Quality school library – how do we find out?

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Abstract

School libraries are agents of current education and an essential part of development of future life-long competences. In order to evaluate the work of school libraries, we need to establish criteria which take into account all factors affecting their quality. Center for International Scholarship and School Libraries (CISSL) at Rutgers University (USA) has developed a model of quality school library. From the point of viewof our paper, which is of methodological nature, the essential part is the development of the methodology which resulted in the model and to see how this methodology can be applied in researching the quality of school libraries in two neighboring countries, Slovenia and Croatia, where school libraries have until 1991 developed according to the same standards, guidelines and regulations, but followed different paths since then. Therefore, in the paper we discuss methodological issues related to identification of the sample of good school libraries and the possibilities of testing the CISSL model of quality school library in the two countries. We expect that the research and use of the CISSL methodology in two countries in question provide findings on possible futire research also in other countries.

Keywords: school libraries, Slovenia, Croatia, qualitative research, methodology

Introduction

Dynamic and quality school libraries enable development of information literacy competences, which are essential in the information society. Students from the earliest age need to systematically develop these lifelong learning competences to be able to learn and act as informed and responsible citizens. A quality school library plays an indispensable role in this process. There is considerable attention internationally as to what constitutes a "quality" school library, and a lot of studies have been made. These issues are made even more complex being accompanied by questions about the future sustainability and roles of school libraries as they have historically developed, and as they transform in digital environments. The ongoing development and testing of quality assessment models and frameworks are very important, in fact critical, for the school library profession.

School libraries, fundamentally equal to other libraries, have important additional tasks in the formal education and are the only libraries visited by everyone, at least during the compulsory part of their schooling. In this paper we will dedicate attention to school libraries in two neighboring countries, Slovenia and Croatia, which were until 1991 part of the same country Yugoslavia. Therefore, Croatian and Slovenian school libraries have until 1991 developed according to the same laws and standards which regulated the educational system and librarianship field. Since then the development has been partly different. But, it is reasonable to assume that even though the school libraries in the two countries differ, their development is still based on the same theoretical findings thus following the same fundamental professional guidelines. However, this is only an assumption, as no formal comparison or assessment has been made.

The question, which we are asking here, is what methodology is needed (and how it can be developed) for investigation of the quality of existing school libraries, having in mind the parameters which will enable comparative analysis in respective countries. Methodological issues, which should guide quality empirical research, too rarely come into discussion. It is more often that methodology is developed through small-scale research – its results (perhaps too limited) then serve

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as a baseline for the development of theories and concepts, and consequently also indicators of quality.

Theoretical framework and literature review

Among the educational goals according to European White Paper on Education and Training (1995), which is a base for several later documents in respective countries and on European level, special emphasis is given to competences for lifelong learning, continued personal and professional growth of individuals, and development of civic competences needed for life in the democratic society. All these competences are acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning which today is dramatically changing in relation to development and use of ICT's. Access to and processing of information are changing, which especially influences formal education. For successful learning it is essential that learners are guided through the learning process from information acquisition to knowledge production. Studies of accessing and using information for learning undoubtedly show positive links between learning achievements and quality school library (Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari, 2007; Todd, 2006; Todd and Gordon, 2010; Novljan, 2010). This means that an appropriately equipped, resourced, and staffed school library can with its program contribute to desired teaching outcomes and to better learning achievements of pupils (Znanjem do znanja, 2005; School libraries work!, 2008; Todd, 2012). Novljan (1996) proved that a school library with a professional librarian (compared to a school library with a teacher without LIS competences) helps the pupils to better learning achievements.

Standards regulating the area of school librarianship in both countries (Standardi ..., 1995; Standard ..., 2000) state that school library should be integrated in the learning / teaching and should act as an information-communication center of every school. However, it is questionable, how much school libraries actually operate in accordance with these statements and what are their actual outcomes. Identification of factors of quality should go beyond such general principles.

We are aware of grounded theories which clearly define quality factors of school libraries (Todd & Kuhlthau, s.a.), while in Slovenia and Croatia no comprehensive studies have yet been done to verify these theoretically grounded factors of quality. Due to lack of such studies, we decided to lean on a model of quality school library, developed by CISSL, US (Center for International Scholarship and School Libraries), as a result of innovative research approach in which key quality factors were identified through in-depth research of intentionally chosen good libraries (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a and 2005b; Todd, 2004; Todd, Gordon and Lu, 2010, 2011). The model is interesting particularly because it took existing good libraries as a starting point for its development. This approach differs from traditional research where samples of libraries are investigated in an attempt to determine which factors could affect their quality. Therefore, as Tepe and Geitgey (2005) and Todd and Kuhlthau (2005a) present, the first element in shaping the model of a good school library was making a selection of excellent and effective schools which was done on the basis of ratings based on their proficiency scores, attendance levels, and graduation rates. Only schools, which rated excellent and employed a certified library media specialist – thus being considered to offer an "effective school library program", were qualified to participate in the study. Additionally, the project team formed a set of criteria based on the Ohio School Library Guidelines (Library Guidelines, 2003), and set up an International Advisory Panel (consisting of nine members which were distinguished scholars and leaders in school librarianship) to help shape the final set of criteria for selection of effective school libraries which were considered for further research. The criteria are shown in Figure 1.

The research resulted in the model's development, not vice-versa. The foundations of the model are not theoretical, but have roots in practice, being supported by contemporary theory. Therefore we could call it practice-based research, stemming from the term 'evidence-based practice' (i.e. educational practices based on scientific research), frequently being recommended as the best approach for school library work (see for example USA DOE, 2002). Its characteristic is that researchers empirically investigate the existing practice, and link it to theoretical findings, in order to assess it and make recommendations for improvements.

Once established, the methodology can be replicated for longitudinal research in the same environment, or used in another context. As argued by Todd (2003), evidence-based practice in school librarianship is the process of carefully documenting how school librarians make a difference in student learning. This evidence can then be used to support the argument on the roles, responsibilities and overall importance of school libraries.

Due to the methodological nature of our paper, we will here focus on the methodology of the preparation of this model, not the actual subsequent findings of the studies in which the model was used. The methodology of the preparation of the model was described by Tepe and Geitgey (2005), and Todd and Kuhlthau (2005a). We will use that approach to investigate if and how the model can be applied (probably in an adapted form) in another context. We assume that the circumstances which influenced the development of school libraries in Slovenia and Croatia – two countries being historically, culturally and economically very different from USA – will dictate certain changes/additions to the methodology which

enabled a model's development. The same methodology was applied and the model tested in Australia (Hay, 2005, 2006), but with a different approach, because they used Australian qualitative data, not as a illustrations of the quantitative-based findings, but as a baseline for a picture of school library based on students' experiences and expectations.

The schools in Ohio that met the criteria, described in Figure 1, were then invited to apply for participation and to provide substantive documentation addressing the criteria. Finally, an Ohio Experts Panel, consisting of 11 leaders from the school library and educational community in Ohio, who had in-depth knowledge of a range of school libraries across Ohio, was constituted to make the final selection of participating 39 schools, using the principle of judgment sampling. The characteristics of the school libraries of these schools were analyzed to see how students benefit from them by looking at the "conceptions of help", i.e. the extent to which the students perceived to have received help from the library in various areas (such as learning, getting or using information, etc.). Two key instruments were used: for students and for staff, each of them provided their own perceptions of helpfulness of the library to students.

Selection Criteria

Any school (building) in Ohio may be selected for the research project if it meets the established criteria.

Minimum requirements:
- ✓ The school building includes at least one of the K-12 grades.
- ✓ The building library program is managed by a full time, certified library media specialist
- ✓ The school library media specialist and the library program are instrumental partners in a systematic information literacy instruction program taught within the school.
- ✓ A physical school library exists within the building
- ✓ A 2002 Ohio School District Report Card rating with supporting data must be available.
- ✓ The school must have a building IRN registered with the Ohio Department of Education.

The following areas (adapted from the January, 2003 draft of the Ohio Effective School Library Guidelines) will be used to evaluate the prospective school with regard to selection for the research project.

Criterion 1: (School Goals and Leadership)-Effective school library media programs support the mission and continuous improvement plan of the school district.

Criterion 2: (Curriculum)-Effective school library media programs support and enhance the curriculum and are an integral part of teaching and learning.

Criterion 3: (Information Literacy) (Including technological and media literacies)-Effective school library media programs provide information literacy skills instruction.

Criterion 4: (Reading)-Effective school library media programs promote and encourage reading for academic achievement and life-long learning.

Criterion 5: (Technology Resources)-Effective school library media programs provide, integrate, and utilize a technology rich environment to support teaching and learning.

Figure 1: Selection criteria for effective school libraries (Tepe & Geitgey (2005, p. 59)

This resulted in a three-part model of the school library as a dynamic agent of learning (Todd and Kuhlthau, 2005a), presented in Figure 2. As the authors (ibid., p. 6) explain, " The model posits that as a dynamic agent of learning, a school library's intellectual and physical infrastructure and output centers on three essential interrelated and iterative components: informational (the information resource and information technology infrastructure; transformational (the instructional interventions, reading and related initiatives, and other student engagement initiatives), and formational (learning impacts and student outcomes)." Further present in the model are *the school librarian*, acting as an information specialist and a learning specialist, as well as curriculum partner-leader, and *the school library*, which is not only an information place but also a knowledge space.
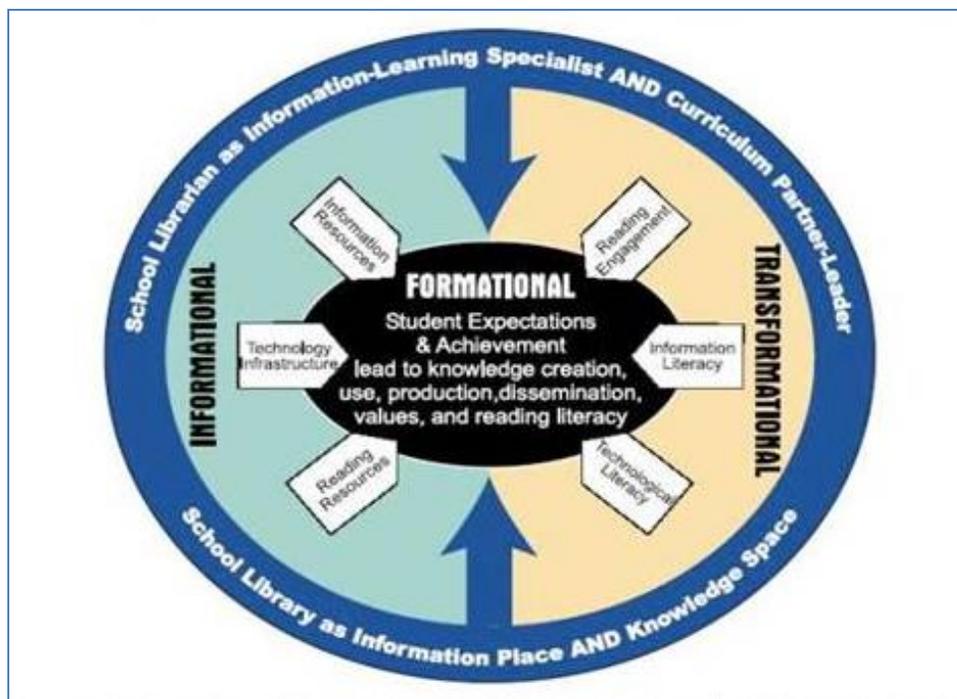

Figure 2: Model of the school library as a dynamic agent of learning (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a, p. 6)

Research questions

This paper is one part of a wider study which aims to investigate, whether (and to what extent) the original CISSL model of quality school library functions in any context. Our goal here is to explore the methodology used in developing the CISSL model and to develop the methodology for building model(s) of quality school library in Slovenia and Croatia. In a wider sense we would like to see, if (or how much) the model(s), which will be the result of such methodology, correspond to the original CISSL model. It needs to be emphasized that for the purpose of this paper we are not testing the model itself; instead we are exploring the methodology which was used in its creation. But, based on the findings which will show if the situation in these two EU countries generates different models (different from each other and/or also different from the original model), it will be possible to

estimate, if and how this methodology can be used for formation of models in other countries/contexts.

For the purpose of this paper, which is of methodological nature, we are focused on the following questions:

1. Which criteria can be applied in choosing effective libraries on which the quality of school library will be explored; which will further serve as a comparison with the CISSL model?
2. Which parts of the research methodology from the CISSL research can be adopted and what should be changed according to the context?
3. Which methods will/could be applied in investigation of the school libraries in Slovenia and Croatia?

Discussion

In order to be possible to test the CISSL model in Slovenia and Croatia, the starting point in the development of the methodology of researching the quality of school libraries should be the (re)framing of criteria for identification of effective libraries on which the research will take place. However, we believe that the second part of research, which is based on exploring how the school library helps the students in their learning, can be applied unchanged. The results which are based on the student's and staff's perceptions of the "help concept" will show what constitutes a good library and whether (and to what extent) it differs from what the CISSL model is based on. It is important to note that this research does not test the existing CISSL model, but the methodology on which the CISSL model has been developed. On the basis of this methodology we will explore the perceptions of school library of the students, teachers, librarians and school management, and then, on the basis of the results, verify how (if) the model(s) of quality school library differs (or doesn't differ) from the CISSL model and what causes potential differences.

In answering these research questions, we first need to look at the two countries in question. Namely, it is not possible to simply transfer a model which has been developed in a particular setting, and apply it unchanged. Furthermore, it is not possible to transfer or apply the same criteria in identifying the sample – good school libraries. Since school libraries are part of educational system and, consequently, influenced by the social, economic and political system, these elements need to be considered in the methodology. USA DOE (2002) warned about some problems regarding scientifically-based research, namely that not much of it is done and that school authorities are not as familiar with the scientific approach to research as they are with other approaches. The same issues can be observed today in Slovenia as well as in Croatia. Not only that there is considerable lack of scientific analyses of school practice, there is also a worrying lack of interest from the school authorities. As already warned by Novljan (1994), the development of school libraries reflects its tight relation to the goals, principles and tasks of educational process. In fact, the actual educational system influences the development more than professional guidelines. School libraries have lived much more in line with guidelines and recommendations of library profession in those countries where actual democratic spirit has been pursued, where educational contents and methods have connected with social changes and where students were educated for life. These school libraries, undoubtedly, are advanced, follow changes, even cause them.

To establish the criteria for identification of good libraries we will analyze, using the method of content analysis, the documents regulating school librarianship in the two countries. The analysis should take into consideration national, as well as international documents. The basic documents are shown in Table 1 (with titles translated into English).

Even though the documents and guidelines/standards in both countries emphasize the role of school library in learning, development of literacy and reading, the level of learning achievements in these areas are not satisfactory. The development of school libraries reflects the literacy of the citizens and vice versa. In Slovenia and Croatia results of PISA 2012 (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests have revealed a worrying level of students' reading literacy which is lower than OECD average, and has not improved since 2009 (Pedagoški inštitut, 2013; Ministarstvo obrazovanja, znanosti i sporta Republike Hrvatske, 2013). This has raised a fierce debate about the entire school system, which will, hopefully, also influence the awareness of the importance of school libraries.

We have already said that the main methodological question in researching the quality of school libraries in Slovenia and Croatia, should we follow the CISSL methodology, is how to set the criteria to choose good libraries. If we take as a starting point the criteria based only on the documents and regulations which govern education and the role of school libraries in the respective countries, this would not give the real picture, since the school management, as well as school librarians, know these documents and try to apply them in their work; but in reality the practice and the overall situation often differ from what has been prescribed. These documents emphasize the role and operations of school library as part of educational process and as support of learning, but on a very general level. Additionally, the problem is that in both countries there are no systematic studies of school libraries and no exact indicators to show to which extent the libraries follow the requirements stemming from the legislation, guidelines and other documents. Also, there are no unique data which could give the exact indicators related to the criteria used in the CISSL study.

In creating the criteria to define the sample, besides the regulating documents, we need to start from the theoretical foundations, which clearly state what constitutes the quality of the school library, as well as from the general criteria used in the CISSL study. On the basis of all these, we need to develop unique criteria which are not general but very precise and which take into consideration the context. Namely, if the criteria are not operationalized in detail, measurable and comparable, school management and school librarians might show the picture of what is *desired/required*, not of the real condition.

Table 1. Documents included into content anaysis

Basic Slovenian documents regulating school librarianship	Basic Croatian documents regulating school librariansip
Zakon o knjižničarstvu – *Law on librarianship* (2001)	Zakon o knjižnicama – *Law on libraries* (1997; with changes 1998, 2000, 2009)
Zakon o osnovni šoli – *Law on elementary school* (2006) Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja – *Law on organization and financing of education* (2007)	Zakon o odgoju i obrazovanju u osnovnoj i srednjoj školi – *Law on education in elementary and secondary school* (2008; with changes 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012)
Standardi in normativi za šolske knjižnice – *Standards and norms for school libraries* (1995) Idejni načrt razvoja slovenskih šolskih knjižnic – *Development plan for Slovenian school libraries* (1995)	Standard za školske knjižnice – *Standard for school libraries* (2000)
Kurikul Knjižnično informacijsko znanje – *Curriculum Library and information knowledge* (2008) Curricula for other elementary school subjects	Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu – T*eaching plan and program for elementary school* (2006)
International framework and guidelines	
The IFLA/UNESCO School Library Guidelines (2002) IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto (1999)	

Even though this assumption is more speculative than exact, in creating these criteria we need to take it into account, since the schools and libraries in Slovenia and Croatia have until now not seen such research, which could mean that their intention will be to show the library in the best possible way. An indication of this is an established practice of demonstrating examples of good practice, which is especially encouraged at meetings and conferences of school librarians. Many school libraries in both countries can show certain examples of good practice in their work, which can create an appearance of positive trends, but a question is how much individual (or a few) examples from one library (or some libraries) can reflect the overall quality of library work in all segments. On the other hand, it can be expected that the schools, aware of the problems which face them (inadequate space, ICT equipment, unreadiness of the teachers and/or librarians for joint development of curriculum, inadequate support of the library by school management, etc.), would not be ready to participate in this research, since they do not want to be ranged according to the quality of their libraries.

Due to all of these reasons, it can be expected that the most demanding part of the research of the school libraries' quality will be the identification of the effective school libraries in which the second part of the research should take place – exploration of school library practices.

It is evident that, before asking the students how the school library helps them in their learning in the widest possible sense, we need to use various research techniques to explore the context in which school libraries in the two respective countries operate, as well as the perception of those stakeholders who significantly affect their quality. Besides investigating the existing school library practices via usual methods (such as surveys, interviews, observations, etc.), it is needed to investigate:

- The attitudes of the authorities towards school libraries, which could be done by employing the content analysis method to analyze the curricula, legislation, formal documents of educational institutions (statutes, regulations, etc.), or even surveying or interviewing relevant bodies (both professional and legislative);
- The contents of existing educational programs (formal, permanent) which are available to school librarians, again by means of content analysis of their curricula.

When data is collected, it will be, of course, useful for analysis of the situation in each country. However, to assess the situation in both countries, we need to employ comparative analysis. Only this will show, whether the model of a quality school library is valid for both countries, or should it be reframed in one or both countries, and also, are the differences too big, which would require different adaptations of the model for each country.

In line with the current need of establishing the school libraries (virtually in any country) as indispensable partners in the teaching and learning process, we also need to try to position our discussion in a wider, possibly more international context. We believe that similar approaches could be used to further verify the CISSL model.

Conclusions

Evaluation of school libraries needs to be based on the methodological apparatus which takes into account theories and models, and also the context in which the libraries operate along with their stakeholders. The main motivation of this paper was the development of an appropriate methodological approach for investigation of a quality school library in two neighboring countries. The major challenge is to set up criteria which will guide the choice of effective school libraries which will then be included in further research. However, this methodology can also serve as a basis for other similar research and enable further application and possible reframing of the CISSL methodology, as well as testing of its model of quality school library in various international contexts.

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Curriculum Vitae

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