

**Thesis of doctoral (Ph.D.) dissertation**

**Reading and Social Interaction:**

The impact of persuasive communication on primary and secondary  
boy students' reading attitude

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## Objectives

At the beginning of the 21st century the popularity of reading is decreasing. Reading appetite is declining in adult population and among children, and the phenomenon characterizes different areas of reading. Reading for pleasure is declining rapidly particularly among young people. As more and more lose the ability to read or do not acquire it at all, the society becomes less informed, intellectually active and independent-minded. Besides the overall decline of reading willingness, it is a worldwide phenomenon that boys like reading less than girls and their achievement falls behind. The results of the international system-level student assessments, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy), draw attention to the consistent gender gap in reading literacy.

There are several reasons for researching the problem. Every country makes efforts to advance students' performance. Improving boys' results in reading literacy offers an alternative alone to achieve that goal. In addition, gender-related results from cross-national surveys on performance are able to provide indicators of how a national education policy works in terms of equity. It draws attention to the challenges of how human rights and obligations function in practice within the society. The nature of gender inequalities in education has changed over recent decades and, with regard to attainment in particular, has become more complex. Research shows that it is difficult to separate innate from learned behaviours, or to understand to what extent stereotyping influences individuals' perceptions and behavioural or cognitive sex differences. At the same time, the range of differences is small compared to the similarities existing between the sexes, therefore other factors that may influence performance should also be examined.

Correlation between reading achievement and attitude is well established in the literature. In the background of better achievement there is more favourable reading attitude while poor performance goes together with rather negative one. Thus, researching reading attitude as an explanatory variable offers a possible way in finding the alternatives how to improve performance. Gender differences in reading attitude have been identified by and explained in various ways in the literature of the field. Among them gender socialization, stereotypes, the deficits of boys' language development originated in family socialization are mentioned. Boys are more likely to drop behind at the beginning of learning to read, to be threatened by Mathew effect compared to girls, and are every often under-motivated.

My research focused on reading attitude. The aim of my empirical measure was to reveal the impact of persuasive communication, which, as an explanatory variable of the attitude, has received little attention in previous research. The question I wanted to answer was whether persuasive communication as a social interaction improves boys' reading attitude, in other words, reduces the gender gap. My research questions were the following:

1. Are the gender differences in reading attitude identified in the literature applicable to the measured sample?
2. What are the scenes of socialization in which either verbal, direct, indirect or non-verbal persuasive communication manifests itself?
3. What actors of socialization – such as parents, brothers/sisters, friends, teachers and the special teacher/pastor of church schools – improve with their persuasive communication the boys' reading attitude?
4. How do direct and indirect manifestations of persuasive communication influence the gender differences of the reading attitude?
5. How does socio-demographic background influence the students' reading attitude, in other words, the impact of which materialised and immaterialised dimensions can be detected in the sample?
6. Does online reading alone reduce the gender gap in reading attitude?

In the dissertation reading attitude was examined within the theoretical framework of Mathewson's (2004) *Model of Attitude Influence Upon Reading and Learning to Read*. In the model, which reflects the tri-component concept of the attitude, reading attitude is explained by its affective, conative and cognitive components. Persuasive communication is a moderating variable of the attitude, and it is the only factor that takes the direct influence of the environment into account. It affects the attitude both directly and indirectly. Previous – among others sociological – research has documented that reading is determined by the social environment in which it takes place. With examining and revealing the impact of socialization on the attitude in the family, peer group and formal education my dissertation supports that social aspect of reading. My hypotheses based on the discussed literature of the field were the following:

1. Boys' reading attitude are less favourable than the girls' in all age groups examined, therefore improving boys' attitude is one of the alternatives for closing up in cross-country assessments.

2. On condition that direct and indirect, verbal and non-verbal persuasive communication appears in different areas of socialization mediated by several actors, it reduces the gender differences of the reading attitude.
3. More favourable socio-demographic background, that is possessing greater cultural capital is an implicit indicator of better reading attitude. Consequently, lower family status goes together with less favourable attitude.
4. In the sample reading as a knowledge- and value-creating activity means the processing of digitalized and visualized information rather than reading traditional paper-based alphabetical texts. Consequently, the content framework of reading research has to be redefined.

## Methods

In the research primary data were collected, and factors influencing reading attitude were identified and tested with quantitative as well as qualitative methods in one introductory and two main phases. The methodological novelty of the research was that it measured the attitude-forming influence of persuasive communication, which had not been tested in previous quantitative research. For better measurement the affective, conative and cognitive components of the attitude were examined separately. The main measurement tool was an attitude scale, which was applied for measuring the affective aspects, while the conative and cognitive components of the attitude were measured by a complementary binary variable list.

In the first, introductory phase of the research I observed reading as an activity among primary school children through focus group interviews. Then I completed it with a pilot study, in which data were collected with a paper-and-pencil self-administered questionnaire. I had two aims in both cases. I wanted to recognize phenomena related to the attitude and empirically establish the principles for developing a scale, which provides an adequate explanation of the attitude in the present Hungarian circumstances.

Based on the experiences of the introductory research a reliable (Cronbach-Alfa=0,873) and valid attitude scale was developed. Having completed it with the partly adopted, partly self-developed student and parental questionnaires I had a fully comprehensive methodological apparatus for the first large-scale research. Students of year four, five and six from ten primary schools in Hajdú-Bihar County were invited to take part. The principle of selection was to involve students and their families in the sample (N=1601) who represent the social, economic and cultural diversity of the county. Data were collected by paper-based questionnaires. The principals of the schools supported the research by sharing the questionnaires among students and the families. This phase of the research made it possible to recognize how reading attitude was shaped, to examine the determining background variables and to test the thesis of the literature. The focus was on the impact of persuasive communication and its actors on the attitude, with great emphasis on the role of the pattern-mediating influence of the family background and parental reading behaviour. The methodological composition, throughout the whole research, aimed at understanding the gender differences in reading attitude and finding the best ways of improving boys' results.

The continuous development of the research, arisen from the topic, resulted in the following: digital reading was involved, and the circle of persuasive communication mediators was broadened. In the second large-scale measurement secondary school students were involved in the sample from schools

run by the Transtibiscan Reformed Church. The age group made it possible to integrate the questions regarding socio-demographic background in the student questionnaire. Data were collected online.

The examination of influence of persuasive communication had been modified, special actors of church run schools (the teacher of religious education and the pastor) as further mediators of persuasion had been involved. In addition, during the period that passed between the two large-scale research phases Neumann galaxy invaded newer areas and became even more widespread, the range of information technology mobile devices broadened and the access to them became easier. As a result, reading among young people relocated on digital surfaces, on the internet, which made it necessary to extend the examined phenomena with digital reading. After collecting quantitative data, I tested my hypotheses with mathematical statistical methods.

## **Results and discussion**

In the interpretation of my results I answer the research questions and remark upon my hypotheses. Gender differences of the reading attitude documented in the literature (research question 1) proved to be applicable to two out of my three samples. In spite of the fact that boys' attitude turned out to be less favourable than girls', in the pilot study the difference between the two genders was not significant. The reason for this was the low number of participants (N=218), and perhaps greater differences would be found in older age groups. In other words, the gender gap in reading attitude was not a characteristic feature of the examined subteeners. In the first large-scale measure the primary school sample – which represented the same age group – with the higher number of participants provided a more reliable analysis. In this sample boys' attitude was significantly lower than that of the other gender in all the examined years of school. Furthermore, boys' attitude proved to be less favourable toward reading for enjoyment, mandatory and other school reading situations. It means that the gender gap appears as early as lower primary. In the secondary school sample – similarly to the primary school one – the male students' average attitude is significantly lower than the females'. Both genders' reading attitude is characterized by the following. From year 9 to year 10 the attitude becomes lower, in year 11 a stagnancy can be observed, and in year 12 it is higher than it was in year 9. This phenomenon contradicts the literature claiming the attitude becomes less positive with time. At the same time, it can be explained with the preparation for the matura examination and the aspiration to continue their studies in tertiary education. The literature of the field has documented favourable participation ratio in tertiary education among students of church run secondary schools, which underlines the above mentioned view.

Considering, however, what kind of reading attitude was examined, boys showed less positive attitude 'only' toward reading for enjoyment and mandatory reading. Their relationship with reading texts from the Bible or other school reading situations does not differ significantly from that of the girls'. For this phenomenon the compensational effect of church run schools is an alternative explanation. These findings partially confirm my hypothesis (hypothesis 1) that boys' reading attitude are lower than the girls' in each examined age group.

The influence of direct, indirect, verbal and non-verbal persuasive communication upon reading attitude was also tested. My research questions referred to the where (research question 2), by whom (research question 3) and how (research question 4) persuasive communication as a social interaction affects reading attitude. In the family the parents', brothers' and sisters', in

wider socializational context the peers', and in formal education the teachers' and pastors' persuasive communication aiming at reading has definitely been identified. Persuasion, let it be direct or indirect, influences the reading attitude of both genders in a favourable way. There are actors of persuasive communication – the father, the brother and the teacher – whose persuasion improves boys' attitude, that is reduces the differences between boys and girls. The primary as well as the secondary school research has proved that in developing a sense of enjoyment toward reading in boys the same gender actor's (parent and sibling) effect is crucial. This is not a completely new finding. The father's significance in supporting his son's language development is known from the literature. At the same time my results draw attention to the fact that sons' reading attitude is also significantly formed by the father.

Among the identified actors of persuasive communication, the teacher has been found to differentiate between genders, too. They either recommend something to read directly, talk to their students about reading in an indirect way or support reading comprehension with different activities, their persuasive communication improve boys' attitude. This finding has not been documented in the literature before. Its significance can be supported with several aspects. First, educational policy has little influence on the socialization in the family. Within formal educational settings, where school-age boys (and girls) spend most of their time, teachers have the tool for improving boys' attitude spending little extra time and making little extra effort, simply talking about and recommending reading. It is expertise (revealed from the literature of communication theories), authority or good teacher–student relationship that may serve as the ground for authentic persuasion. I am convinced that the most authentic expertise for persuasive communication toward reading can be provided if the teacher (in their free time) reads, too.

Besides direct and indirect persuasive communication, the significant impact of the teacher's reading supportive pursuits on boys' attitude has also been proved. Supporting the development of reading comprehension, explanations, teaching reading strategies, processing texts may require change in the approach and educational policy intervention. The international and national good practices of programs regarding reading as a cross-curricular issue – such as *CORI (Concept Oriented Reading Instruction)*, *Between Common and Mutual* or *CIP (Complex Instructional Program)* – are known from the literature. The findings of the international system-level student assessments show that better mathematical or science performance goes together with better reading literacy results, and vice versa. These make it necessary to provide texts in the mathematics and physics lessons, too. Furthermore, the mathematics and physics teacher is expected to talk to their students about reading, and with direct or indirect persuasive



communication to win more and more boys and girls to reading. On the other hand, it is also necessary to provide texts with science content, which boys generally show greater interest in.

Besides the above discussed, I formulated a question (research question 5) regarding how socio-demographic background – materialized and immaterialized dimensions – affects the reading attitude in the samples. I hypothesized that better socio-demographic status contributes to better reading attitude, that is lower status goes together with rather negative attitude. This hypothesis has partly been confirmed. In the primary school sample, the relationship between parents' years of schooling and the students' reading attitude has been supported. It means that the higher the parents' qualification is, the better the reading attitude. In the secondary school sample however, the correlation cannot be demonstrated. For this there are two possible reasons. On the one hand, it may come from the homogeneity of the sample. Most of the parents passed at least the matura examination. On the other hand, it is possibly the result of the compensational effect of church run schools. In addition, the parents' labour market status does not differentiate in either sample. The richness of the reading-supportive materialized environment goes together with more positive attitude among the primary school participants, while it has had no significant influence on the secondary school students' approach toward reading. I regard this finding as a further evidence for the above discussed compensational effect of church run education.

The examination of the relationship between digital reading and the reading attitude was emphasized in the secondary school measurement. The question (research question 6) I formulated related to whether online reading was capable of reducing the gender differences of the attitude. On the basis of my findings, it influences the attitude of both genders in a favourable way, so has no significant effect on the differences. These findings support the view that traditional paper-based reading has been replaced by reading of digitalized and visualized contents among the young taken part in the research, which means our concept of reading and the content framework for its research is necessary to be redefined. My examination however, left the digital content unrevealed. It could be task of a further research. Another direction of the research may be the measurement of the attitude toward online reading along with the online reading performance.

Since the main finding of my work is that gender differences in reading attitude may be lowered at school by teachers' persuasive communication, it is necessary to conduct a research on teachers' the persuasive communication toward reading.

Drawing a conclusion, as I highlighted in my dissertation in the chapter discussing the historical aspects, reading – as opposed to being a social activity initially – has become a solitary, silent occupation, and today – as a consequence of the expanded Neumann galaxy – we witness the obmutescence of interpersonal communication. Reading is a tool for passing on our culture to the new generations, and educating intelligent, emphatic and democratic-minded young people who find their place and happiness in life. If we want the young to read, it is necessary to view reading as a cross-curricular issue, and verbal as well as non-verbal persuasive communication should ‘get in a word’ in social interactions.

## Proposals for practical applications

1. In order to achieve better performance in reading literacy it is necessary to support the development of reading attitude in formal education. My research findings confirm that advantageous influence should not be limited to reading and literature lessons. In teacher training – with a properly worked out methodology – the cross-curricular approach toward reading is essential to be dealt with.
2. On the basis of my results, the concept – established in teacher training – of how to teach students to become readers, may be put in a wider context. Developing a proper methodology – on the relatedness of persuasive communication and reading attitude revealed in this dissertation – is an alternative tool. This methodology may appear as a separate subject in the sample curriculums of teacher training. The working out is a further task.
3. The above mentioned methodology can be adopted into teachers' longer and shorter postgraduate trainings as well.
4. In addition, my research findings can be used to inform parents about their opportunities and responsibilities in supporting the advantageous development of their offsprings' – sons' and daughters' – reading attitude. Parent's meetings, informal talks are excellent occasions. To inform parents about the phenomenon it is also necessary for experts to write blogs and comments on the topic in social networks. Popular country-wide campaigns – such as *The Year of Reading* or *Read your Child Every Day* should be continued. Offering trainings to parents is a further alternative.



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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Fülekiné Joó, A.**: A perszuazív kommunikáció mint az olvasási attitűd nemek közti különbségeinek magyarázó tényezője.  
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