



## Multicultural Dialogue in the School Library

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**Abstract:** These days a sudden and wide growth in number of migrant pupils is recorded in many countries and it is already starting to have a strong influence on the education systems. The one place which holds an important role in developing multicultural dialogue is the school library due to its numerous resources of literature in different languages and because it encourages work with youngsters using various and new teaching methods. Each library is the meeting point of different generations and different cultures. If there are many immigrants living in its surroundings it is important for the school library to operate with a view to meeting the needs of both the young newcomers as well as their parents.

**Keywords:** immigrants, literacy, mother tongue, picture books.

### Introduction

The national territory of the Republic of Slovenia has traditionally and historically been settled by Italian and Hungarian national communities and the ethnic community of Roma. There are also people migrating into the country. Until 1991, Slovenia was a part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia – people looking for work here thus often come from other former Yugoslav republics: Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYROM and Serbia. Everyone coming from a different cultural background must be given the opportunity to be successfully included in the new environment and to foster their native culture in this environment. There are pupils of different nationalities in Slovene schools, too.

I work at a small primary school in Ljubljana, where 95 percent of the pupils are of nationalities other than Slovene. Most of them come from the countries of former Yugoslavia. There are more school-age children living in the district of the school, but many parents do not wish for their children to attend this particular school – only less than a half of the school-age children in the district enrol there. The majority of the pupils are second generation immigrants. Every year there are 20 to 30 children enrolling to the school who have never been to Slovenia before.

During breaks, children mostly interact in their respective mother tongues. To them, Slovene is a second/foreign language; however, they are required to demonstrate the same standard of knowledge and use the same textbooks as their Slovene counterparts do. Proficiency in mother tongue plays a crucial role in learning a second/foreign language. However, since pupils at the school are mostly culturally deprived they lack such proficiency and often start learning to read and write their second language (i.e. Slovene) even before they



have started learning it in their mother tongues. They can thus find no support in their first language. Such language deficits undoubtedly affect their opportunities for being successful in school. Behavioural and emotional disorders in unsuccessful students often occur due to their poor literacy.

### **Importance of well-developed literacy**

The most important mission of primary education is to develop literacy skills. Well developed literacy skills are the fundamental tool for functioning in a society and greatly influence the quality of life. Or to rephrase this in the words of Cécile Ladjali (Zgonik, 2009: 26): “Language is our home. Words are our flesh. Without them we are bare and bloodless”. If we understand a language well, we can better understand the nation and the customs of its people. Socialization of immigrants is therefore closely related to their language proficiency.

When discussing the literacy of children we must also address the literacy of their parents. At our school we strive to find ways to include parents with poor comprehension of Slovene. Since parents must be able to use the language proficiently if they wish to help their children with their schoolwork, we organise special courses for them.

At schools, the question whether our pupils really do understand us is not raised often enough. Not only immigrant pupils, many pupils of Slovene nationality, too, have comprehension problems. Textbooks are too demanding for them and they often do not read the instructions for solving a problem careful enough. Expanding the vocabulary of pupils and encouraging them to listen intently and to try to understand what they have just read are very important missions of every school.

International researches indicate that differences between children with well developed communication skills and those with a lack of them will further increase in the years of schooling. In *Jezikovno in medkulturno ozaveščanje v šoli*, a journal on linguistic and intercultural awareness issues in schools, Ms Fidler, the coordinator of *Ja-Ling* project (Janua Linguarum – the Gate to Languages), quotes a report by Lord Bullock, president of the Committee of Inquiry into Reading and the Use of English (Jezikovno, 2004: 9): “Pupils who began schooling with inadequately developed communication skills have failed to develop them in classes and so the gap between these pupils and those who had developed these skill before starting school has increased year by year”. This does not hold true only for British schools. We should systematically work on developing children’s vocabulary even before they



reach school age, as we see that their vocabulary is oftentimes so restricted that it is impossible to teach them to read and write without additional problems arising. It is therefore important to raise parents' awareness of the importance of reading and to give children access to quality children's books already in nursery schools.

### **Role of the school library**

According to an international research on reading literacy, school libraries play an important role in improving reading skills of children.

In the school library, pupils can learn about the richness of cultures and customs of different nations through reading and discussing it. We thus encourage them to think about what it means to be different. Each library is the meeting point of different generations and different cultures. If there are many immigrants in the surroundings, it is important for the school library to operate with a view to meeting the needs of both the young newcomers as well as their parents.

School library is a place of dialogue – dialogue between pupils themselves, between pupils and the librarian, between the librarian and teachers, between the librarian and pupils' parents. On 8<sup>th</sup> February, the Slovene day of culture, we celebrate the greatest Slovene poet, France Prešeren. But do we give pupils of other nationalities the opportunity to tell us who the most respected poet of their countries is? We must bear in mind that our work is based on respecting values and views which are different from ours. Second generation immigrant pupils are typically torn between two different cultures and therefore often burdened with identity issues.



Dialogue between the librarian and a young reader holds the central position in a youth library. Pupils sense whether we are capable of empathy and whether we respect them or not. Are our messages clear enough so that they can understand them? Are the non-verbal messages in harmony with the verbal ones? Do we place sufficient emphasis on ensuring social inclusion? The latter can be an effective motivation to learn and study more eagerly.

Youngsters do appreciate it, if we are familiar with new books and if we are able to present them in an attractive manner. However, we must bear in mind that a reader may have different expectations and experience than the librarian. A book that really moved us may leave youngsters indifferent. In such a dialogue alone certain misunderstandings, contradictions and lack of understanding another's points of view may already occur. In a library which is frequented by pupils of different nationalities, being tolerant and open in dialogue is even more important.

I wish to demonstrate it to the pupils that we have much in common, but that we are also different in many aspects. I find support for developing the ability to identify and accept both the common things and the differences between us in quality children's books. I take children to book fairs, book presentations and meet-the-author events. I also organize book exhibitions and prepare quizzes on literature in the library. For each year from 1 to 5 I prepare a "book satchel" – I put 4 books in a satchel, along with a notebook in which pupils can either note or draw their thoughts on and impressions about the books after they have read them. Every pupil can borrow the satchel intended for their year for a week.

Pupils also read in the framework of the Reading Badge program. This form of promotion of reading has a 50-year tradition in Slovenia. Pupils read five books of their choice or five books from a recommended reading list and discuss them at book debates. Come the end of a school year, each pupil who participated in that year's program is awarded the Reading Badge, and all who participated in the program in each of their school years also receive a book. Every year the event is moderated by a renowned author or illustrator. Special awards are presented to pupils who read the most books. Parents are also invited to attend the event.



Our school library welcomes not only pupils, but their parents as well. I encourage the parents to come to the library on Tuesday afternoons, so that they can borrow some reading and that we can talk a little about how to encourage their children to read. I also organise two regular monthly afternoon activities for them: fairy tale hours which they can attend together with their children and a book club for adults.

However, it does not suffice to organize activities only for the immigrants; Slovene children, too, must begin to grasp that differences between us enrich our lives. Prejudices are deep-rooted, and in times of economic crises the level of intolerance towards immigrants increases. In this respect, systematic work with all children is of crucial importance.

### **Didactic materials and picture books for working with children**

All of us who work with children with language deficits are in need of materials which contain a large amount of illustrations, as these enable pupils to expand their vocabulary in terms of learning synonyms and antonyms, as well as developing the sense of intonation patterns, rhymes, the initial and the final sounds in a word, length of words, number of syllables, etc. A pupil will first develop the vocabulary pertaining to his or her basic needs and cognitive world. A child whose mother tongue is other than Slovene will gradually develop the ability to talk about events or happenings, describe pictures and take active part in role playing. After such pupils have mastered new words, it will still take some time before they will know how to use them in new circumstances.

Teachers and librarians dealing with children whose mother tongue is other than Slovene wish to acquire more knowledge of what didactic materials are appropriate. I am also an author of didactic materials and picture books. I create exercises and illustrated stories for children's magazines *Cicido* and *Ciciban*. Both magazines put a lot of emphasis on promoting intercultural dialogue. We also recorded and published a CD of poems set to music, entitled *Sonce in sončice po vsem svetu* (*Sun and the Sunshines Around the World*), by Slovene author Tone Pavček, who has been placed on this year's IBBY Honour List. The poems are translated into Japanese, Danish, Romanian, Macedonian, Russian and Albanian.



When working with pupils from the republics of former Yugoslavia I try to look up Croatian, Serbian and Macedonian translations of Slovene fairy tales and Slovene translations of Croatian, Serbian and Macedonian fairy tales. I am also the author of a series of children's books entitled *O Jakobu in mucu Mici* (*Adventures of the Little James and Kitty the Cat*). This collection currently features a picture book entitled *Rojstni dan* (*Birthday*), and the second picture book, entitled *Novoletna smrečica* (*Christmas Tree*) will be published in autumn. The collection is illustrated by Ana Zavadlav.

The stories about the Little James and Kitty the Cat are simple, simply worded and short, and feature clear and narrative illustrations. They are suitable for children with difficulties with reading comprehension. The Slovene text is accompanied by an abundance of illustrations and printed in a very reader-friendly format so that the books are also suitable for children suffering from dyslexia. The Slovene story is followed by translations into Italian, German and Hungarian (in one volume) and Croatian, Macedonian and Roma (in another volume). Between the Slovene and the translated texts there is also a glossary of eight words from the story.

I have not created the collection on Little James and Kitty the Cat only for immigrants, representatives of ethnic minorities and Slovenes living abroad. I find it important that also Slovene children living in Slovenia would become aware that there are people living among us who do not speak our language: who name objects differently, use different intonation, different scripts. It is important that children develop this awareness already at a pre-school age. When playing and listening to stories in different languages they learn that other languages exist beside their mother tongue. This also stimulates children's interest in developing communication skills. Through systematic development of children's vocabulary and by showing them just how much communication depends on one's ability to express one's wishes and feelings, children will become aware that relationships are built with words and that it is therefore very important how successful they are in this respect.

## **Conclusion**



Europe's unique advantage lies in its cultural diversity. In order to accept and understand the latter as an advantage, we need to speak openly about it. School is an environment in which a lot can be done to promote tolerance. Quality children's and youth literature is the cornerstone of working with young readers. Schools must take a leading role in promoting intercultural dialogue and school library should be regarded as the place where such dialogue is fostered at all times. At the school where I work as the librarian we face challenges of multiculturalism every day. Slovene is not the first language of many of our pupils. We therefore organize many activities for these pupils to help them accept and even like the language of their surroundings, as it is essential for them to be able to read and write it well in order to achieve good results at school. However, we must not forget that only good knowledge of their own culture makes it possible to understand and accept other cultures as well.

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