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## Minority group in a school library

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### **Abstract**

*Pleasure in reading and reading comprehension are important for reading, and library is a good assistance for both. With its stock and methods of work, library has a positive impact on reading development, especially by supporting pupils' autonomy in choosing books for reading. For this reason, the information literacy programme has been incorporated into the Slovene standards for school libraries. The paper shows how a school library accomplishes its mission of free access to library material for children. Usually, ethnic minorities are the touchstones for libraries regarding the fulfilment of the principle of free choice of information. Therefore, the effectiveness of information literacy programme has been surveyed in the area where the Roma nationality lives.*

*In Slovenia, the Roma children are integrated into the regular education system by attending kindergartens and schools in the Slovene language. In some areas, special adapted programmes of education are carried out in certain schools. The author presents the project: Education for a Book - specific school library services for Roma pupils. Through the information literacy programme, they were provided additional lessons carried out by a special method. With the help of adequate methods, including fairy tale hours, playing hours etc., the librarian can change pupils' relationship to the library and teach them how to handle books and other material, and develop their confidence.*

**Key words:** school library, minority, the Roma, reading, information literacy, special needs

## **Better reading with library**

The school period is the time when children acquire their habits of using a library, which can develop towards a permanent need for books, reading and libraries. The direct goal of the inclusion of children into a library is to develop readers who like books and find much pleasure in visiting the library. This is the important role of the mediators - children's parents, educators and librarians – to develop children's reading skills and to provide them with the opportunity to meet books. Libraries play a key role in developing reading and effective learning. Library users can exercise their right of self-determination, and the right to choose library materials, information and services which enhance their education and satisfy their wishes. In libraries, children are provided with the reading material, place, time, help, advice and motivation.

As an effective reading and expression assistant, the librarian is invaluable by contribution to understanding, direction for and introduction into reading, evaluation of the reading material, motivation for reading and independent learning and selection of library material.

The results of the PIRLS Research showed (2004) the positive factors of well equipped and furnished school and class libraries, and activities of librarians. Achievements of the Slovene nine-year-old children in the reading literacy tests were:

in 1991: 458 points; the international average 487 points,  
in 2001: 493 points; the international average 500 points.

Consideration of children's interests and their independent selection of reading resources had the greatest influence on the improvement of results. Frequency of leisure reading and frequency of borrowing books in school/public libraries also improved the results. Pupils were encouraged for this by teachers and librarians, who also taught them how to use libraries and library material. It is their task that pupils recognize the library as a source of opportunities for learning, access to information, relaxation, social gathering and personal growth during the education period.

In Slovenia, all schools must have school libraries. They are integrated in the education work as teachers' assistants helping them to:

- plan the lessons: content, methods of work,
- choose adequate forms of learning: guided learning, independent learning, checking,
- select the literature for textbook substitution,
- represent subject matter by different material.

Libraries and teachers together aim to:

- develop pupils' information literacy,
- stimulate their independent learning,
- support the use of different resources,
- foster visiting the library.

Biblio-pedagogical work in the library is carried out effectively when all pupils select and use library material and other information resources independently (Nacionalna 2005; p.12 ), and when visiting the library becomes a habit for solving their problems. For this purpose, school librarians have implemented information literacy programme. In the case of the school library operating in the environment with the Roma nationality, it has been examined what are the

possibilities of the pupils of this nationality, which has a characteristic culture, to visit the library.

### **User Education Programme**

In Slovenia, primary schools have started to implement information literacy systematically in 1971 under the title »Book and Library Education«. The first experiences of this programme carried out in primary school and youth libraries were incorporated into the national standards for school libraries in 1980. The present primary school information literacy programme has been obligatory since 1999 (Šauperl, Novljan, Grčar 2007; p. 294). It consists of four hours of information literacy in each of the nine academic years. The programme includes the following subjects: (1) information location, (2) general, special and current information resources, (3) printed and non-printed resources and (4) applicability of information technology. The teaching methods used are a demonstration of library operation and practical problem solving in the library, and the performer is the librarian. There is also an elective thirty-five-hour course in the ninth grade. During this course, information literacy is taught in collaboration between a subject teacher and a librarian in order to support individual and self conducted education. It is carried out as a research process and its scope is that within each course pupils independently work on a certain topic, selected in cooperation with their teacher.

Forty-three percent of school librarians responded to a questionnaire examining how the pupils use their library knowledge by selecting leisure reading material. Fiction was selected because the research by Gradišar and Bucik (2005) showed that pleasure and fun are the most important features in reading for competent readers, and reading comprehension is the most important for poor readers.

The librarians reported that:

- pupils borrowed more fiction (94%) than non-fiction material (6%),
- they selected fiction for leisure reading by browsing the shelves (66%), by asking for the librarian's advice (11%), or from recommended reading lists (5%),
- they rarely used the catalogue independently (66%) to select leisure reading material, only 7% of pupils often use the catalogue, and 26% never use it,
- when requested by pupils to advise them for the selection of fiction for leisure reading librarians most often take pupils to the shelves and advise them on the spot (92%), and only 8% of librarians take children to the catalogue and help them by the selection.

We consider that pupils trust library's acquisition policy and they like to select the material directly from the shelves, however, they use the catalogue very rarely. Such a selection of leisure reading material is expected and also efficient if children master the arrangement of library material and if they can evaluate the bibliographic data in the book. They also trust the librarian. Unfortunately, librarians do not use the counselling role for individual education, e.g. for the use of catalogue to increase children's independent selection. Also Bucik and Gradišar (2005) established that in Slovenia teachers do not support enough pupils' autonomy in selecting books for reading. According to their opinion, the possibility of choice increases the reading interest, especially by older pupils.

The influence of the librarian on the group of Roma children, who characteristically have learning problems due to bad literacy, has also been analysed.

## **Roma children in a school library**

According to the data collected by Statistical Office (2002) 3.246 inhabitants of Slovenia declared themselves as the Roma (0,17%). The Roma children are integrated into the regular system of education by attending kindergartens and schools in the Slovene language (Strategija 2004). They are provided with some additional help in classes and the Roma assistants, the Roma language is available as a selected subject and they have an extra subject of the Roma history and culture. In some areas, specific adapted programmes of education are carried out in certain schools. The Roma language is not codified, and therefore, there are very few sources available in this language: Roma authors write about 30 books and there are two newspapers written in two Roma dialects (Rifl, Razpotnik 2007), however, a very few Roma are able to read them, even if it is written in their own dialect. Young people and adults who speak Slovene can access information, books and other material in the Slovene language in libraries. Libraries are integrated in the school work but the key problem is illiteracy and poor literacy of the majority of this population, and therefore, the Roma children visit the libraries very rarely.

The primary school programme focuses on the basic knowledge of library and its material to support the independent use of library resources. In the first three years of the primary school, the pupils gain the first independent experience about the school library (Knjižnično 2007, p.9):

- They become familiar with the library premises, learn about the arrangement of the library and perceive it as a democratic space.
- They are able to use the basic library services.
- They know the procedures of independent borrowing and returning of the library material.
- They use an adequate collection of fiction and non-fiction material according to their age, they can distinguish book and non-book material.
- They know the basic elements of the definition and selection of information resources.
- They know the public library.
- They cooperate in different activities in order to develop reading and reading culture.

It is evident that according to this programme after the first three years pupils should know the basic rules of library operation. They are able to select independently the material appropriate to their age and to use the catalogue for searching by author and title. They should regularly visit the library and cooperate in different activities for developing reading skills and reading culture.

In the area where the Roma live, a well-equipped and technologically advanced school library implemented the information literacy programme for all children, including 85 Roma pupils (Balant 2006). The performance was evaluated by the librarian according to the proposal created on the example of Progress Monitoring Chart (Keefe, Wesson, 1995; p. 42). The knowledge of the library, which children should master after finishing the third grade to select the material independently, was analysed. A satisfactory command of skills was marked by a plus (+) and unsatisfactory by a minus (-). The librarian evaluated the results of mastering the information literacy programme content of all pupils after the realization of regular classes and the achievements of the Roma pupils after additional classes. The results show that additional classes have contributed to their better knowledge of the library and its use.

Table: Information skills after the first three years of the primary school

Skill	Regular classes		Additional classes
	Other	Roma	Roma
<i>Citizenship:</i>			
Behavior	+	-	+
Care of books	+	-	+
Borrow books	+	-	+
Return books	+	-	+
<i>Location</i>			
Locate primary	+	-	+
Locate fiction	+	-	+
Locate nonfiction	+	-	+
Locate magazine	+	-	+
Locate computers	+	+	+
Locate AV	+	+	+
<i>Define kinds of books</i>			
Fiction and nonfiction	+	-	-
<i>How books are arranged</i>			
Fiction	+	-	-
Nonfiction	+	-	-
<i>Eguipment</i>			
Computer	-	-	-
<i>Automated catalog</i>			
Arrangement of catalogs	-	-	-
<i>Parts of a book</i>			
Title page	+	-	+
Table of contents	+	-	+
Index	+	-	-
<i>Using parts of book</i>			
Title page	+	-	+
Index	+	-	-

Balant reported (2006) that only two Roma pupils visited the library on their own to borrow books before the project, the others visited the library only with the group. During the group's visit, they showed indifference, lack of interest, mistrust, and a feeling of being threatened because of their poor literacy. The librarian realized that they were not willing to express their views, feelings and experience, and that she could not develop a positive attitude toward the library and reading while they had been integrated into the non-Roma majority.

Therefore, the librarian prepared additional separate classes with a special programme for them. Once a week, the librarian invited the Roma pupils to attend the lessons and she communicated with them in the Slovene language. She started the lesson with a speech or a social motive game for concentration and relaxation. The main focus was on her reading and the closest contact with the pupils and the book, and then after reading, expressing one's feelings. The following principles of operation were considered:

- selection of subjects and activities from the real world (contents which are close to the child),
- a complex discussion (hearing, speaking, reading, writing),
- reading various types of texts (fiction and non-fiction) as the expert suggested (Pečjak 1999; p. 57).

The problem was the isolation and associated stigma and this model of work was declared as segregation (Novljan 2007). But it was effective for the enhancement of reading and using the library as showed in the Table, and the librarian reported (Balant 2006) that the Roma children have:

- realized that books are intended for reading
- enjoyed in listening and reading
- pretended to read
- attempted to write
- learnt the alphabet
- known the relation between the letter and the sound
- read independently with the limited number of words
- recognized the pictures in a book
- been motivated for the classes
- visited the library and used the library material: 58 of 85 Roma pupils have started to visit the library regularly, and every week they have borrowed three to five books on their own. They have learnt what the library is, they respect the rules, and for them, the library is mainly the librarian they know.

## **Conclusion**

Knowledge of the library enables a self-confident use of its material and services. The Slovene school librarians have been paying ever more attention to teaching the information and library skills. The research on reading literacy shows, however, that they have not yet succeeded to develop literacy at the expected level by all pupils. In this group, there can also be some pupils with special needs. This research was performed to illustrate one of the groups with special needs. The way of integration of the Roma children into the library needs to be paid a special attention. The Roma children must be treated as a special group of library users. Keefe, Wesson said (1995, p.17) that "Inclusion means more than providing access to facilities. Physical presence in the library, especially in the school library media center, is not

enough. In order to include special needs students in a meaningful way, many aspects of their activity in the library should be considered; instructional strategies to help them learn skills associated with the library, selection of material appropriate for all students, and helping students interact with each other in a positive manner.«

The librarians must know how to adapt to the needs of young users who are not yet able to read, and what kind of activities should be organized for them. With its library stock and methods of work, the library can satisfy young users' needs. In Slovenia, the positive impact of library work can be noticed in our case, where children can exercise their own rights in libraries through:

- a stimulative library environment (collection and a programme of events)
- a qualitative provision of material and services (irreproachable material regarding contents and artistic, linguistic and musical image)
- a respectful relationship (the adequacy of material and services and the way of operation)
- a personal attention (individual addressing)
- a selection and freedom of choice (different types of material: formats and contents, open access)
- a companionship (enough space for groups)
- safety (irreproachability of substances used, place, equipment, a librarian)
- comfort and kindness.

Minority groups have special needs: preservation of language, preservation of culture, promotion of culture, and the Roma groups also need to develop literacy and socialization. As our example shows, the special method can be successful. Stigmatization due to additional lessons has been lightened by the final success. However, we do recommend introduction of the majority group into the group of Roma children and inclusion of the characteristics of the Roma culture into the content of the information literacy programme. The development of reading culture and information literacy can be more effective through co-operation between school and public libraries, and teachers and librarians respectively. They could all use certain equal strategies of presentation, classification and evaluation of reading materials. By working together, it would be also easier for them to motivate parents for co-operation, inform them about the activities and gain their support for the inclusion of children into educational and cultural activities.

Finally, there are also some benefits for the librarians from particular services for people with specific needs. Advantages of integrating diversity into regular library activities are: understanding other people, freedom of choice, better professional library administration and management, constant inflow of new library material, provision of new services and methods of work. Librarians should often operate differently by meeting special needs within general public library services to bring into force equality of user's rights. However, choice of methods should not lead to stigmatization of differences but to understanding and acceptance.

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