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READING – THE MOST DELICIOUS DISH FROM THE LATVIAN LIBRARY CUISINE: JUDGEMENT OF THE CHILDREN’S JURY

The Children’s Jury is the first part of a National reading promotion programme for children. The author of this programme is the Children’s Literature Centre of the National Library of Latvia. The programme is supported by the State Culture Capital Foundation of Latvia and local municipalities. The main idea is to purchase collections of the best published in the last year. It attracts and involve children in reading, talking, evaluating and recommending the most interesting books for other readers. There are 7 or 6 books included in the collection for each age group: 7 - 8; 9 - 10; 11 - 13; 14 - 16 years. Children have to sign a contract to read all books and have to write about their 3 top books. Every participant received special pencil, sticker and libraries the coloured posters. At the end of reading programme libraries organise several events such as reading conferences with famous writers, illustrators, publishers, visiting theatre, museums, special children’s parties. Library users were satisfied about this programme. It was the first such programme in Latvia, where involved approximately 10 thousands children and 397 Libraries 2003.

The reading programme reaches the following goals: Promotes children’s reading; Respects children’s choice and opinion; Establishes children’s Literature award.

Should it be necessary to listen to children’s opinion about books written, translated, and published for them? Isn’t it enough to draw conclusions just on the grounds of the number of sold books and repeated editions? However, if we look into the question at issue, and joy of reading of children is not indifferent for us, it is important to see their opinion. These and some other issues motivated us to elaborate and implement the first reading encouragement programme in Latvia. I would like to tell readers about fantastic success provided by the programme mentioned above enabling improvement of library services to children.

Two years ago the first project for the State Culture Capital Foundation was originated having the title “Children’s Jury”. In 2002 the project acquired status of the national target programme, and implementation of it commenced in 245 libraries all over Latvia, by involving 5425 children as assessors and experts of the latest books. What was the impulse for elaboration of such a project? It was the urge to involve wider audience of young readers into exchange of opinions on newly published books; to get to know opinion of country-children by providing the same opportunities for them as for town-children as regards access to new books still smelling of print-shop. We wanted to arouse minds of our writers for new ideas, to assist in establishment of closer ties and dialogue

with the most demanding readers who were sincerely named as Experts of the Children's Jury in libraries involved in the project.

Involvement of children in assessment of books is not our invention. Already for several decades in neighbouring countries Lithuania and Estonia, by using public libraries' network, readers' opinions on the most popular books are carefully collected and summarised. However, work processes of their jury have shortages that made us to look for more progressive experience. Thus we studied out that in Austria and Germany a youth group works which grants its award to books intended for youth. In Canada, USA, and Australia nominations of the best children and youth books are widely evolved. Also in Scandinavian countries children's juries work, and these juries have originated by applying pattern of the Netherlands National Children's Jury. This year the Swedish Children's Jury counts seven years of activity. Initially it has been the National Reading Promotion Programme, in which children have voted for books themselves. Until then in Sweden, as well as in Latvia all other awards have been granted by adults.

However, the very children read these books, therefore they should choose themselves, and learn to make the choice. Although not always children's opinions agree with assessment of adults, they are of the same importance and considerable for specialists of the book sphere.

By getting familiar with the respective world experience we were greatly astonished that in no country attitude towards reading encouragement undertakings was unambiguously only positive. Still, it should be acknowledged that situation of youth literature and original literature intended for children is completely different in the developed countries than in Latvia; it is more supported than in our country. Nevertheless, also there not always politicians understand how important for mastering of information it is to motivate for reading, and to read just for fun.

Latvia is a unique country with a complicated course of development. We can not expect that a school or a library will purchase the option to participate in jury for their pupils or readers respectively, as it is in the Netherlands; therefore patterns of several countries can be distinguished in the project elaborated by us. We are very satisfied that innovation we have introduced in the mechanism of jury's activities has generated a great attractive force. The novelty – difference – in organisation of the Children's Jury is the fact that we have purchased the best collections of children and youth literature that encourage joy of reading for each library involved in the programme for money from the national budget, as just development of collection in public libraries is one of the most problematic issues due to poor funding and weak knowledge of librarians about children's literature. Children are attracted also by the competition element in this reading action.

After publishing of the first results of the Reading Promotion Programme in children and youth magazines our telephone rang continuously. Readers' interest was so great that it made us misbelieve that encouragement of reading is even unnecessary in Latvia.

Objective of the target programme is to consolidate undertakings and resources of the state and local governments for encouragement of reading by using and improving opportunities of public libraries in their work with children and youth, as well as to involve the target group in an active exchange of opinions, thus influencing publishing decisions and library politics in the country.

10 000 children from entire country became experts of the Children's Jury in 2003. It roused their confidence, they drew in their schoolmates in the action actively, and warmed up their interest about the new books. To the Children's Literature Centre of the National Library of Latvia 24 000 inquiry forms were delivered, in which they named three books they liked the best.

The target programme is topical also this year. The Culture Capital Foundation has granted 40 thousand Latvian lats for its development. We are extremely proud for the respective popularity of our programme, as positive references have spread fast, and this year 50 libraries have joined our common reading promotion action anew.

Books included in the collection of the last year are shown in the poster. The target programme has also other lively publicity materials attracting attention of children – stickers, bookmarks, printed pens, mugs, T-shirts, a doll of human size that is intended for theatricals. Information intended for adults is summarised in a booklet that is distributed in libraries, schools, other local government institutions, and families in a circulation of several thousand copies. In March 2004 experts of the Children's Jury from all over Latvia came to the great reading festivity in Riga. Long lives the reading “bacillus”!

When children notice a poster having the green, good-humoured creature with book wings on it at the nearest library or in school, usually they question the librarian, in order to acquire a detailed information about conditions of the reading promotion programme. A teacher or a school librarian has an important role in successful promotion of the Children's Jury all over the country. When principles of participation are clear, pupils have the opportunity to take part in reading and assessment of books nominated for the jury. Children's Jury works in four age groups: 1st – 2nd forms (6 – 8 years); 3rd – 4th forms (9 – 10 years); 5th – 7th forms (11 – 13 years), and 8th – 9th forms (14 – 16 years). We offer seven/six books from the most interesting, most developing joy of reading published during the last year (including books of both original literature, and translated literature) to each group.

A professional commission took part in selection of books, and selected the most interesting reading from a collection twice as large. We were really glad that teachers had chosen books advised by the Children's Jury for summer reading for children of the youngest school age. It should be admitted that at the same time we have received quite a lot of undeserved critics, as too little original literature is included in the selection. The answer is very simple – we would do it willingly if there were not lack of works interesting for adolescents and youth by Latvian authors.

Literature of different genres, nations, subject matters, and difficulty level has been represented; we will attempt to follow this principle also further on.

Children are entitled to replace two books by two other books of the other age group that seem more interesting to them. And almost every young expert uses the said opportunity. Unfortunately, we could not be as free in set-up of conditions, as it is with the Swedish Children's Jury. There readers may vote for all 100 books that are included in the list. Reading Promotion Programme of Latvia could not guaranty that such large number of books really would be available in all libraries; but the aforementioned 24/28 books in one or two copies are purchased for money of the Culture Capital Fund for each of 245 libraries involved in the Jury work in 2002, for already 397 in 2003 and 451 libraries this year. We are extremely proud for popularity of our programme.

When an expert of the Jury has read all books intended for his/her age group, he/she receives three forms, which should be filled in by describing the best books. Children have to answer five questions about the respective book:

1. I choose this book because

It is full of fun;

By reading it I had to cry;

It is pleasant and sweet;

It made me to think a lot;

It is exciting, rich in events;

It has an unusual, fruity language;

It is creepy;

It has beautiful illustrations.

2. How would you advise this book to your friend?

3. What would you like to ask the author of the book or any character of the of the book?

4. Would you read this book, if you was not the Jury expert?

5. Your final assessment: which place should be awarded to this book – the 1st, the 2nd or the 3rd one?

On the 30th of December, each year, all books should be read. And then the great festivity begins. It is up to each local government how to make activities of the Jury's children more interesting, award the best readers, and spring a surprise on them. The local working team, generally uniting forces of librarians, teachers, deputies, leaders of culture

life, and parents, work with ideas. Undertakings planned for the Jury's experts provide for different meetings with writers, literature critics, publishers, and translators. Discussions, competitions, seminars, reading camps, carnivals of literary characters, readings of the most interesting books, advertising campaigns related to books and reading, and exhibitions of the most popular books take place in libraries and schools.

We are very satisfied that so many people have involved in implementation of the Reading Promotion Programme. In order to understand children's tastes and enter into children's problems better, in many places of Latvia deputies of the local governments get themselves acquainted with the Jury's books, parents organise alternative juries, and read all the same books as their children.

In 2002 we received 13 000 inquiry forms but in 2003 - 24 000; it is an information of huge scope that has been researched by students of higher educational establishments majoring in pedagogy, researchers, teachers, and librarians. Authors themselves study assessments of Latvian writers' works. It is pleasant to observe how the writers grow red in the face by turning over leaves of the large folders – so seriously they are addressed by opinions of experts of the Children's Jury.

There are very many positive aspects. I would mention just some of them:

- Pupils' interest about the latest literature will increase;
- Scope of pupils' knowledge expanded;
- Experts of the Children's Jury managed to involve their equals in age in reading of books successfully;
- Profile of library increased;
- Children learnt to fill in inquiry forms and to express their opinions precisely;
- New readers involved in work of the experts' group who took an active part in organisation of library undertakings;
- Readers became more unconstrained and independent in their decisions both in discussions and individual interviews;
- Library offered one more way how to express oneself, how to go on one's own to children;
- Nothing was imposed to anyone; children just read, as the books were good;
- New books were handled with care, as the role of a Jury's expert motivated to a careful attitude towards the book;
- An extra opportunity was provided for library to promote itself and facilitate collaboration with schools;

- New forms of work were created – children got through with truants themselves by visiting the colleague expert at home;
- Many such children who had read unwillingly by the present involved in the Reading Promotion Programme. It was their first travel to literature of different countries.

Conclusions of the Working Team of Local Specialists about the Children's Jury and Its Influence Upon Collaboration of Culture, Education and Other Institutions:

Generally librarians, teachers, deputies, leaders of culture life, and parents have united their forces in the local working team. If group has managed to work positively, then usually the common undertaking is assessed as a very positive stimulus for closer collaboration between library and local government in favour of culture life. Often an excellent working team is developed, which could continue its work in organisation of any other undertaking for children.

People have been well informed – booklets, posters, reading agreements, and letters with invitation to participate in work of the Children's Jury have affected public opinion on activities in library favourably.

Often local government is short in resources for purchase of new books, therefore the target programme has provided a noticeable contribution in acquisition of book collection, and along with the successful publicity campaign created a positive attitude towards image of a librarian and library in the local community.

The most successful has been collaboration with teachers of the Latvian language; in many places an agreement has been made that by participating in Jury's work the pupil may receive an extra ten-mark in Literature. Parents have been dedicated supporters. Work of the Children's Jury has been explained in school parents' meetings, therefore also parents and grandparents have taken an active part in the Reading Promotion Programme. Parents are educated and understand role of reading better, as well as the fact that a non-reading child is not a hopeless case; it is possible to alter everything by the help of an exciting literature and intense exchange of opinions.

A beneficial one has been collaboration with those schools, in civil parishes of which there had not been a jury. Often the book exhibition of the Children's Jury has been displayed there, and the Jury experts have acquainted listeners with the books they have read. In many places managers of houses of culture and centres of children and youth interests, and schools of art have taken part in the Programme. Book advertising and drawing competitions have been organised by joint efforts.

Reading encouragement should be supported by any means. It should be democratic, non-imposed, and creative. Libraries are able to be primary in performance of this task. By gaining support in the project, attitude of the local government becomes more favourable, and the school begins to perceive the library as an equal collaboration partner. Therefore fairly often in assessment of the target programme the following works said by Board Chairs of civil parishes are heard: "May children read and participate! We

will finance everything.” It is indicative of change of attitude towards library, and of the fact that the hopeless, regrettable speculation: “Children watch just TV and waste themselves at computers. They do not take interest in books,” is overpassed. As it is not true, and it is proved by the present Reading Promotion Programme. It is appropriate to remember words of the brilliant French writer Daniel Pennac: “If joy of reading is lost all the same (if, as it is told, my son, my daughter, youth in general does not like to read), it still has not gone astray far. Just got lost a bit. Can be found easily. One has just to know, by which roads it should be searched (..)”

Confidence of experts of the Children’s Jury has increased, children visit library more frequently, they read books more, and it is highly assessed in public, perhaps for the first time somebody tells openly – we need good readers, it is praiseworthy! Children have learnt to express their opinion about the books they have read, they have learnt to select books by annotations, and they also listen to librarian’s recommendations more frequently. By involving in the jury’s work some teenagers have turned to more qualitative literature.

Such an effect is acquired we even did not fancy – children’s responsibility for reading of books has facilitated development of interrelations, collaboration skill, aroused interest about happenings, taught to involve into projects and evaluate them.

There come some emotional statements about the programme:

“At school we felt that something interesting happens at the library; we had a good information on the project.”

“Entire civil parish knew about the Children’s Jury.”

“(.) Books went over from hand to hand. Yes, the bookshelf really was empty, in the direct meaning of the word! Not a single book lied on the shelf for more than a couple of minutes, or even seconds.”

“I had to explain also to the other readers, what a programme it was.”

“(.) Even such children came to the library, who had not ever crossed the threshold of this place by the 7th form.”

“Members of the Culture Commission concluded that by mediation of a library one can influence the culture and education course of children much more. In the result of collaboration new ideas have arisen how to involve children in public life more.”

A person who reads is advantageous among the others. Awarding of the most active readers helped to strengthen this cognition in public. Awarding was of many forms: awarding the Jury’s experts with books, gift cards, money awards, subscription of press issues, and other valuable things necessary to children. The most interesting assessments of books, and the most interesting advertisements on books and reading were published both in large daily newspapers and local newspapers.

Local governments paid for excursions to writers' museums, picture galleries, tickets to theatre, concerts, organised meeting with children of jury from the neighbouring town or civil parish, arranged parties for the most enthusiastic readers.

By summarising reports of libraries participants of the Jury it was stated that the target programme has gained the most significant success in civil parishes, the most disadvantaged local governments, and in the Latgale region. The programme has attached a large co-funding from local governments – LVL 47 000, as well as it has arisen an undivided interest of local community, particularly parents, teachers, and managers and deputies of local governments.

Basic Rules of the Children's Jury:

1. Stimulate joy of reading among children and youth.
2. Show respect to children's choice.
3. Introduce an award in literature where the very children determine the winner.
4. Develop collaboration in the national level that would attach greater effect to local reading promotion activities.
5. Confirm advantages that a good reader possesses in community.
6. Provide children with the latest literature and opportunities to spend the leisure time pithily even then, if they live