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Bringing Libraries and Books Closer to Children during the War - UNICEF projects in Croatia

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Abstract

In these pages we are going to make a presentation about how Croatian librarians helped children to cope with the consequences of war in Croatia – former Yugoslavia. In the beginning of 1993, UNICEF supported a library psycho- social rehabilitation project called " Step by Step (12 Steps) to Recovery " in cooperation with the Public Libraries of Zagreb. The project involved 22 libraries in 14 cities throughout Croatia, with 2732 children participating.

For the first time UNICEF in Croatia started to support psycho – social programm.

Before that UNICEF supported health, nutrition and education. Beside that psycho-social oriented programme, UNICEF supported educational and advocacy projects, as well as projects on child rights promotion and education in children's and school libraries, offered by local experts.

It is estimated that four hundred thousand children in Croatia have become direct or indirect victims of war. During the intense war in 1991/92 and prolonged war activities in areas along the borderline of the country lasting until 1995, children were exposed to various forms of suffering. The most tragic was wounding and killing of children, caused by weapons and war devastation. Refugees, displaced, desertion from homes, life in poor hygienic and sanitary condition, separations from parents, loss of a parent, impoverishment of the family, have affected a great number of children and reflected on their growth and development for a long time.

In 1992 UNICEF began emergency intervention which also included psychosocial rehabilitation of traumatised children. Various projects of capacity building of care providers to deal with trauma were initiated and implemented since 1992. The project "Twelve Steps to Recovery", or the "Library project" was born within the project "Psychosocial Rehabilitation in School". A group of creative experts, mainly psychologists and librarians, realised that public libraries were a peaceful spot in besieged cities where people could gather, bring their children and look for a secure environment and the consolation of reading. "Step by Step to Recovery" has been implemented since then in 22 libraries all over Croatia where traumatised children's souls were healed by experienced and trained librarians in "Step by Step" guided activities. Library project proved to be far more than just a set of art therapy techniques used for trauma healing. Creativity stimulated during the session, the atmosphere of hope, tolerance and peace created by children during these workshops, contributed to the quality of life of many more children other than those involved in the project groups. Benefits varied among the places in Croatia where several librarians enriched their own experience and felt strongly motivated for this type of work with children. Finally, the road "Step by Step to Recovery" contributed to paving the way for implementation and protection of basic rights which were rudely violated during the war.

It has become a focal point for children traumatised by war, their voice, a collection of stories, poems and drawings in which children have expressed their greatest joys, their deepest fears and a vision of how they see their future.

The project Step by Step to Recovery, which began in 1993 was initiated by well-known art therapist and psychologist Dr. Arpad Barath, a member of the Institute of Psychology, at Zagreb's Faculty of Medicine, and librarian and bibliotherapist M. A. Ljiljana Sabljak from the City Library of Zagreb. The concept involves using the library environment as the most conducive for art therapy work with children. The projects incorporate the use of psychological discussion and games, drama and puppet therapy, computer games, art and bibliotherapy. The project took place in 14 cities throughout Croatia, involving 22 libraries, with 2732 children participating. Librarians, pedagogues, teachers and psychologists worked with children, mostly with refugee and displaced, helping them express their post-traumatic stress and negative emotions and transform them into creative works.

The achieved results were inspiring. The range of tested trauma-related symptoms by 73 %. Children were delighted in the opportunity to have a voice, a medium to express themselves, even the most withdrawn. Many of them introverted, anxious, suffering from shock and antisocial behaviour at the beginning of the programme, truly found a place and expression by the end of the therapy.

The creative process guided reading of bibliotherapy facilitate by a series of 12 steps psychological and creative techniques lead the children to problem solving, recognising and developing their goals and finding their own individual and collective path towards a positive growth towards future. According to the project, 22 libraries involved in it, received a basic set of the unique manual for care providers in the field of psychosocial care has included a whole range of new experiences that has been completed since the project was first implemented in 1994, four audio-cassettes of selected segments from books for the library therapy work with children and the library therapy list of literature for different age groups and for the performance of all the 12 steps.

On the occasion of UNICEF's 50th Anniversary 1996 the Mobile Exhibition on the 12 steps was prepared followed by the text of the Convention on the Rights of Child. The project Step by Step to Recovery was given an International award for innovating approach to the reading by IRA (International Reading Association, Dublin, 2001).

At the same time UNICEF in Croatia supported other library and book projects. These projects are:

- "In the World of the Fairy Tales of Ivana Brlić- Mažuranić" (Croatian famous writer for children). It reached more than 20 000 children in 15 war-affected towns in Croatia, representatives of which were present at the workshops every year in different town. They also included librarians and

teachers from the pilot groups who disseminated skills and built the capacities of local teachers in primary schools in war-affected areas. It began in Slavonski Brod, a town on the East part of Croatia, on the war frontier, involving intensive training, workshops, performances, talks, shows and numerous of other activities.

- "Early Childhood Care and Development" is a project whose goal is to promote the development of an organised out-of-family programmes for pre-school children and programmes for parents. The manual "Early Childhood Care and Development in the Republic of Croatia" was developed. For that purpose, the centres for parents are planned to be organised as examples of overall programmes for both children and parents, providing a better care for family in local community. Some public libraries participated in the project by opening playroom activities for pre-schoolers in children's libraries.
- "Education for Development, Co-operation and Tolerance in School and Children's Libraries" is a project which is realised with an aim to promote education for development, tolerance, peaceful conflict resolution and co-operation in 31 school and children's (public) libraries. Seminars are organised, a bulletin for librarians is regularly published, the professional literature for librarians is supplied and several libraries are equipped with the literature for children and with didactic and art materials. Librarians all over Croatia were trained in peaceful conflict resolution skills and communication skills.
- "Promotion of the Rights of the Child" is a project in which lecturers of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb and the officers of the Ministry of Education and Sports take part, preparing, within the project, a handbook for teachers called "Promoting Rights of the Child". The project involved 10 primary schools - teachers and school librarians. The manual has been produced containing the text about child rights in library.

Why projects of this kind should be applied to public libraries?

Public libraries in Croatia, especially in big towns are organised in a network of libraries, like networks of primary schools. They become a kind of a cultural centres, in addition to having the traditional information and life-long learning function.

The librarian's job has two components:

- keeping up with and processing new editions, ensuring access to information (informative task)
- offering and organising various activities for attracting children and stimulating them to read, creating a pleasant atmosphere in which they can learn and spend their spare time creatively.

For this reason public libraries have become a natural place for psychosocial programmes with bibliotherapy and other expressive technique applications, because of their basic purpose, equipment and professional part of their everyday activity of working with those who can use this psychosocial structure, especially with children.

We have come to this conclusion:

1. Public libraries, in addition to their traditional education and information role, have recently become institution for self-education and local cultural centres. They also become places for self-help groups.
2. During the war in Croatia from 1991 to 1994 public libraries were permanently open to users. They had a 100 % increase in the number of their users, a real boom in readers.
3. Librarians have founded themselves facing the problem of what to offer to so many users who spontaneously turned towards the book as a source of information and also as a kind of therapy in sociological terms.

How books can help displaced and banished children brought out many difficulties and problems. Under the treat of war destruction of their homes and their lives, they had fled, leaving their home, friends and neighbours. They left behind their favourite toys, books, familiar playgrounds, they did not even have time to take pets with them.

We have realised that if we want to help children, we have to discuss their problems and to organise the new way of life. The usual creative technique we use is bibliotherapy which includes the following processes.

- a) IDENTIFICATION- which is the most important, because without it none of the following processes can be followed up. That is why the choice of text, i.e. literary work is extremely important.
- b) PROJECTION- the reader projects himself and his feelings into the character he identifies with, and through this character's eyes examines his own views and the reaction of other people. It is a reliable way of examining one's own and other people's behaviour, as well as of trying out alternative ways of solving certain problems.
- c) CATHARSIS- by sharing emotions with the character the reader identifies himself/herself with, he can achieve emotional exoneration.
- d) INTROSPECTION- through the conflict in the text, the reader can recognise his own problems, which could be the key to its solution.

Some UNICEF-supported programmes are now being run by national rather than international NGO's like "Naša Djeca" (Our Children). Some of them became a part of "National Program of Human Rights Education" in which school and public librarians are participating.

Bibliotherapy project "Step by Step to Recovery" lives till nowadays like a creative reading program for children and young adults trying to solve their everyday problems. It is implemented in public libraries in various ways, like in City Library of Zagreb in programmes "Reading on the Other Way" and "Guided Reading through Yours Problems".

It is important to stress that UNICEF does not offer completed projects to local institutions, but it only supports those which are offered from experts in those countries where UNICEF is active.

During the war in Croatia local librarians and psychological experts were the first who offered their projects to UNICEF to be financially and sometimes organisationally supported, and many of them were accepted. For the first time UNICEF supported psychosocial, educational and advocacy programmes, because of the situation in Croatia. There were medical and nutrition goods and experts who worked well, as it is usual for UNICEF's programme. The country was not all demolished, there were parts without war destruction, but Croatia had more than 400 000 refugees and displaced people (most of them were children) even from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It was a great need for psychosocial support and Croatian experts, supported by UNICEF gave all their knowledge and creative capacities on that field.