

FROM SCHEMATIC TO CREATIVE READING. AND WHAT CAN PRECEED IT?

*What do we expect from contemporary children and teenagers, when we want them to read?
In the contemporary lifestyle, the qualities and abilities that enable both children and adults
to read creatively, are being weakened step by step. What shall we do about it?
Is this rabbit waiting for you?
What do you think?*



This task is from our regular cultural-educational event Palace Reading Playroom, which we prepare together with the dance pedagogue Viera Sádovská, and the concert flautist and music teacher Janka Mikulčíková. The children solve during the first part different tasks and riddles, either by themselves or with their parents' help, which



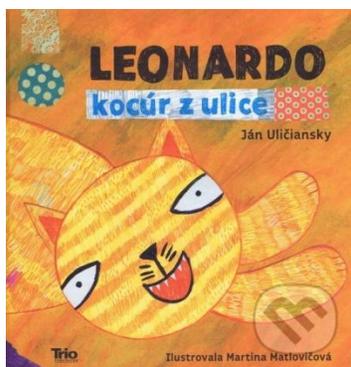
visually portray the key ideas, themes, issues from the book.

The task led to the novel *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, written by the American writer Kate DiCamillo. The children, (and even older schoolchildren), had severe difficulties while dealing with this task. Maybe you think that the question was not well formulated. It is unclear. However, we are in the Reading Playroom. Therefore, we may play with possibilities, and moreover, we may ask without limits. What would you ask me, so that you found the answer easier?

The children were told to write down the tasks, so that even those more introvert would have enough space. In this way we stimulated their individual responsibility for finding solution. It stirred up the opportunity for vivid communication. Communication with lecturers and with parents. The children were not troubled with the straightforward character of the question. They had problem to imagine the meaning of the concept to be waiting for somebody. We dealt with this situation, as many of you would have done: we played this scene several times. This helped them partially to understand the concept. However, it was difficult to find examples to which they were able to respond. At that moment I found out, that they did not know, what does it mean, when somebody is waiting for somebody else.

The concept of waiting is connected in the story of Edward with the key themes that refer to important ideas. They summon up wide range of emotions, that the main characters feel, as well as the emotions that the author passes on to the reader. However, the concept of waiting is not internally processed by the children at all. Therefore, they will miss many important associations in the story. And that is not all. We may think about other consequences. Reading books allow us to contemplate on similar topics and themes, that are also related to other literary pieces. Let us quickly think of other literary pieces, (poems, stories, even themes only), which will not be understood (internally accepted) by these children (either partially or fully), unless they experience the concept of waiting, so they understand it. What a numerous number there are! And it may be assumed that the children will not be interested in them, as the pieces would not appeal to them so much. It is not because the pieces would be out-of-date or boring. And it is not because these children would have no potential to read them!

Why the children have these kind of difficulties? Of course, I have thought of the problems connected with poor perception of real psychosocial context in their own lives. The children have not experienced the concept of waiting, as they experience it rarely. In our society arose the illusion, that so-called successful people have nowadays everything almost immediately. We can smell it in the air. As it is the main life priority. Sometimes it is unhealthy implemented into the education. In the families there are also other unhealthy models showed, that may be connected with the fact, that the children have not sufficiently understood the concept of waiting: insufficient consistency in upbringing, the children get things immediately, so that they do not bother, and there is also insufficient time for emotional contact of high quality. The perception of real time and space is weakened also by inadequate influence of technologies. And yet. This is not the complex answer, as I will now share with you my other experience.



In the Palace Reading Playroom we worked with the story written by Ján Uličianský: Leonardo, the Street Cat. One task in the riddle section of the event was – what did he see?



Maybe you see it just as a jolly ball. But what if there is somebody very very little, abandoned, alone? Somebody who desires to come out

from their hiding place? Somebody who suddenly spots above of the road something so BIG. Write down, what would he think:

What would you write?

A child was led to think about the answer by imagining the feelings of a small kitten, who was standing one-on-one right before a big unknown object. The child might have been thinking about the fact, that the ball is above the kitten, and that it is a big ball which can fall down anytime, and that it might be scary for the little kitten. Of course, there are many other associations. There are negative and positive associations. The children could react creatively and express fear by “ah!”, or amazement by “oh!”. Or kitten’s curiosity by saying: “What is it?”

Why to do this in such a way? Because by playing such an investigation game, the process of stimulating emotions and feelings is activated, and the child starts intensively seeing the solution for the kitten, who steps out, alone and abandoned, into the unknown.

To encourage and activate the children, I went through this task with every child individually. A very difficult job. It was obvious, that the children are not used to real creative tasks. They rarely work with their own imagination. (Let us not forget, that they have schematically everything visualised, e.g. in technological media.) Therefore, again, they have little chance to put themselves in the place of the kitten in their own way. (That is one of the reasons of mechanical reading). We animated the objects and played over the situations, but it was almost of no help.

I realised, while helping them with the task with the kitten, that the children have not experienced the physical space sufficiently. This task was based on the perception of the space. It was obvious, that they have not learned to sufficiently observe, think in movement, in the space, perceive real objects. This led to the reduction of their feelings, that would otherwise help them to perceive and understand, what it meant for the kitten to walk into the street. And moreover, they were absolutely unable to think about such stimuli at all. Here I want to point out the connection between reading in life and reading in the book. The physical space is not only about the environment that I perceive. Perceiving the physical space supports my imagination of symbolical perception of the reality as well. I need this in order to get along in the world not only by physical sight, but by inner sight as well. For instance, to find the sense of life, a relationship, to perceive my own existence, to examine situations from the perspective of value... (e.g. a touch or look that is either loving or disrespectful.) A child can hardly put themselves in the place of another person who is unable to stand in the bus, if the child has never experienced, how it is when their legs hurt. When we take into consideration the consequences, it is understandable, that the lack of connection to the reality supports negative emotions and fear. That is logical. Such a person gets along poorly, processes the stimuli slower, and has more tendency to be confused. Our brain finds, however, an alternative solution: in something that is easier and safer for us, the brain follows the model of schematic thinking. You have surely experienced that at the time of emotional strain, you tend to do mechanical activities mostly. If there is an area in our life, where we have fear, we have the tendency to submit in that area to somebody dominant and to obey them.

Let us look closer at this parallel between physical and inner concept. If we have some physical limitation, our body finds an alternative form of the movement. From the long-term perspective, this alternative form is harmful. In the same way, in our inner world, i.e. how we perceive and deal with stimuli, we may get used to an unwanted model in our mind, according to which we think and react. Similarly to a man, who experienced that he has fallen few times down from the stairs. He keeps holding onto the bannister all the time. As he tries to protect himself from falling down, he “reads” his physical terrain according to the scheme. While reading a text, we face an unknown terrain as well. We react according to the degree of how we are prepared to deal with the unknown terrain. (Even if we have read that book several times, our inner constellation always differ). In every creative task we face a certain degree of fear “from the unknown terrain”. Therefore, the adrenaline is excreted, and our inner world sets on such emotions, which help us to overcome obstacles, e.g., enthusiasm. To make a child to read creatively, the child has to learn to face the fear “from an unknown terrain”. In a mild way, the fear is natural, it activates our perception and it is not harmful. If we face the fear on a regular basis, firstly, we learn to recognise it, and secondly, we learn to deal with it step-by-step.

However, if we do not learn to work with the limitations, our brain surrenders in those areas, because it does not evaluate the fear from the terrain and fear from the stairs any longer. The brain does not analyses, whether the situation differs, or it is easier, nor does it search for other methods of how to deal with it. So the brain strongly implements that one scheme applicable for stairs, and maybe, it will not even allow us to perceive the terrain profoundly. The consequences displays also in the psyche, as concentration on certain types of stimuli only leads to stupefaction of attention. The child, that is used to perceive and think schematically, will not be happy, if they have to solve a task, which goes beyond the expected frame. And we are not speaking about a child with low intelligent potential. How to get out of these unwanted models?

The good news for us was to find out, that is was the creative work on a regular basis that helped the children. Those children, who came here on a rather regular basis, became engaged in the tasks with higher motivation, regardless the result. They were trying it, though they were unsure, whether they could respond immediately. They started enjoying the process of searching and exploration. Other factor that helped was that we gave extra time to parents as well. We tried to involve them in the activities. Moreover, sometimes we took some time to show them and explain, how the process looks like and what they can do

on their own.



We avoided those kind of forms, which evoke children the schemes that they are used to. You may be surprised that we avoided the majority of standard forms, which are used to promote books. To make them the content of the book attractive. The reason was, that we wanted to stimulate in children such mechanisms, that are new for them, and which they do not use at all or use them insufficiently. To read a book meant rather to taste something, that was connected with the story. And it was a challenge, too. We focused in a greater way on stimulation of experiencing emotions, percepts, and on thinking of particular issues that were addressed in the book. The children could seek solutions, or find analogies between their own life situation and the book.

We aimed at concepts, that would have been probably missed while reading. Why missed? Because children's expectations of reading are conditioned by their stereotyped scheme, which leads them into the mechanical model of perception and way of thinking. The task with the little kitten did not come out explicitly from the text. It was its complement. It expressed hypothetical feelings, that the kitten might have had. We did not lead the children always to the text directly: How does the kitten feel? Is it afraid? However, we created situations with stimuli in advance, that would prepare the child on the process, that the story of the kitten led to. Why in such a complicated way? If a man had a negative experience in falling down from the stairs, he would have created an unhealthy schematic model of movement. It would be of no help, if he was exposed directly to situations, where he would have to walk down the stairs and release hold on the bannister. It is important, that he is trying it, but it will be only a superficial solution. If he is not stimulated by other ways, even by ways "seemingly not related", he will reach only a limited level of certainty. His hesitation will be showed in his speed, stairs avoidance, and always present carefulness. At the moment of first difficulties, he will return to his habit. The way out of the mechanical reading is similar. Similarly as in creative reading of the terrain (stairs), we need while reading the story to hold psychologically (in our inner world) over from the bannister (scheme) to something else. Therefore, in Palace Reading Playroom we support both relationship level among participants and among participants and us. Our goal was to create an environment, where both children and parents feel safe. We demonstrated it, and we repeated the structure of the Reading Playroom (through activities, space division), so that they may subconsciously prepare on the process. Every child and parent could consult and ask to the appropriate extend even during the task. Sometimes the situation was modified slightly. The choice of books and the choice of tasks stimulated processes, that were aimed at strengthening inner safety, decision-making, self-confidence.



For example, in *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* the children tried their physical stability (thus supporting their self-confidence). Apart from that, we led them to experience other similar tasks (e.g. while standing on one leg, writing down a message on a stone to a person, who is sailing alone on the sea). Again, in this way we stimulated the process that is important for their self-confidence, far before we put this theme in the direct text context. And far before we were talking about the soldier's physical problem, and far before we started indicating in a direct way the symbol

of maintaining stability. During the task, the children met with several references, which led them to think of something, that strengthen our inner world, something, that helps us to stand in our life (e.g. friendship, love).

We used a great scale of stimuli, mainly not reader's (music, movement, artistic and scenic forms, various forms of individual and group interaction, even the space of the Reading Playroom was divided into thematic sectors, through which the children walked, while they were searching for issues related to the book). Why to use such a variety of stimuli for the sake of one book? Let's get back to our parallel. One day, the man holding onto the bannister, will spontaneously release it, and he will maintain his stability, and will leave behind his safety scheme on how to walk down the stairs. To do this, he will need a lot of stimuli. He needs to maintain self-confidence in walking in diverse terrain, weather, time, and situations. Maybe, he will find the feeling of inner freedom while drawing. I am not talking about drawing the stairs, but I point out, that by drawing, his inner focus holds over from stressful situations (stairs as one of them) to experiencing his individual freedom and liberty. Therefore, it is very important to support both in children and our own adult lives, those concepts which lead us to such an individual bloom and freedom. Each one of us has their own bannisters. Both grown-ups and kids found the safety and freedom in our Reading Playroom.



They started working on creating the safety place together (as a family). They have found out that trying things is a beautiful process. There were different tasks, so that they would meet the various needs more accurately. (The needs not only of various types of groups). The goal was to allow each individual to express themselves on their own in various fields.

Another reason was this:



This is the picture of so-called F-Syndrome. It is the consequence of our civilisation impact: non-balanced usage of technologies. In the picture you may see a scan of a brain while reading from the screen. While staying in touch with normal physical reality, while reading physical books, the whole brain is involved. However, while reading from the computer screen, it looks like this. Regarding the schematic thinking, I am talking about this influence. The software computer scheme attacks my language knowledge all the time. I do not manage to be balancing it, my spelling is getting worse, I am making mistakes. If I want to have my brain stimulated, so that it is uplifted and it works normally, the complex activation is right thing to try. To achieve this, I have to write by hand, sing, go to nature, talk with people, and activate myself.

And why to pay attention to details? Should not the child work with the entire plot, story? It is the entirety that may have stronger effect.

Standardly, a child is able to narrate more complex plot not sooner than at the end of the pre-school period. However, this skill is developed step-by-step already in earlier period by concentrating on particular details and minor episodic stories. As we were talking about this yesterday. The children are holding onto the bannister of mechanical reading, and it means, that while experiencing and reading the story, their consciousness of these details is missing. These episodic stories, which are aimed at the details of the story, build up systems of images in a child, due to which the language becomes lifelike, and the child starts experiencing and enjoying various connections between meanings. It develops an ability to understand connotations, i.e. secondary meanings, semantic and stylistic shades, which help us to get deeper into what is talked or written about. The connotations have effect on our emotional perception as well.

Reading is a very complicated process. It is an activity that includes quantity of psychological processes. It is quite obvious. There is great proximity, almost sameness, between reading a book and reading situations in the life. When I am reading a story, processes, which immediately initiate creative imagination, should be stimulated in my brain. And many other processes, which recall experiences, memories, and pictures of characters from my memory, consciousness, and even subconsciousness. Observation of behavioural models. In that moment the emotions appear on the scene. Not only the elementary emotions, such as joy,

sadness, or compassion. But also sensual feelings and their relations with emotions (perception of soft/solid, slippery/wet surface on which I am walking, or pleasant velvet flute tone in medium pitch/continuing urgent sound of ship siren). We are not aware of many percepts, and yet, they enrich our world and they are positively renewed in us. We have named only some of many stimuli and reactions so far. But these have further effect. They stir up our symbolical perception and thinking. The slippery surface will indicate danger and risky situations, and the brain is prepared not only to record it, but to evaluate and perceive strategies on how to get through this situation. And it is amazing, as it happens simultaneously: on the one hand, there is the empirical background in the consciousness and subconsciousness, experiences with the slippery surface, and on the other hand, a new galaxy of percepts, which create the story and its situations, appear on the scene. All this may be creatively merged into new experiences, through which we may be prepared on upcoming events in our own lives. I am still talking about basic psychological processes only. I have not yet mentioned, e.g., that the reader enjoys such moments, when their mind starts connecting themes and topics, which refer to concepts, (such as the concept of looking into somebody's eyes), and in their mind appear memories on plenty of books and stories, that were read, seen, and on whole passages from them, if they were well perceived. Or how wonderful it is when we recognise various concepts: e.g. good and evil, right, safe, peaceful. It leads us to the worlds in which we may experience the happiness that comes from good decisions, the respect that is uplifting, the goodness that is motivating, and the love that affects us deeply. Various styles come along with taking into consideration the forms of the written text, which refers to other concepts. And so on. The more is the reading process cultivated, the more stimuli and new experiences we have. I am personally very thankful for all this.

I appreciate the opinion of Martin Buber, the author and scholar, who says, that we, people, are exclusively relational beings. What he meant was the relations to beings. Not our relationship to objects, things, but our relationships to creatures. If it is true, then we will feel well in this world, when we develop this kind of relation concept. It implies that if we want our child to play or read creatively, we need to think of how we may experience this kind of close relationship of our beings together while reading or playing. Edward must not be an object. Edward must become a subject, a being. Afterwards, that is the theme of the book.