

Thursday Sociological Seminars

30/11/2023

14:00

room 207

Jilská 1, Praha 1

# MICHAEL L. SMITH

## A Lost Generation?

### An Examination of the Czech Gender Gap in Reading during the COVID-19 Pandemic

It has often been portrayed in the mainstream media that the closure of in-class learning and other disruptions to schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a dramatic decline in education, accentuated by inequalities in the ability of different families to provide quality at-home learning environments for their children. Indeed, the presumably irrecoverable loss of learning, along with the brief loss of presumably standardized in-school learning environments, has often led pundits to describe students who underwent these pandemic disruptions as the “lost generation.”

However, the first major international standardized learning assessment conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic that was publicly released – the 2021 PIRLS survey (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), conducted among 4th grade pupils at the height of the global pandemic – tells a somewhat different story. Not only was the decline in global reading scores quite modest – certainly not suggesting a “lost generation” – but gender inequalities in reading, long favoring girls, declined as well. In fact, in the Czech Republic, the large gender gaps in reading competency evidenced in previous surveys largely disappeared during the COVID-19 pandemic (an achievement in social equality that was not even noticed by politicians or the public). The gender gap narrowed even though the Czech decline in reading during the pandemic (a loss of four points on the PIRLS scale), was less than the global average (an eight point loss), leading to an improvement in its country ranking. How did this narrowing of the gender gap happen?

To answer this, I apply a standardized model of the reading competency of boys and girls as determined by their family environments, parental background, and other controls – for both the survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as previous iterations of the same survey. The driving hypothesis of the analysis – which may be counter-intuitive to some - is that the increased role of the family environment and on-line learning during the pandemic, compared to previous surveys conducting during in-class learning, helped narrow the gender gap in reading. The presentation will focus on the results of the analysis, theoretical perspectives on the decline in the gender gap, the implications for in-class learning environments, and opportunities for improving the statistical model.

*Michael L. Smith, Ph.D. is a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences. He conducts research in the areas of social stratification, inequality and mobility.*