other places visited by parents with children as well as distributes book sets in parents' groups and baby clinics.

In the following article I wish to analyze the programme that has been a harbinger of a change when it comes to raising awareness among parents, namely, the *Bookstart*. What is more, I would also like to compare the selected campaign with a Polish one: *Cała Polska czyta dzieciom* (*All of Poland Reads to Kids*). What is interesting and makes *Bookstart* a truly unique phenomenon is the fact it is the very first national book gifting program in the world. Its beginning dates back to 1992 when an independent charity Booktrust (funded by the Arts Council England) together with Birmingham Library Services, South Birmingham Health Authority, and Birmingham University School of Education initiated the program (see Fig. 1).

Booktrust, established in 1920s, aims at of creating a literate society through encouraging and promoting engagement with books. The charity navigates several national book-gifting programs, one of which is the *Bookstart* program. Its objectives are simple – it provides sets of books or other reading materials for babies between 0 and 12 months, known as 'The Baby Pack' and for children aged between 3 and 4 years, their set is called 'The Treasure Pack'. In the pilot project, back in 1992 300 babies were involved. Today, this initially small scale idea has grown significantly and, as the data on program's website inform, "around 1.5 million babies,

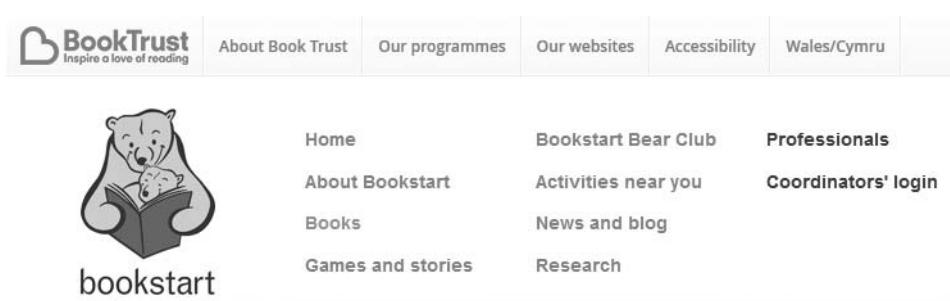


Fig. 1. Booktrust. Source: <http://www.bookstart.org.uk/books/>

toddlers and preschoolers receive *Bookstart* packs each year in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which is around 95% of all children" (*Bookstart*) which makes it one of the most efficient nation-wide movements (see Fig. 2, Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Bookstart baby package. Source: <http://www.bookstart.org.uk/about/packs/>



Fig. 3. Bookstart treasure hunt set. Source: <http://www.bookstart.org.uk/about/packs/>

The bureaucracy is reduced to minimum, parents or carers are not required to fill endless piles of red tape, the packs are usually given by their health visitor during one of the regular checks whereas the set for older children is provided by a nursery. The packs are more less of similar content and include baby books, a booklet providing information about the pivotal importance of reading for and with children and an invitation to join a library. The latter is also a place where parents may seek help should they have any difficulties receiving their sets as *Bookstart* co-operates with libraries to enhance the experience and build a literature-friendly atmosphere that benefits the children in further education and experience.

Naturally, as program's funding is not fixed they need to seek financial support in both private and public spheres. Even though *Bookstart* is administered by an independent charity – Booktrust – its essential funding is provided by Department for Education in England but also by Department of Education in Northern Ireland and Welsh Government in Wales (*Bookstart. How Bookstar works*). Financial support is too generated by private legal persons and corporations for instance authors, children's publishers, and illustrators. This kind of multi-agency partnership is the "largest corporate social responsibility partnership of its kind in the UK" (*Bookstart. How Bookstar works*). Booktrust is also a beneficiary of £6 million grant for the bookgifting programme that was given between 2013 and 2014 and will receive another grant in 2014 and 2015. As one of the most prominent Scottish poets, Carol Ann Duffy said "support for Bookstart is support for the dreams and imaginations and futures of British children" (Helm, Doward, Watt, 2010) and indeed it is, as some of the grant is dedicated to reaching most disadvantaged children in the UK. Therefore reading aids such as books in Braille or in large print are offered in the program. Given the growing population of immigrants *Bookstart* started to include bilingual resources and guidance as to facilitate their needs and to ease children's adaptations to new language.

Despite the fact that children and their emotional and social development are the focus of the program undoubtedly, parents also gain certain satisfaction coming from the awareness that they help to form foundations of their offspring's literacy.

It also enables family units to spend quality time and helps their members to bond. In a study conducted by Emily Morris from The University of Sheffield she states: that *Bookstart* has "positive effect on parent/carer opinions of reading, increasing their awareness of its importance and their appreciation of the enjoyment it can bring. This is vital in encouraging parent/carer reader development" (Morris, 2004). This may be the perfect response to somewhat dim image of societal reading habits that emerges from 2004 report by the Founder of eBooks site, Tim Coates who analyzed the decline in the use of libraries that has been taking place even after 25% funding increase (Coates, 2004). One may argue that this precisely why programs such as *Bookstart* are needed, not only do they teach the importance of literature but also create a bridge between an institution of library and members of a community. It happens even more so, as one of the program's objective is to build an inviting environment in libraries for children to experience new ways of reading. To quote one of the coordinators: "we enroll them in the library straight away and we can spend time with the family to just introduce them to books and libraries, and what the library's got to offer for the whole of the family" (Morris, 2004). This trend was also observed by Barrie Wade and Maggie Moore who are responsible for major-

ity of the research conducted between 1992 and 2000 that evaluates the *Bookstart* program. In one of their analysis, they state that *Bookstart* "led to increased sharing of books with babies, more family read generally, more babies enrolled in libraries, more book purchase and more membership of book clubs" (Wade, Moore, 2003, p. 3-13). Participating in such a social phenomenon not only may results in social changes but also, exposure to nursery rhymes, intonation, voice modulation shape phonological awareness and results in educational achievements as it inspires children to begin to read and write.

It is recognized how vital the program is and how it increases positive changes in a child's life and therefore it should come as no surprise that 2010 decision to cut program's £13m government grant was described by Sir Andrew Motion as "an act of gross cultural vandalism" (Helm, Doward, Watt, 2010). He, together with Philip Pullman, Carol Ann Duffy, Ian McEwan expressed their disbelief and anger about the "small-minded, high-handed and nasty decision" (Helm, Doward, Watt, 2010).

UK's example echoed in Europe and bore fruit as similar campaigns emerged. Majority of the programmes and strategies are relatively recent and have been founded after the year 2000 and in consequence national bodies were called to life as a direct effect of these reading strategies. They are large-scale state-funded campaigns promoting literacy skills and reading. The target audience usually are children and their parents. In the Netherlands there is *Boekenpret* (Fun with Books) aiming at improving children's language skills, *Buchstart* in Germany and *A Book is a Treasure* in Malta. A very dynamic movement has been established in Ukraine with its *All of Ukraine Reads to Kids* – a socio-cultural project run by the Ukrainian Research Centre of Children and Youth Literature, and its aim is "to change our Ukrainian future" (*Ukrainian*). This campaign has its equivalents in several Central European countries. In Lithuania for instance *The Mažojo Princo Fondas* (The Little Prince Foundation) manages the reading events across the schools and libraries. An interesting example of international collaboration is the Czech Republic that in 2006 implemented *Celé Česko čte dětem* (Every Czech Reads to Kids) and since then has organized The First International Week of Reading to Children together with the Polish *Cała Polska czyta dzieciom* (All of Poland Reads to Kids). This event's goal was to provide a platform for exchanging experiences and ideas between various associations and organizations who promote reading practices and run campaigns in their countries.

In Poland such an organization was established by Irena Kozminska in December 1998. The goal of the programme and the foundation is to encourage parents and carers to read to children at least 20 minutes per day. It also researches the correlation between reading to children and their emotion health and development. The foundation also managed, through

lobbying in the government and Parliament, to gain 30 million zloty of the 2005 budget for supporting libraries (*ABCXXI*). The campaign is the first one to draw public attention to literacy of children and tangibly proved of its efficiency. In December 2013 *Cała Polska Czyta Dzieciom* launched "Pierwsza książka mojego dziecka" (My Child's First Book) packages and gave 75.5 thousand of free sets to new mothers. The set consists of books text for parents and nursery rhymes for children. The project is under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. According to a poll conducted for the campaign after the first five years since the inauguration of the "All of Poland Reads to Children" campaign more than three-fourths of Poles stated that they were familiar with the campaign which is a good sign showing the effectiveness and recognition of the programme (In 2006, 85% of Poles stated they were familiar with the campaign) (*ABCXXI*). As the awareness of the importance of reading rises, one may only hope to see more and more programs like *Bookstarts* that set an example for other countries and institutions who should realize that, as Charles William Eliot stated "books are the quietest and most constant of friends; they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers" and, hopefully will gift children with such.

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Ewa Wyleżek

A gift that keeps on giving – the idea behind the Bookstart Program

Summary

The aim of the article is to present an incredibly significant phenomenon, such as social programs that encourage reading to and for children. A children's book has its own, separate rights and characteristics that differ from young adults literature. It is justified by the process of a child's development which requires triggering different stimuli.

In the paper several campaigns with widest reach in Europe are commented upon, with special emphasis placed on British campaign *Bookstart* founded in 1992 and the Polish one *Cała Polska czyta dzieciom* (*All of Poland reads to Children*) founded in 2001. Both projects aim to promote reading aloud to children, and hope to create a habit of reading among the youngest.

Keywords: Bookstart Program, book for children