
In-house library training program supporting Roma people – the power of networking in local community

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Abstract:

After years of organising various library activities for Roma children and teenagers (multicultural workshops, computer courses, literary meetings, book exhibitions), the librarians of Public library of Koprivnica, Croatia have initiated and started to organise in-house library training programs on cultural and educational competencies, and knowledge about Roma people. Their purpose was to overcome the gap between the school and society requirements to Roma children coming from deprived families on one side and partial and insufficient knowledge of teachers and librarians about their needs on the other side. The aim of the in-house training programs is networking of professionals from various sectors in local community, working on daily basis with Roma children and youth.

The final goal is building tolerance and tearing down prejudice against Roma population, as well as supporting better quality life chances to Roma children through formal and informal ways of education, and helping them to get included in the life of local community and society in general.

This article aims at presenting the impacts of in-house training programs on cultural and educational competencies and knowledge about Roma people based on sharing knowledge and practices of professionals coming from various working fields in local community, NGOs and local government. It embodies an important question: how to work on issues of the Roma social integration and inclusion to respect, protect, support and realize their national, cultural, educational, social and all other personal and economic rights and interests?

Keywords: the Roma, in-house library training, public library, social inclusion, social integration

1. Introduction

1.1. Romani population in Europe

The Roma are the largest ethnic minority group in Europe with an estimated population of 10 - 12 million people. Their exact number is unknown because of the Roma nomadic history and contacts with a large number of peoples and languages. Since their arrival in Europe from India, some 700 years ago, they have been politically, socially, culturally and economically

marginalised by the dominant population. Despite their position as a “non-territorial people”, they have their own history, culture, and language.

1.2. The Roma population in Croatia

The data on the presence of the Roma in Croatia dates from the 14th century (Babić, Škiljan and Župarić-Iljić, 2011, pp. 21-22). Today they are one of 22 national minorities in Croatia. According to the 2011 Census in the Republic of Croatia there are 4,284,889 inhabitants; the share of all national minorities amounts to 7.67%, while the share of Roma is 0.40% or 16,975. However, it is estimated that the actual number of Roma in Croatia is between 30 and 40 thousand because many of them either did not participate in the Census from various reasons (for example, migrations) or declared themselves as Croats due to discrimination or assimilation (Babić, Škiljan and Župarić-Iljić, 2011, p. 118). However, in the last few years the Republic of Croatia has launched programs of accelerated integration of the Roma in Croatian society through a variety of social, educational and community projects, so they can freely identify with their ethnic origin (The Status of Romani population in the Republic of Croatia, 2011). Their legal status is regulated by the Croatian Constitution, the Constitutional Law on National Minorities in the Republic of Croatia and the National Program for the Roma. Roma rights as ethnic minority also protects Anti-Discrimination Act and international regulations such as *The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* and the European Convention on Human Rights.

According to Spajić-Vrkaš (2013), there is a so called institutional gap between legislation and its implementation into institutions on national, regional and local levels. Štambuk (2005b, p. 243) found that the existing institutional mechanism cannot be (completely) effective in the social inclusion of the Roma. Basic rights to employment, health protection, social welfare protection and other rights for the Roma should also be included. This is not (only) connected with the Roma as members of an ethnic minority but members of a minority whose behaviour markedly differs from others. This is evident because of traditional elements that are prevalent in their everyday social, family and working life. Novak (2004, pp. 403-432) has also found institutional gap or relative success of international institutions in the protection of human and minority rights of the Roma community.

Similar to many other countries in Europe and all over the world, the Roma community in Croatia in most cases has lacked social emancipation and social development. A large number of illiterate or poorly educated, a specific way of life and economy, and the very beginning of the Roma community establishment in political sense, make difficulties for the integration of Roma into society, even for younger generations. Besides, a substantial disunion among the Roma themselves it is still present, which yields a large number of their associations and lack of coordinated action (Tatalović, 2005, p. 81).

According to Štambuk (2005b, p. 242), lack of life and material conditions (low standard of living, housing, financial sources, poor quality of life) is expressed as a disqualifying factor, where discriminatory components are reflected in incapability in the field of education, employment, the broader social and political integration. The result is a position of isolation and marginalisation in society. Šučur (2005, p. 377), has also found the connection of poverty and unemployment, low educational achievements, and a large number of children among Roma families is considerably stronger than among the non-Roma.

According to Mišćević (2005, p. 362), the substantial problem that consequently burden all aspects of the Romani community life is a low level of education. The low level of education, which diminishes chances (not only for Roma) for employment and improvement of their life standard, is a cause and key solution to their problems. "Finishing school" is at the bottom on their scale of values, while poverty is accepted as a feature of the group and used as an identity marker that pushes other typical cultural features such a folklore, customs, language, trades, etc. into the background.

1.3. The Roma in local context

Despite the fact that in the 2011 Census only 149 inhabitants or 0.48% population had declared themselves as the Roma in town Koprivnica there are some 300 socially excluded Roma residents within the Koprivnica town limits. They live in suburban areas in a traditional way in their everyday social, family and working life, characterised by high unemployment, poverty and occasional migrations. Roma children coming from hard social and impoverished backgrounds are deprived from the start, being in an inferior position to their peers in classrooms. They are often exposed to prejudice, stereotypes and stigma and they do not speak Croatian very well. Their difficult position in the classroom is best described by this teacher's quote which came from a discussion during our first in-house library training program supporting Roma people organised by the Public library "Fran Galović" Koprivnica, Croatia, April 6, 2010: "it is hard to end up in unfamiliar environment, with school teacher that does not understand you and nobody at home to help you with homework."

2. The public library role in social inclusion

According to Sabolović-Krajina (2011), the main contribution of public libraries in social inclusion of vulnerable social groups in local communities is based on the platform of human equal rights to information. Such a task is primarily founded on the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1997) and the IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines (Koontz & Gubbin, 2011). Public libraries try to act in accordance with changes within society offering solutions to the problems.

Since 2003, in Croatian libraries there has been discussion on the role of public libraries in social inclusion, highlighting the context of exclusion from information society. However, Croatian strategic documents do not mention library social inclusion potentials in helping citizens join and participate in the information society. Nevertheless, many Croatian public libraries have individual initiatives to promote libraries, especially the public libraries, as places of social inclusion.

2.1. Public library "Fran Galović" in Koprivnica

The public library "Fran Galović" in Koprivnica is a medium-sized Croatian library, serving the area of the town of Koprivnica with 32 thousand inhabitants and Koprivnica-Krizevci County with population of 122 thousand. It is situated in the north-western, industrially most developed part of the country. The library has 22 employees in total (16 of them being professional staff).

The library acts as a local community cultural, information, social and communication centre that supports education, lifelong learning and creative leisure-time activities of citizens of all ages and socio-professional interests and needs.

The library's strategy is expressed with the slogans *Literacy for all* and *Libraries open to everyone* and demonstrated by supporting social inclusion of the handicapped and socially marginalized into the local community and society in general, raising local community solidarity and awareness to their needs. These are amongst the Library's priority initiatives. Besides print disabled, persons with physical or mental disabilities, elderly and unemployed, several of the Library's programs are dedicated to the Roma, especially children, teenagers and youth.

2.2. Library programs for Roma children and youth

The action plan of the Croatian Government *Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 -2015* on national level frames the library programs for the Roma.¹ Additionally, at the community level *Local Agenda 21* is a long-term program of sustainable development that aims at improving the quality of life in Koprivnica in the next 10 to 20 years. Roma ethnic minority issues are among the priorities in the planned development of Koprivnica town.

In 2000, the Koprivnica Library began to raise awareness of Roma people's needs, their language and culture by organising exhibitions from library book collections on Roma topics.

From 2003 onwards, the Library has been celebrating April 8, World Roma Day, on annual basis. Various library activities like workshops and cultural meetings have been organised. Their integrative character, i.e. gathering both Roma and non-Roma children and teenagers, aims at development of mutual trust, understanding and tolerance. Topics of such events include children's rights and their abuse, learning about Roma history, anthem, language, music and dance, poetry readings both in Roma and Croatian languages, telling folk tales from the Roma tradition, meetings with writers who write about Roma people and their way of life, introducing librarians, their work, library services and the mobile library. So far, all of these programs have attracted some 500 Roma and non-Roma children, and they are carried out in collaboration with Roma associations and local elementary schools from Koprivnica and its vicinity.

In 2007 a *Roma corner* was established in collaboration with the Roma association *Romane droma* in Zagreb. It is a collection of around 200 books for children and adults (fiction and non-fiction, that deals with Roma themes and topics on different expert levels; the books are written in Roma language and a few other languages as well).

In 2011 the basic computer and information literacy training for all library users was started, including groups of Roma elementary school pupils and Roma young adults without elementary school attending local Open university.²

¹ The World Bank implemented a Decade of Roma inclusion, started in 2005 and lasts until 2015. It is the first time that the European countries have worked together to improve the lives of the Roma people. The 12 countries participating are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Spain. Each country features a fairly high Roma population. The aim of project is to improve the lives and socio-economic status of this often discriminated against group of people. There are four community-based target areas of Roma inclusion: education, employment, health and housing (*Decade of Roma inclusion 2005-2015*. Retrieved from <http://www.romadecade.org>)

² At the beginning of 2013 the Library has won the prestigious, international EIFL-PLIP award for this service named "Jump in the Train for a Better World". It provides free access to information and communication technology and ICT training for Roma living in Koprivnica. (See: *Europe winner – Public*

All these activities resulted in Roma children, teenagers and young people starting to use the library and recognising that the Library is an unthreatening environment for learning and leisure time activities. Together with other children and young people, they spend their time off, playing and doing homework using computers, reading children's magazines, borrowing DVD movies, and sometimes the books too. Their computer and information literacy skills have improved. Roma young adults use computers in the Library mainly for internet browsing and social networking and because they do not have them at home.

2.3. In-house library training program supporting Roma people

After years of organising various library activities for Roma children and teenagers (multicultural workshops, computer courses, literary meetings, book exhibitions), in 2010 in-house library training programs on cultural and educational competencies, and knowledge paradigms of Roma people were initiated and organised by the librarians of the public library of Koprivnica. In their years of long collaboration with schools and non-government organisations (NGOs), the librarians have recognized that not only Roma children but teachers and other professionals need help.

The purpose of this action and self-organisation between the librarians, teachers and other professionals in local communities through in-library service regarding the Roma needs is to overcome the gap between the school and society requirements to Roma children coming from deprived families on one side, and partial and insufficient knowledge of teachers and librarians about their needs, on the other side.

As a need to create a more systematic and organised approach in working with Roma children on local level, since 2010 the non-formal networking of professionals from various sectors in community has been started, working on daily basis with Roma children and youth in the various forms of in-house training program.

The local kindergarten, school and the Open university teachers, librarians, social workers, members of county Roma people associations have been gathering at meetings, round tables and workshops in library. The purpose has been to share knowledge and practices of professionals coming from various working fields in local community.

2.3.1. Topics of in-house library training on Roma

Central topics of in-house library training, which was named *Experiences in work with Roma children in kindergartens, schools and libraries in Koprivnica district* during 2010-2013 were:

- 1st round table *Roma children in classrooms and libraries* (April 6, 2010)
The importance of spreading awareness in the wider local community on the difficult position of marginalized Roma people, especially impoverished Roma children entering into a regular education system has been stressed. Roma children suffer from the lack of the Croatian language knowledge and pre-school skills and knowledge (i.e. required level of abstractive thinking, social and communication skills and health habits). Therefore individual teachers' and librarians' experiences and practices in the education of Roma students have been

exchanged and discussed. Especially, the status of Romani female students was discussed, because they bear a double burden, of both racial and gender discrimination.³

- 2nd round table *Roma children in kindergartens* (April 5, 2011)

The importance of including preschool Roma children into preschool educational programs, both in rural and urban communities, has been recognised. The aim is to create equal presumptions to bridge the gap between Roma and non-Roma children before entering into school system. Many Roma parents are uneducated and illiterate and do not recognise the importance of education. Roma children often do not have their support to attend and finish school. Besides, their living conditions and way of life do not encourage them in schooling. Therefore the cooperation between school teachers, social workers and local authority bodies with Roma parents was stressed as a priority, as well as necessity of Roma associations' assistance and engagement. All municipalities in the County should support a systematic, sustained and equal inclusion of Roma children in pre-school programs and educational system in order to avoid “good” or “bad” will of their mayors. Town, County and municipalities have been identified as the responsible factors in finding financial and organisational solutions.

- 3rd round table *Roma assistants in classroom* (March 27, 2012)

The importance of the Roma assistants in kindergartens and classrooms has been stressed. Local Open university practice in training and acquiring Roma assistant qualifications was presented as well as experiences of the educated Roma assistant in classrooms and assisted school teachers and principals.

The Roma assistants in kindergartens and classrooms are very important to the quality integration of Roma children into education system. They are *the bridge* between the Roma children and teachers' not only in learning Croatian language, but also in everyday communication with Roma parents, and avoiding behaviour problems of Roma children and youth. They could be a positive model role to deprived Roma children and youth how to escape from vicious circle of poverty by education.⁴

- 4th round table *Inter- and in-sectors cooperation: best practices and future challenges* (April 10, 2013)

³ According Perić (2005), Romani women are discriminated as “Gypsies” by the majority society, which views them as members of a marginalised and often despised group. However, at home, Romani women are often considered inferior on the basis of their gender in a community that is led almost exclusively by men. The pressure of the Roma community will force many young Romani women to leave school in their prepubescent years in order to get married. At the same time, in the education process, Romani girls also face the risk of segregation in education, being placed in so-called special schools for children with mental disabilities, or discriminated by their non-Romani peers and/or teachers. Because of their lack of formal education and racial discrimination in hiring procedures, but also because of the pressure of families that do not always consider it proper for women to work outside the home, a vast majority of Romani women are unemployed.

⁴ Despite the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sport in 2002 deciding to introduce Roma assistants in schools with Roma pupils from first to fourth grade as an answer to the common problems of the education of Roma children - falling grades, unjustified absences from school, dropping out, and poor knowledge of the Croatian language, funding has not been secured. This is an example of previous mentioned *institutional gap* in implementation the well-regulated legislation into practical life. Therefore, employment of the Roma assistants as a crucial problem in local community was open.

The problem of financing implementation of a special preschool program introduced by the same Ministry in preparation children aged three to seven years was also stressed at the round table.

The importance of partnership among government, non-government and private sectors in well-being of the Roma in local community was discussed. Recognizing and defining the problems at the local level is crucial, including the Roma, their associations, municipalities, kindergartens and schools in partnership with local libraries and centres for social and family care. Various experiences and practices of professionals, institutions, for the first time local authorities, Roma and other civic organizations were presented and show how to bridge gaps in practical implementation of strategic documents on national, regional and local levels.

2.3.2. Impacts of in-house library training on Roma

There are direct or indirect positive effects on micro- and macro local level, but also in the wider society:

- Professionals in the local community now have forums that enable them to learn each from others, exchange their professional experiences, good practices or simply link together with other individuals, with local authorities and local government in solving common problems together.
- Owing to common efforts of local authorities and the Employment service Roma assistants have been employed, but not permanent.
- Public institutions like libraries, schools, kindergartens, the Centre for Social Work, the Family centre and the Employment service have established stronger mutual links with the local Roma associations as the most important bridge in common solving problems of Roma children and parents.
- The Roma associations have established better link with the Town and the County authorities in funding its programs and premises.
- The town authority has launched EU funded projects for Roma women.
- Better links were established between school teachers and social workers, and the Roma associations and the Employment centre.
- Other NGOs, for example a local NGO for disabled people, has helped the Roma Association leaders by knowledge transfer about organisational skills and competencies, primarily in preparing projects and applying for grants, in order to come up with funds for Roma, and in line with the action plan of the Croatian Government *Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 -2015*.
- The efforts of the Public library are recognised and awarded on international level. The direct impact of this award is local and national publicity that contribute to spreading the knowledge on the role of public libraries in social inclusion and well-being of community and wider society.
- Non-Roma inhabitants now have more information about the Roma backgrounds, problems and need, as a way to break prejudices and stereotypes against them.

All of the abovementioned effects are slow, more or less visible. They are part of the small step library strategy, expecting shifts in the long term.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of in-service library training is not only to help teachers and librarians to cope with problems in everyday work with Roma students, but to help local authorities to develop and implement a concept to help the Roma population, especially children in local community (i.e. to create strategy of improving Romani status).

In-service library training contributes by enriching the information and data on marginal groups as well as motivating and inspiring ideas on solving problems, including problems on ethnic and cultural identity. It is one of the ways to establish mutual trust between the Roma and the majority population. The starting point is that problems are on the both side and that it is worth acting on both sides to reduce or eliminate prejudices, stereotypes and intolerance. Besides, in-service library training aims at integrating the Roma into social environment to respect, protect, support and realize their national, cultural, educational, social, and all other personal and economic rights and interests.

The positive effects of programs are not visible immediately. They are parts of a small step strategy, expecting impacts in the long run.

Library initiatives both in service for Roma children and youth and in-service library training contribute to the social inclusion of Roma people, as well as to the development of mutual trust, understanding and tolerance in local community. The final aim is to improve the life chances to deprived Roma children through formal and informal forms of education as the way to more easily inclusion into the local community and society in general.

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