

Linda Langenfelde

Vice-President, Latvian School Librarians Association

THE ROLE OF THE LATVIAN SCHOOL LIBRARIANS ASSOCIATION IN PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF LIBRARIANS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

The situation of school libraries in Latvia is rather peculiar. Joking we say they serve two lords. On one hand being a part of our national culture and heritage they are under guidance of Ministry of Culture.

On the other hand school libraries as educational establishments are under the guidance of Ministry of Education and fulfill the policy of the state and implement the strategy of education system through a number of legislative documents.

Recent years are showing typical features of decentralization with a number of administrative bodies increasing and each of them producing different regulations for the school libraries. Little cooperation can be seen and the demands to school libraries quite often are contradictory.

That is the main reason why Latvian School Librarian Association was founded. As non-governmental organization it tries to help its members to understand the mission of school libraries at present moment and provide librarians with practical knowledge and skills.

Latvian School Librarian Association sees its role in future in calling for united efforts of different structures and institutions and demanding to formulate clear state policy concerning school library development.

Explaining the necessity of special post in Ministry of Education - expert and consultant who will coordinate progression of school libraries into information centres according to the needs of information and knowledge – based society. Latvian School Librarian Association becoming a good cooperation partner.

School libraries in Latvia

The aim of the library of any educational establishment is participation in implementing the aims of school educational programmes according to state education standards and subject syllabus. The National Compulsory Education Standard outlines a changed focus from the acquisition of information to the application and utilization of information, practical orientation accenting functional knowledge and skills. Consequently, school libraries organize their work to implement this demand in to life.

The school librarian participates in educational process more and more actively. Many school libraries have become modern information and methodology centres.

School libraries in Latvia are under the control of Ministry of Education. The quality of the educational process and students' learning outcomes is greatly enhanced by effectiveness and quality of school libraries. It is determined by several documents.

School libraries work according to IFLA School Library Manifesto and the Ministry of Education regulations: Law of Education, Law of Libraries and several regulations of the Cabinet. According to the above mentioned documents school library services are targeted at pupils, teachers, management, staff and pupils' parents.

The functions of school libraries can be divided in 4 groups:

- information - school library is a part of the national library network
- educational – in close cooperation with teachers enable learning process and acquiring information skills
- cultural – give aesthetic experience and develop creativity
- entertainment – possibility to spend free time and develop positive attitudes among people.

The quality of students' learning outcomes is greatly enhanced by the effectiveness of school libraries. In order to implement educational programs school libraries try to develop resources and services both for students and teachers. They try to provide all learners with equal opportunities, enable our students to prepare successfully for their life and work in information and knowledge-based society, help all members of the school community to live as responsible citizens.

School libraries follow the standards of public libraries. At present school libraries are developing their catalogues in correspondence with the programme worked out by Latvia

University or use the programme ALISE (used by public libraries), some schools use their own programmes. School libraries automation process is developing rapidly and shared catalogues will be available in many regions of Latvia.

We have good examples in many schools. In Spidola gymnasium in Jelgava the school librarian Lita Vevere regularly provides her students with latest resources, books and learning services, helps them to acquire life long learning skills and develop imagination, to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats and media. Library class is introduced in school curriculum as a special subject.

School libraries in Bauska region take part in the competition for the best information centre. Methodology department of Regional School board (specialist on school libraries Inga Belinska) has worked out criteria for a good information centre. But the local municipality plans special sum of money in its annual budget to support the winner - the most successful school library information centre.

There are many other examples which prove that Latvian schools are in transition period towards pupil – centred teaching with tasks for which pupils spend much more time learning independently in school library or school information centre.

Demands to the school librarians

School librarians support and enhance educational goals as outlined in the school's mission and curriculum. From the aspect of supporting the study process, school librarians have three main tasks:

- 1) provide the necessary textbooks and study materials
- 2) enable the use of different learning methods providing the necessary literature, the library's learning environment and IT facilities
- 3) shape students' learning and information skills and reading habits through the provision of relevant literature, reading activities and library programmes.

To fulfil these demands school librarians should have professional competences on high level. The Cabinet regulation No 371 states that school librarian should have higher pedagogical education and special librarian's education. There are two ways to achieve this. First variant: school librarian has higher pedagogical education and courses in library science. Second variant: higher librarian education and courses in pedagogics.

We believe that only librarians with such qualifications can:

- develop and sustain in children the habit and enjoyment of reading and learning and use libraries throughout their lives;
- offer opportunities for experiences in creating and using information for knowledge, imagination and enjoyment;
- support all students in learning, finding information of different formats and evaluating it.

Another important aspect is librarian's personality. Every day the librarian meets people of different ages, interests and characters. To work successfully with children the librarian has to understand their psychology. We have good examples of programmes for developing pupils' reading skills in Marupe secondary school (librarian Ilga Maizele), Livani secondary school No.1 (librarian Silvija Silina). To cooperate with the local administration the librarian must be competent in planning, making accounts and future visions to prove the need for financial support. The library of Elksni Primary school (librarian Rita Sirmovica) in Jekabpils region every year gets considerable financial support from the local municipality for obtaining study books and learning materials. The state guaranteed financial support is too small to meet the rising needs of school libraries. Only those librarians who are open, self-confident, purposeful, insistent, tolerant, willing to learn and cooperate with other colleagues and municipalities achieve good results.

Latvian School Librarian Association

The general policy of library development in Latvia is worked out by Ministry of Culture in cooperation with Latvian Library Association. But Ministry of Education having special demands for school libraries has not worked out policy concerning the school libraries. For many years there has been no specialist dealing with school library matters on state level. Due to this uncertainty a lot of discussion is going on among specialists who want to have clear vision for future development of school libraries.

To fill the empty space Latvian School Librarian Association (LSLA) was founded in 1996. The main aims of Latvian School Librarian Association are:

- development of librarianship,
- enhancement of librarians' professional skills,
- protection of librarians' professional interests.

LSLA tries to unite efforts of different institutions (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Centre for Further Education of Librarians, Latvian Education Information System, Library Association, e.t.c.). It takes part in the accreditation of school libraries, organizes courses for school librarians.

LSLA as non-governmental organization has pointed out a lot of functions which are not fulfilled by governmental institutions, has drawn attention to different questions and organized public discussions resulting in amendments in Law of education, School Statutes and School Library Statutes.

It helps the school librarians to improve the quality of their professional competences by organizing annual conferences, competitions, projects.

LSLA has its own home page which informs about the latest news and helps to exchange information concerning school libraries. Librarians can find documents concerning school libraries, cabinet regulations, IFLA Guidelines, Bill of Pupils Information Rights, information about further education and good practices of their colleagues in other schools, calendar of library events, information about competitions and projects.

Possibilities for further education

To gain experience school librarians regularly visit their colleagues in other regions. School libraries cooperate among themselves regarding information and experience exchange. Public libraries invite school librarians to participate in their activities, like seminars, courses. And school libraries invite the specialists of public libraries as consultants when dealing with the questions of library work. The most active cooperation is between school and children libraries.

In each library we can find many good examples of practical work – pupils’ and teachers’ reports, research papers, projects which most often are a single copy. To make this valuable information available for everybody LSLA took part in joint project with public libraries in 2003. The main objective of the project “Integrating traditional and non-traditional encyclopaedical reference services in libraries of Latvia” was to create methodology which would allow each school (public) library to make their own entries of relevant information in the national electronic encyclopedia Letonika. The project was realised successfully resulting with a new School and library folder in Letonika. 14 school and public libraries were working in close cooperation during this project.

The most valuable LSLA contribution to further education of school librarians is the development and implementation of 36 hour long course programme approved by Ministry of Education. During the period from April 2004 to April 2005 about 100 school librarians from all over Latvia will have attended the course to improve their librarianship knowledge and skills. At present LSLA is working to more elaborated programme for the qualified librarians with longer work experience.

Evaluation

It is very important to have regular evaluation of your work and to have clear criteria for the evaluation. The old system included certification of the school director, accreditation of education programmes, accreditation of school library, e.t.c.

New system of continued evaluation of the quality of education is being introduced in schools of Latvia. A new approach is suggested by the experts of World Bank. They try to prove that the final result of the educational process is important. School library being part of the whole process should not be evaluated separately. But Ministry of Culture has started the accreditation of public libraries. It plans to accredit school libraries in the same way as libraries of local importance.

During this period of constant changes, school librarians can only guess what awaits them in future. LSLA has expressed their proposals at different meetings.

Future visions

- There is a great need for state policy concerning the development of school libraries.
- A qualified specialist, school library expert working on national level could unite the efforts of different structures, work out the main guidelines and coordinate the work to some global aims.
- Latvian School Librarian Association is ready to become a good cooperation partner to the Ministry of Education.