

# **From Books and Information to Excellence: Perspectives of Exploring and Modelling the Quality of School Libraries in Slovenia and Croatia**

**Polona VILAR**

Department of Library and Information Science and Book Studies  
University of Ljubljana  
polona.vilar@ff.uni-lj.si

**Ivanka STRIČEVIĆ**

National and University Library in Zagreb  
istricevic@nsk.hr

## **ABSTRACT**

The paper deals with the quality of school libraries in two neighbouring countries: Slovenia and Croatia. In both countries, school libraries had, 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 has still been based on the same theoretical findings, thus following the same fundamental professional guidelines. The paper starts with general views on researching school libraries, quality of school libraries, and then focuses on the situation in both countries. Emphasis is on the developments in research and theory between 2014 and 2024, which can be shown in the areas of researching and modelling competencies of school librarians and the quality of school libraries (including the resulting models), as well as investigating the role of school library in the curriculum, both in the context of developing information and other literacies and collaborating with the teachers. The differences in these areas between the two countries are presented and discussed to show the results and their implications for practice as well as to show how achievements in one country can benefit the other.

**KEYWORDS:** school libraries, quality, Slovenia, Croatia, modelling

## 1. Introduction

There has been 10 years since the publication of our first paper on researching the quality of school libraries (Vilar & Stričević, 2014). We wrote it after lengthy and intensive conversations about why and how to research school libraries in our two countries and decided to shape it as a methodological paper with propositions how it could be done and what should be considered. In the paper, we listed the reasons why such research is needed—namely that, until 1990s, our two countries had had the same framework for development (meaning the same legal and professional framework), while after that they went their separate ways within their new national legislation—and what it would bring, and suggested the research framework, e.g., methodology, sampling, in particular parameters and criteria for identifying good schools that could be selected for further field research of quality school libraries. That was the draft plan which required to be reshaped as we went deeper into the research, which we describe in this paper, along with the results up to this time.

It turned out that ten years is both a long and a short period. At LIDA conference that year<sup>1</sup>, the paper has come under scrutiny of our distinguished colleagues, most notably Ross Todd who, as is widely known, had had extensive experience in this area and who served as one of the greatest role models for our research. When we presented the most challenging part of our methodological consideration, i.e., that we do not know how to approach sampling and recruit participants for our intended national studies of school libraries—namely, our wish to somehow replicate their sampling approaches of working only with good schools was hindered by the fact that neither country ranks schools according to quality, which meant that choosing good schools was impossible—Ross commented in his most practical manner: “Well, take whoever is willing to participate.” When we thought about it afterwards, we realized that he actually meant that it would most likely be the best librarians who would be most willing (if not eager) to participate in such a study. Considering the research conducted in Slovenia afterwards, he was right.

In the following years, there has been considerable development in the area

<sup>1</sup> Libraries in the Digital Age, 2014. <https://lida.ffos.hr/2014/>

of school libraries in both countries, both in the professional field and in research. In this paper, we overview these developments in the context of investigating the potentials for developing model(s) of quality school libraries, try to contextualize school library research, and show some future perspectives.

## **2. Researching School Libraries**

According to many authors (e.g., Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a, 2005b; Novljan, 2010; Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2012; Todd, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b; Vilar & Stričević, 2014; Vilar & Zabukovec, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2022; Njoku & Ken-Agbiriogu, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020), quality school libraries play a crucial role in supporting teaching and learning within educational institutions. School libraries have important tasks in formal education and are the only libraries with the potential to be visited by everyone, as all people, at some point of their life, attend formal school, of which the school library is a part. School libraries are one of the fundamental prerequisites for the systematic development of information literacy that is essential in our information society. They serve as essential learning spaces that play a vital role in promoting information literacy among students. Many studies demonstrated the significant impact of school libraries on information literacy development among students, emphasizing the role of well-funded and well-staffed school libraries, collaboration with teachers, and the integration of technology in promoting information literacy skills. By fostering a culture of inquiry, providing access to diverse resources, and offering targeted instruction, school libraries contributed to students' information literacy competencies, empowering them as lifelong learners. Lance and Loertscher (2013), Todd (2011a), and Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari (2015) discussed the relationship between well-staffed and well-funded school libraries and academic achievement, including information literacy skills. They highlighted the positive impact of school libraries on student achievement and the development of information literacy competencies and emphasized the importance of school libraries in promoting information literacy development and empowering students as critical thinkers. Lance and Loertscher (2013) also stressed the importance of effective school library programmes, including col-

laboration between librarians and teachers, to enhance students' information literacy development.

Several studies examined the correlation between school librarians' competencies and student learning outcomes, including studies of digital literacy, information technology management, and digital citizenship. Most importantly, research has shown that highly competent school librarians positively impacted student learning outcomes. Smith and Johnson (2018) found that school librarians' expertise in information literacy instruction positively influenced students' academic achievement. Additionally, research by Todd (2006, 2008, 2011a, 2017) demonstrated that school libraries with highly qualified librarians positively impacted students' reading motivation, skills, and academic performance. Purcell (2012) highlighted the evolving role of school librarians as information specialists who supported students in developing digital literacy and information literacy skills. They discussed the integration of technology into school library programmes to enhance information literacy instruction. Following the continuous rapid development of information landscape, the competencies required of school librarians have also transformed and now encompass a wide range of skills including information access, instructional partnerships, program administration, digital literacy, and information technology management, and these skills are reflected in many other competence models (Hughes-Hassell & Mancall, 2015; Leckie, Given & Buschman, 2010; IFLA School Library Guidelines, 2015; American Association of School Librarians, 2018). Leckie, Given, and Buschman (2010) and Loertscher, Koechlin, and Rosenfeld (2013) argued that school librarians must be adept at navigating the digital landscape, guiding students in evaluating online information, and promoting ethical and responsible use of digital resources.

In 2014, we discussed the importance of school libraries research from the perspective of providing proof of their quality for their future sustainability and roles in today's quickly changing environments. We argued that the ongoing development and testing of quality assessment models and frameworks are very important, in fact, critical for the school library profession (Vilar & Stričević, 2014). Generally, a school library has always been recognized as qualitative if it is dynamic, inclusive, well-resourced, staffed by competent librarians, actively fosters learning and teaching competencies and needs of

its users by supporting literacies, a love for learning, and diverse needs of the school community, while being integrated part of the curriculum. Our arguments went further:

“...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.” (Vilar & Stričević, 2012, p. 4)

Researching school libraries is therefore important for several academic and practical reasons, connected with practical as well as academic circumstances. This research touches upon a wide array of educational and societal factors which shed light upon the important role of school libraries in quality education. Understanding the role of school libraries in fostering academic success, information literacy, and equitable education is essential for improving educational systems and ensuring that students are provided with opportunities to develop the best possible knowledge and competencies—and in this sense this research spans far beyond the library field. Furthermore, this research is significant and has practical implications for several stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers, and communities, seeking to enhance the learning experience for students of all backgrounds.

Undoubtedly, there are also several other areas that influence school library research agendas, for example exploring relations of school libraries (e.g.,

Todd & Kuhlthau 2005a, 2005b; Novljan, 2010; Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2015; Todd, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b; Vilar & Stričević 2014; Vilar, 2024; Vilar & Zabukovec 2016, 2017, 2020, 2022; Njoku & Ken-Ag-biriogu, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020; Hay, 2005, 2006, Hay & Todd, 2010):

- **Educational outcomes:** Good school libraries play a pivotal role in shaping students' educational outcomes. Research in this area can explore and provide proof how access to well-maintained and equipped libraries with diverse resources and competent librarians correlates with academic achievement. Understanding this connection can inform educational policies and practices, and influence requirements for school libraries. Understanding the impact of school libraries on student outcomes can inform resource allocation decisions. Policymakers can make more informed choices regarding funding and support for school library programmes based on research findings.
- **State of the educational systems:** Good school libraries hold a strong position in the educational systems which are based on firm quality standards and follow contemporary guidelines in all relevant fields. Education is also a social institution, and, as such, it is under the influence of the ideas, trends, and movements that affect society. This, in turn, also affects libraries.
- **Literacy development:** School libraries are crucial in promoting literacy and reading culture. Investigating the impact of school library programmes on students' attitudes to reading, reading habits, and competencies such as comprehension and language skills can provide insights into effective teaching strategies and, in turn, influence the development of quality standards for school libraries.
- **Development of 21st-century skills:** In an age of information overload and problematic information, it is vital to equip students with information literacy and related literacies (e.g., media, visual, metaliteracy). Researching school libraries can assess how they contribute to students' ability to assess their information needs, find and evaluate appropriate information, and use it effectively, critically, and responsibly. In this context, research on school libraries can assess their role in developing critical 21st-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking and prob-

lem-solving, and communication. This information can help shape curricula and teaching methods and is especially essential in today's digital and AI-influenced era.

- **Innovation and technology integration:** As libraries adapt to the digital age, research can explore how they integrate technology and innovative teaching methods, thus informing educators on best practices for utilizing technology in educational settings, including collaboration with librarians.
- **Professional development:** School librarians are essential educators who often provide formal and informal professional development for teachers. Research in this area can examine how school librarians contribute to teacher effectiveness and student learning through collaborative efforts, and what they themselves need to effectively execute these tasks.
- **Cultural and socioeconomic equity:** School libraries can act as equalizers, providing access to resources and services, thus offering equal opportunities for students from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. Here research can shed light on the role of libraries in bridging educational gaps and promoting equity in education.
- **Community engagement:** School libraries often serve as hubs for community engagement. Research can investigate the extent to which libraries foster community involvement and support lifelong learning for all members of the community.
- **Global education trends and trends in the development of the library field:** School libraries are not limited to one country or region. Comparative research can shed light on the international best practices, enabling educators and policymakers to learn from successful models worldwide.

In all of the aforementioned areas, significance of such research is framed by a common denominator—the quality of school libraries. Namely, all these areas provide the basis for understanding how a school library functions on its path from the informational to transformational role—as Todd or Todd and Kuhlthau showed in the model and studies (Todd, 2006, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a, 2005b). They comprise all

contextual elements which are needed to transform the school library from its mere informational function to becoming a true learning agent. Their model is the result of research that links all contextual elements, which is the most important methodological trait of their study (Todd & Kulthau 2005a, 2005b). It includes the perceptions of all stakeholders, especially students, who are crucial both as study participants and as the focus of the educational process. In order to understand the context and link all contextual elements that contribute to and help build the quality of school libraries, the research must include these crucial stakeholders, and for this reason, in the “Ohio study”, (Todd & Kulthau 2005a, 2005b) the researchers used the so called *help construct*—they asked the students how the school library helped them without having previously formed expectations of what the school library should be.

In the next chapter, we address the concept of school library quality in more detail.

### **3. Quality of School Libraries**

Quality school libraries are essential components of the education system and can significantly contribute to student success, literacy, and lifelong learning. They provide a range of educational benefits that extend beyond the classroom and help shape informed, curious, and engaged citizens. As discussed earlier, quality school libraries support learning and academic achievement by providing access to a wide range of educational resources of various formats, which support classroom learning, research, out-of-school activities, and others; support and promote various literacies and reading culture; promote and provide equitable access to information, thus reducing educational disparities; support and collaborate with teachers to develop lesson plans, research projects, and teaching materials, and by doing this help enhance the effectiveness of classroom instruction; serve as school hubs for technology and digital learning by effectively integrating and using technology. They can also serve as community hubs, hosting events, workshops, and activities that engage parents and community members in the educational process. Quality school libraries invest in the professional development of librarians, ensuring

that they stay current with the best practices in librarianship and education and, as such, serve as indispensable co-workers to teachers. Quality school libraries help equip students with the skills they need to succeed in an information-driven, technology-rich world, and to become lifelong learners who are prepared for further education and the workforce. Last but not least, quality school libraries often engage in research and innovative practices, contributing to the broader field of education and library science.

In general, the quality of school libraries can be assessed based on several criteria and characteristics, which are often referred to as fundamental elements that contribute to a quality school library (clearly, with variously shaped specific indicators of quality):

- adequate, diverse, up-to-date, and accessible collections, to cater to the varied interests, reading levels, and academic needs of the users;
- qualified librarians who play a pivotal role in managing the library, collaborating with students and teachers, and integrating information literacy into the curriculum;
- active promotion of various literacies by developing and implementing adequate programmes;
- integration of technology into library services and resources (providing access to computers, educational software, online databases, e-materials, and others);
- serving as places for safe learning in physical and digital settings, including comfortable, welcoming, and inclusive space;
- curriculum support through resources and services, integration into the curriculum with teaching activities;
- community engagement inside and outside school;
- ongoing professional development of librarians to provide the best possible services by staying current with trends in education, library science, and technology;
- regular assessment of library services and collection to ensure they meet the changing needs of the school community, through feedback from users;
- adequate funding and a budget that supports the library's operations, acquisitions, and programming.

As Novljan wrote (1996, 2010), a quality school library with a competent school librarian contributes significantly to quality learning and teaching. The library contributes to creative learning with information in three dimensions (Novljan, 2010: 15)—information as:

- a thing (the subject of processing in information systems),
- a process (informing),
- knowledge (personal knowledge that changes).

Novljan based her narrative on Buckland's (1991) information-as-thing theory, putting it into the context of school libraries.

Information presented in these three ways helps build knowledge and competencies about and linked with the use of:

- information sources for the purpose of acquiring knowledge (i.e., learning),
- sources that develop reading and other abilities in the field of literacy,
- sources that develop mental abilities and organization of work.

Novljan (2010) also establishes that a quality school library also helps develop thinking and creativity because libraries are actually the best classrooms for learning with information sources. In the library and with the library, users develop knowledge about the use of resources, about learning, about developing reading and other literacies, mental and social skills. Thus, the library:

- encourages and supports learning with its collection of library materials, with its services that introduce users to information sources outside libraries;
- provides options for choosing different approaches (methods, models) to solving problems, for the continuous development of abilities and competencies, also through the ethical views of individual and social actions;
- is an unmistakable link between people, disciplines, contents, formats, contents and their forms, insight with ethics, and others.

Assessing the quality of any school library involves looking at how well it meets at least some of these criteria and the specific needs of its student population. A quality school library enhances the educational experience, supports academic achievement, and fosters a lifelong love for learning and reading among students. As Vilar (2024a) writes, many authors and institutions such as the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) discussed measuring the quality of school libraries. Several sets of performance measures and approaches have been suggested (as shown, for example, by Meyers, Fisher & Marcoux (2014) and Ramanjaneya (2017)), including those that addressed various aspects of the work of school librarians, such as collection development, information access, instructional support, technology integration, and collaboration with teachers. Most measures take into account evidence-based practice (IFLA School Library Guidelines, 2015; Beile & Boote, 2016; Todd, 2012a) and the impact of libraries on their environment and users (Scottish Library and Information Council, 2017; White, 2016; Todd, Kuhlthau & Heinström, 2005). However, deeper insights are also recommended, which was well demonstrated by the work of Ross Todd and colleagues who managed to document and gather proofs on the links between the quality of school library and its image in the eyes of users (Todd, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b; Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a, 2005b; Todd, Kuhlthau & Heinström, 2005; Gordon, 2023). They also formed one of the most widely cited and used models of quality school libraries (Todd, 2005, 2011b, 2017).

#### **4. School Libraries in Slovenia and Croatia**

As emphasized by Vilar and Stričević (2014), in both countries school libraries had developed until 1991 according to the same laws and standards which regulated the education system and librarianship field. Since then, the development has been partly different. But 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.

#### **4.1. Slovenian Situation**

School libraries in Slovenia are formally organized in primary schools, secondary schools (gymnasiums, professional schools, vocational schools, centres with several school types), music schools, schools with adapted programmes for pupils with special needs, institutions for children with special needs (at primary, secondary level), and dorms (secondary level, for pupils with special needs) (IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Children aged 0-18, 2018; Vilar, 2024b). Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2022), Vilar and Haramija (2022), and Vilar (2024a) warned that there is no systematic library service in kindergartens and in schools for adults who did not finish regular schooling during their youth. They have their own separate legislation which does not mention a school library. In practice, in cases where there is one institution with several types of schools (for example, a primary school with a kindergarten, or a school centre with a gymnasium, a professional school, and a school for adults), their school library covers all of them. In case of separate schools, there is a school library only where the law specifically requires it (for example, in a primary school, but not in a kindergarten).

The current formal framework is, as Vilar (2024a, 2024b) and Fekonja (2016) write, that school libraries in Slovenia operate in two systems: as part of formal education institutions, they fall under the jurisdiction of the ministry in charge of education (at present, it is formally named Ministry of Education<sup>2</sup>, and covers formal education at preschool, primary, and secondary level, while in the past it used to cover sports and higher education), and as part of the library system, they are under jurisdiction of the ministry in charge of culture (Ministry of Culture<sup>3</sup>). As such, school libraries are the subject in two parallel legislations: the one covering education and the one covering libraries, which, in some cases, causes confusion and unclarity. The education system assures existence of the school library through the statement in the main education law (ZOFVI, 2007) which literally says, “The school is equipped with a library.” This means

<sup>2</sup> In Slovenian: Ministrstvo za vzgojo in izobraževanje, website <https://www.gov.si/en/state-authorities/ministries/ministry-of-education/>

<sup>3</sup> In Slovenian: Ministrstvo za kulturo, website <https://www.gov.si/en/state-authorities/ministries/ministry-of-culture/>

that every school is obliged to have a library. The law does not, however, define how this library should be set up, organized, financed, equipped, and others. Non-systemic financing is one of the main obstacles to a more balanced development of Slovenian school libraries. Schools do not receive targeted financial means specially for their libraries—instead, each school receives the finances for their operation in one bulk and the school management decides how they will distribute them to run their school. Therefore, the actual conditions under which the school libraries operate are left to the ingenuity and competency of librarians who depend on the management of their school and their awareness of the necessity of their existence and quality. For this reason, there are significant differences between school libraries. School libraries are therefore subject to legislative requirements. The next thing which is defined in the school system legislation is the librarian. The law clearly requires each school library to employ a professional librarian and defines the employment conditions and work norms. There are also curricular documents for the courses taught by the school librarian in primary (Knjižnična informacijska znanja, 2008) and secondary school (Knjižnično informacijsko znanje, 2008).

The professional framework for library work is provided by the library system, first and foremost through the basic legislation, the Library Law (Zakon o knjižničarstvu, 2015). The law has been valid from 2016, and, in it, the school libraries have a specific position, being the only library type not directly providing public service—instead, school libraries are defined as libraries in support of another public service, namely education. The library legislation defines for school libraries their basic tasks, teaching tasks (thus explicitly stating that school librarians' task is to teach information literacy!), some standards and recommendations, basic conditions, inclusion in the national bibliographic system (COBISS<sup>4</sup>), obligation to participate in the nationwide statistical measurements (although this has become somewhat problematic, since the National and University Library has stopped these measurements due to inadequate funding, and plans to continue this in 2024), to prepare strategic documents (in process),

<sup>4</sup> COBISS (Co-operative Online Bibliographic System & Services) is “an organizational model of joining libraries into a national library information system with shared cataloguing, the COBIB union bibliographic/catalogue database and local bibliographic databases of participating libraries, the COLIB database on libraries, the CONOR authority database, and with a number of other functions”. (<https://www.cobiss.net/cobiss-platform.htm>).

to appoint a member in the National Library Council that works under the Ministry of Culture, and are subject to supervision (inspection). Unfortunately, neither system has yet provided school libraries with professional standards. In the past, the ministry responsible for libraries had managed to prepare the standards for school libraries, but these were unfortunately not adopted by the Ministry of Education and therefore did not gain validity to be followed by the libraries. This means that librarians need to rely on international documents for professional recommendations and solutions. In the supplement to the Slovenian translation of the IFLA School Library Guidelines (2019), we find that the development of Slovenian school libraries has always followed international school library guidelines (2002, 2015). According to these guidelines (2019), a system of professional support to school librarians—although understaffed and underfinanced and therefore inadequate—has been set up to a certain extent by the national organizations responsible for education (Ministry of Education, National Education Institute Slovenia) and librarianship (National and University Library, Institute for Information Science Maribor). Through this system, school librarians have available professional and technical support, educational opportunities, and chances to stay informed of the latest developments in relevant fields (legislation, technology, etc.).

#### ***4.2. Croatian Situation***

School libraries in Croatia are organized in primary schools, secondary schools (gymnasiums, professional schools, vocational schools, centres with several school types), art schools, schools in institutions for special needs youth, and dorms for secondary school pupils. Statistical indicators for the year 2022 show that there are 1,246 school libraries of all types in Croatia<sup>5</sup>. Although preschool education is part of the complete education system, a library is not mandatory in kindergartens, but in practice many kindergartens have special collections of literature for children, parents, and professional staff. School libraries in Croatia fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Science and Education<sup>6</sup>, but as the

<sup>5</sup> Portal matične djelatnosti knjižnica u Hrvatskoj: Statistički podaci i pokazatelji uspješnosti školskih knjižnica za 2022. godinu. Nacionalna i sveučilišna knjižnica u Zagrebu, <https://maticna.nsk.hr/statistika/preuzimanje/>

<sup>6</sup> In Croatian: Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, website <https://mzo.gov.hr/>

Ministry of Culture and Media is in charge of legal and professional work of all kinds of libraries, some operational issues are distributed between the two ministries, including the Croatian Library Board, which is an advisory body for all types of libraries for both ministries, but works within the Ministry of Culture and Media<sup>7</sup>. By decision of the Minister of Culture and Media, librarians acquire a professional title after completing their studies and at least one year of working in a library. In order to work as school librarians, which is not a formal title but is commonly accepted in literature, they must acquire pedagogical competencies during their studies or through a lifelong learning programme worth 60 ECTS credits, which is prescribed in the legislative documents. The formal title is professional collaborator librarian<sup>8</sup>. (Pravilnik o tjednim radnim obvezama učitelja i stručnih suradnika u osnovnoj školi, 2014). This document also brings a list of librarians' tasks, from collaboration in teaching, encouraging reading culture, and forming school's multimedia centre, to encouraging the teachers and other school professionals to use scientific and professional literature, cataloguing, as well as working with publishers and other librarians. From this, it is difficult to conclude *how* these tasks should be carried out (such as collaborating in teaching), but it is important that they are listed, because this means that they *have to be carried out*.

Just as in Slovenia, according to the Croatian Law on Education in Primary and Secondary School (Zakon o odgoju i obrazovanju u osnovnoj i srednjoj školi, 2009), it is prescribed that the school institution has a library—the school is obliged to have a library. In this document/regulation, we can see that all school personnel need to have pedagogical competencies, school librarians included (Article 105, line 12). Additionally, it says that the library is an integral part of the educational process and serves to realize the educational process, and that it must meet the conditions prescribed by the standards. The Standard for School Libraries prescribes all the details, from library space and collection to tasks and activities (Standard za školske knjižnice, 2023). As the last Standard was adopted way back in 2000, it was more a reflection of the situation at that time than a developmentally oriented and realistic tool for assessment and self-assessment. Therefore, school libraries developed with

<sup>7</sup> In Croatian: Ministarstvo kulture i medija, website <https://min-kulture.gov.hr/>

<sup>8</sup> In Croatian: stručni suradnik knjižničar

different intensity because they depended more on the perception of individual schools than on the prescribed conditions for work. It is believed that the new Standard will enable aligned development and better conditions for the operation of school libraries. Although it stipulates the financing of libraries, especially the acquisition of the fund, it will take time for many libraries to catch up over two decades. It will also take time for a large part of school management to become aware of the importance of investing in libraries and their crucial role in education and learning. Librarians, as professional associates (in addition to pedagogues, psychologists, and educational-rehabilitation experts), are educated at the master's level (five years of university study), but considering that they work in education, they must also acquire the mentioned additional pedagogical competencies and pass a distinctive professional exam at the Agency for Upbringing and Education. In practice, this means longer training for school librarians than librarians in other types of libraries.

The Law on Libraries (Zakon o knjižnicama, 2019) prescribes general conditions for the establishment and operation of libraries, and all other conditions, including the competencies of librarians, are prescribed by rules and standards. There are many opportunities for professional development and lifelong learning—through the Centre for Continuing Education of Librarians in The National and University Library<sup>9</sup>, conferences organized by the Croatian Library Association<sup>10</sup>, and especially through the central yearly conference of The Agency for Upbringing and Education called Spring School for School Librarians<sup>11</sup>. The involvement of individual school librarians in international associations (IFLA and IASL) and in Erasmus projects, in which some schools participate, enables the transfer of knowledge, but considering the number of school libraries and librarians in Croatia, direct involvement is too small. Although the Standard for School Libraries prescribes the professional training of school librarians, the actual conditions often depend on the school management and their willingness to financially support the lifelong learning of school librarians.

There is little wholistic scientific research on school libraries in Croatia, and

<sup>9</sup> In Croatian: Centar za stalno stručno usavršavanje knjižničara, website <https://cssu.nsk.hr/>

<sup>10</sup> In Croatian: Hrvatsko knjižničarsko društvo, website <https://www.hkdrustvo.hr/>

<sup>11</sup> In Croatian: Proletna škola školskih knjižničara, website <https://www.azoo.hr/najave-i-izvjesca-arhiva/27310/>

it is mainly carried out in the context of graduate theses at master's studies or within the framework of doctoral studies as dissertations. What stands out are the works by Banek Zorica and collaborators (see for example Zorica & Špiranec 2011; Špiranec & Zorica, 2011; Banek Zorica, 2015; Banek Zorica & Dukic, 2016; Banek Zorica & Grubišić-Čabo, 2022; Hebrang Grgic, 2013) who continuously investigate certain elements of quality of school libraries in the context of new paradigms of school librarianship. There is no systematic research at the national level in Croatia, which would deal with the quality of school libraries according to comparable parameters. Statistical data and analytics monitored by the Centre for the Development of Libraries and Librarianship in the National and University Library are valuable but insufficient considering the need for continuous scientific research, the results of which could monitor and develop this activity.

## **5. Developments in Research and Theory Between 2014 and 2024**

As we show further on, the theoretical developments can be shown in the areas of modelling competencies of school librarians and quality school library, as well as investigating the role of school library in the curriculum, both in the context of developing information and other literacies and collaborating with the teachers. Even formally, there are certain differences between the two countries—namely, while, in the first area, both countries can show mainly theoretical contemplations, in the second area, Slovenian results are based on empirical research, thus providing a base for similar research in Croatia. We therefore did not decide to do a wholistic comparative approach but to show the results of these endeavours, along with their implications for practice. But aspirations stay the same, and achievements in one country can benefit the other, also from the viewpoint of avoiding certain obstacles or mistakes.

### ***5.1. Developments in Slovenia***

There is a relatively rich body of theoretical professional literature on school libraries and librarianship. The professional journal *School Library*

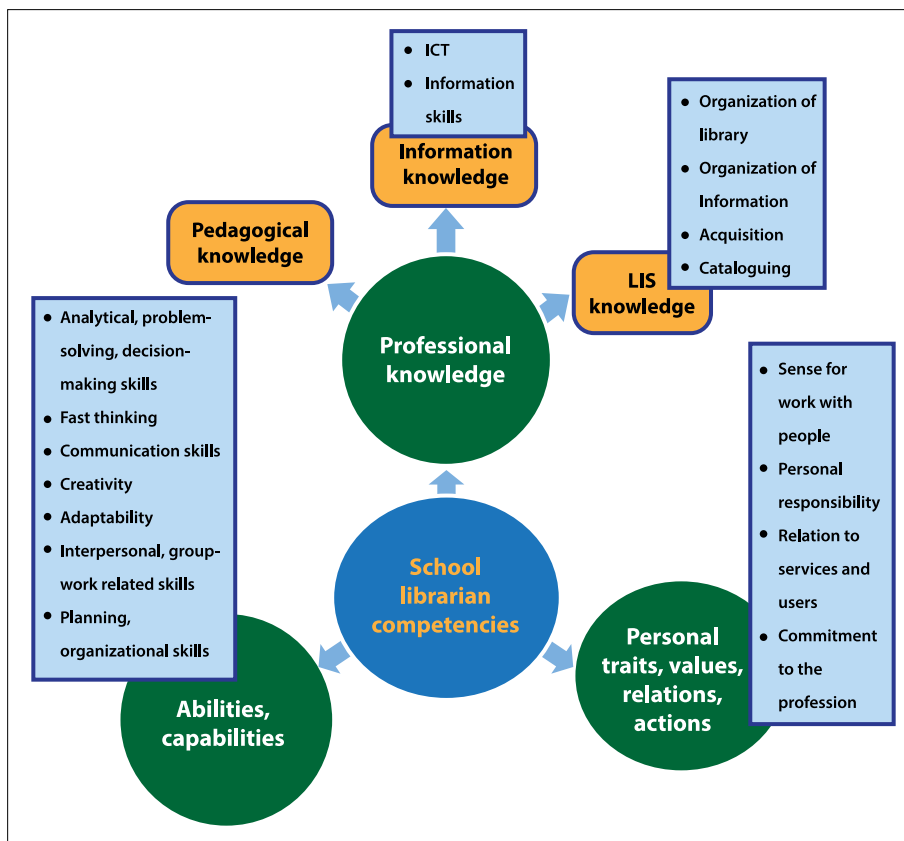
(Šolska knjižnica), which has existed since 1991, acts as a bridge between theory and practice and brings many current and relevant information (research results, applicative solutions, etc.) to school library practitioners, including many examples of various teaching and cross-curricular approaches involving school libraries. Applicative research in the area of school libraries revolves around various interesting topics, for example work with talented pupils (Repinc & Vilar, 2013), implementation of new automation environments and tools within the context of transition to COBISS system (e.g., Šink, 2017, 2020; Šink & Vilar, 2018; Banjanin, 2023), and kindergarten library services (Zabukovec, Vilar & Fekonja, 2019). The first document to assume the function of a development strategy was published in 1995 (Idejni načrt slovenskih šolskih knjižnic, 1995) but has been neither entirely followed nor updated since that time. The integration of the school library in the curriculum has been and has stayed the most problematic area. Among the most important theoretical developments, we can mention the modelling of the school librarians' competencies, and modelling of the quality school library, presented in the following two chapters.

### *5.1.1. Modelling the Competencies of School Librarians*

For the purpose of the research on the competencies of school librarians, Zabukovec and Steinbuch (2010) first developed a broad outline of the required competencies, drawing on the competencies for teachers, which was later expanded by Zabukovec (2014). The librarian needs to have the knowledge to organize and manage the library, which he/she passes on to the users as part of his/her duties. Besides the basic library knowledge, the librarian is involved in the process of learning and teaching and therefore needs to have a range of competencies (similar to a teacher). The librarian gives his/her contribution to information literacy in each school as the taught course called *Library and Information Knowledge*. An information literate school librarian uses the information process for independent learning and problem solving, has library knowledge about the organization and functioning of the library, and knowledge of pedagogy and its sub-disciplines of didactics, methodology, and psychology, which help him/her to transfer the knowledge of information literacy to students (Steinbuch, 2009). As the school

librarian is also a partner in teaching and learning, pedagogical knowledge is also extremely important for the relevance of the school library in the school environment and for the integration of the library programme into the educational curriculum. Librarians are also information professionals and therefore need information skills. To be successful in a school library, a school librarian also needs various skills, abilities, aptitudes, as well as personal qualities, attitudes, behaviours which are the third set of competencies, very relevant to the work of a school librarian. The model of competencies thus consists of (Zabukovec and Steinbuch, 2010; Zabukovec, 2014; Figure 1):

- 1) professional knowledge (expert and technical knowledge):
  - a. general knowledge
  - b. library knowledge
    - i. knowledge and understanding of library organization,
    - ii. information organization (knowledge of information sources, understanding of information resources and their use),
    - iii. acquisition and professional processing of library materials (for transparent use and accessibility).
  - c. pedagogical knowledge
    - i. knowledge of the curriculum,
    - ii. pedagogical-psychological knowledge (knowledge of didactics and methodology),
    - iii. bibliopedagogical knowledge.
- 2) information knowledge
  - a. information and communication technology (ICT) knowledge,
  - b. information search and retrieval knowledge.
- 3) skills, abilities, and aptitudes
  - a. analytical, problem-solving, and decision-making skills,
  - b. the ability to think on his/her feet,
  - c. communication skills,
  - d. creative skills,
  - e. flexibility and adaptability,
  - f. interpersonal and teamwork skills,
  - g. planning and organizational skills.



**FIGURE 1.** Model of school librarian competencies (Zabukovec, 2014; translation and graphic presentation by P. Vilar)

- 4) skills, abilities, and aptitudes
  - a. analytical, problem-solving, and decision-making skills,
  - b. the ability to think on his/her feet,
  - c. communication skills,
  - d. creative skills,
  - e. flexibility and adaptability,
  - f. interpersonal and teamwork skills,
  - g. planning and organizational skills.
- 5) personal qualities (attitudes, behaviours)
  - a. a sense of working with people,
  - b. appropriate and responsible behaviour,

- c. attitudes towards service and user satisfaction,
- d. commitment to the profession.

As we demonstrate, research worldwide and in Slovenia has shown that the school library can be integrated into the school curriculum, and librarians can successfully implement information literacy programmes if they collaborate with teachers and inter-curricular links are established. Therefore, the educational knowledge of librarians, which includes curriculum knowledge, pedagogical-psychological knowledge (didactic and methodological knowledge), and bibliopedagogical knowledge, is also important for the integration of the school library into the curriculum. This knowledge is also compulsory for Slovenian school librarians, as the Law (*Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja*, 2007) requires that librarians must also have a pedagogical qualification. This can be acquired either in the context of a full-time formal pedagogical course of study or through a programme of complementary education.

### 5.1.2. *Modelling Quality School Library*

Initial approaches to modelling quality school libraries—the basis were some of the findings of the OBJEM<sup>12</sup> project (Zabukovec and Vilar, 2018)—took into consideration the following starting points (Vilar and Novak Zabukovec, 2020: 287-288):

1. **Improving cooperation between the school library/school librarian and the school and kindergarten staff** to establish new connections with the librarian's teaching of *Library and Information Knowledge* each year and to find opportunities to collaborate at a different level than usual.
2. **Strengthen/update the internal promotion of the school library** in the school, its activities, and the opportunities it offers—especially promotion among teaching staff—for example, the librarian should prepare an action plan, outlining the actions to be taken (e.g., presentation

<sup>12</sup> OBJEM was a national project on encouraging reading literacy (<https://www.zrss.si/projekti/projekt-objem/>).

- of the library at pedagogical meetings, development of a mission statement, plan for a new role of the librarian's teaching, etc.).
3. **Strengthening or updating the external promotion of the school library**, thus influencing the change in the perception of the school library by external stakeholders (parents, decision-makers, the library profession and professional associations, the general public).
  4. **Strengthen opportunities to raise awareness of the importance and role of the library profession** (among school management and staff)—for example, establish regular participation of librarians in pedagogical conferences (where this does not already exist) and other meetings.
  5. **Improvement/clarification of the legislative framework** in which school librarians operate (norms, status, conditions, etc.)—while this is not the domain of the individual librarian, things should be addressed at the level of the ministry/national library (working groups on the revision of the regulations, standards, and setting up the national SL strategy).
  6. **Strengthening professional development opportunities for school librarians** where possible. Topics could be more complex information literacy, ICT and online topics, team (collaborative) teaching, cross-curricular teaching, textbooks as a lever for building library collections, strengthening relationships with colleagues, presentation skills, training in library space management, new types of materials and services (ICT and AI related, etc.).
  7. **Improvement of library space and equipment, more influence of librarians on financial resources**, for example, exempting library resources from the school material budget and setting up an independent library budget.
  8. **Consider ways and means to increase and, above all, make the library more integrated**. Increasingly integrate the library into the life and work of the school or kindergarten, including through awareness-raising, education, and training of teachers, kindergarten and school management, and education and training of librarians in the kindergarten and school.
  9. **Consider how to improve cooperation and networking between teachers and librarians**, including joint planning, implementation,

- and evaluation of activities with the aim of continuous improvement.
10. **Consider how to improve library space, equipment, staffing, and other conditions** (e.g., in terms of materials, systematic and planned work), as well as to adapt the legislative framework and regulations.
  11. **Libraries in kindergartens should be managed and staffed by qualified school librarians, not by teachers**; however, librarians should be properly recognized and valued for their work, which means adjusting the legislative framework and regulations accordingly.
  12. **In the context of educational work, consider a higher quality, more varied and more frequent library activity, including a wider range of materials addressing different literacies** (pre-reading, reading, information, media, multimodal, family literacy, etc.), and including other areas of relevance to children, other people involved in the child's life (e.g., parents).
  13. **Develop a systematic collection of quantitative and qualitative data on the work of school libraries** to ensure continuous monitoring and identification of challenges.

### *5.1.2.1. Models of Quality School Library*

#### *5.1.2.1.1. Draft Model*

First, a draft model was designed, presented by Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2020) and Vilar (2024a). This purely theoretical draft model (Figure 2) included seven segments, each consisting of several elements:

1. **Good conditions:** In order to produce and support quality work, basic working conditions must be available in the library, starting with reliable financing, high-quality, up-to-date, relevant library materials in sufficient quantities, appropriate location and accessibility, appropriate premises, modern equipment and technology.
2. **Competent librarian:** A competent school librarian possesses LIS, pedagogical (PED) and general competencies and values. These are noticed and appreciated by the teachers, management, students, and external users. The librarian is also responsible for establishing his/her own im-

age in the eyes of users. This, in turn, is also influenced by factors such as the organization of work at the school, the attitude of the management, and work norms. Taken together, these factors would determine the content and scope of the librarian's work.

3. **Development strategy:** Slovenian librarianship law requires that each library must prepare a strategic plan for its development and that this plan must be included in the school's strategic development plan. It is a strategic view of the future, based on the current situation, important for the development of every library. A quality school library must have such a plan.
4. **Importance, indispensability, popularity:** A quality school library is actively and dynamically involved in the life and work of the school. All actors are aware of the school library's importance; it is popular with them, and they perceive it as indispensable. Among other things, this is important because it creates positive expectations of users towards the library. It is important to remember that the responsibility for creating these expectations cannot be transferred entirely to users—the librarian also has an important role.
5. **Activity and availability:** A quality school library is active and accessible—this is shown in its openness during, before, and after classes, its physical accessibility, including both the location of the library and library space, as well as in its activities inside and outside the library (including virtual types of accessibility). Active internal and external promotion of the library is connected to all this.
6. **Inclusion, integration:** A quality school library is closely and regularly included and integrated into the entire life and work of the school. This is shown by the use of its materials and resources, space, technology, and inclusion of the librarian in every activity that takes place at the school at all levels. The library is included in all departments and classes, in teaching preparations, and planning of teaching. As part of teaching teams, the school librarian is present at professional meetings and gatherings such as pedagogical conferences. In this way, the library becomes indispensable in the minds of all actors.
7. **Contribution to knowledge, literacy, values, atmosphere:** A quality school library contributes to knowledge, literacies, values, and, through

creating a supportive atmosphere, it is unequivocally recognized. Such contribution is measurable. For this, clear criteria and approaches must be established, which, similarly to the creation of a development strategy, are again linked to the knowledge and competencies of librarians in areas such as user research, quality measurement, and promotion of services. Visibility and an unequivocal contribution make it possible to establish the library as an important stakeholder in teaching. Naturally, these are soft areas where determining the influence of just one actor is undoubtedly very challenging.



**FIGURE 2.** Draft Model of Quality School Library (Source: Vilar and Novak Zabukovec, 2020: 289)

As emphasized by the authors, a quality library needs to prove that it is positive in all segments, although in some cases, a well-qualified and engaged librarian can, to some extent, make up for other potential gaps.

This theoretical model was validated (reported in detail in Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2022)), with two goals in mind: 1) A research-oriented goal: to acquire and analyse data to form a more verified version of the model that would comply to professional recommendations and respond to practitioners' needs and allow a nation-wide and perhaps wider verification of the model. 2) A more hands-on-oriented goal: to demonstrate to the practitioners how to approach analysis in the first place, especially at the level of an individual institution (i.e., their library).

### **1) Research-Oriented Validation**

As presented by Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2022) and Vilar (2024a), each segment and element of the draft model was tested using various quantitative and/or qualitative methods, approaches to the analysis, data sources, and samples. The reasons for this variety were also varied: the rather lengthy timeframe, availability (and sometimes non-availability of data), research capacities, support of the decisionmakers, and others. The data and data sources included:

- Quantitative statistical data of the national library center CeZAR<sup>13</sup>;
- Quantitative and qualitative data from the surveys within the OBJEM project (collected by the authors or other collaborators);
- Quantitative and qualitative data from surveys and other documents (Doodle polls, Padlet documents) from the participant trainings that the authors performed within the OBJEM project;
- Qualitative data from the strategic and yearly plans and yearly reports of the schools and libraries in the OBJEM project.

Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2022) and Vilar (2024a) emphasize that many elements could only be partially analysed or not at all, either due to a lack of data or due to their complexity, which led to employing their own qualitative data gathering and analyses during the five years of the OBJEM project and

<sup>13</sup> Center ZA Razvoj knjižnic (in English: Centre for the Development of Libraries).

only included the project participants (fourteen kindergartens, twenty-three primary, and twenty-two secondary schools), since they did not have access to wider samples. Even where national statistics existed, it only allowed partial analyses. Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2022) provide detailed explanations of samples, methodologies, analyses, approaches, and solutions for each segment of the model, as well as the results and discussions. In summary, the authors admit that, besides discovering areas with a serious lack of data, they were also not satisfied with the findings for most segments and elements.

**TABLE 1.** *Data sources and analyses of the draft model*

Draft model segment	Elements	Data source	Analysis	Notes on sample
good conditions	financing library materials premises equipment technology	/ 1 (partially) 1 (partially) 1 (partially) 1 (partially)	/ quant. quant. quant. quant.	national data, only statistical
competent librarian	LIS comp. PED comp. GEN comp. values	1 (partially) 1 (partially) / /	quant. quant. / /	national data, only on formal edu.
development strategy	of school of library	4 4	qual. qual.	only OBJEM participants
important, indispensable, popular	with pupils with parents with teachers with management	2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially)	quant./qual. quant./qual. quant./qual. quant./qual.	only OBJEM participants
active, accessible	open active phys. accessible promoted	1 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially)	quant. qual. qual. qual.	only OBJEM participants
included, integrated	regularly everywhere all levels all meetings all teaching plans	2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially)	qual. qual. qual. qual. qual.	only OBJEM participants
contributes	to knowledge to literacies to values to atmosphere	2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially) 2, 3 (partially)	qual. qual. qual. qual.	only OBJEM participants

(Source: Vilar, 2024a)

## 2) Practice-Oriented Validation

The analyses were also examples of how to approach the analysis of each element, along with suggested possibilities for improvement with a goal to empower the librarians wanting to attempt this at their school. In this, an attempt was made to provide practitioners with guidelines and a sample of such analysis, with the desire that more of this will be done in practice, leading to a more development-oriented school libraries environment. It is a pleasure to say that results of these endeavours are already visible—see for example Tušek (2022).

### 5. 1. 2. 1. 2. Finalized Models

Through these analyses, the *Model of Quality School Library* was formed (Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2022) and Vilar (2024a); presented here in Figure 2). Initial analyses showed that the segments and elements of the draft model were *basically* appropriate; however, while the draft model included seven seemingly equivalent segments, a closer look and analyses revealed that:

- 1) In certain segments of the model, some additional elements as well as changes to the existing ones were needed in terms of distribution into areas, naming, and content (Table 2).
- 2) In the model, there are actually three different types of elements that are also interdependent of each other. Therefore, a different display is needed.

**TABLE 2.** *The changes in the names of the elements*

Draft model	Final model
good conditions	work conditions
competent librarian	librarian
development strategy	development strategy
important, indispensable, popular	important and popular
active, accessible	interactive
included, integrated	integrated
contributes	effective

(Source: Vilar and Novak Zabukovec, 2022: 250)

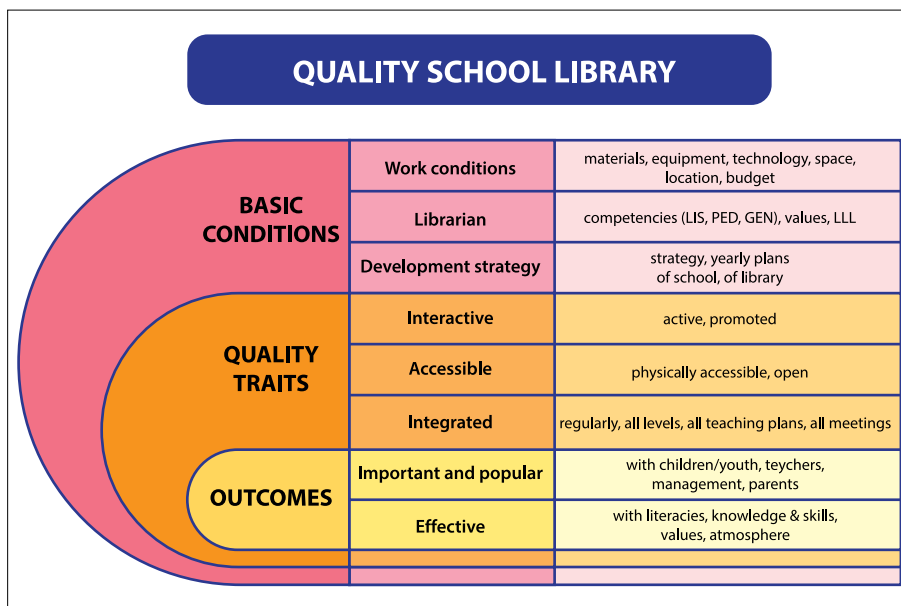
The *Model of Quality School Library* (Figure 3) thus consists of three levels, i.e., layers on top of each other:

- Three elements comprise the *Basic conditions* that must be ensured as a foundation for quality work: “Work conditions”, “Librarian”, and “Development strategy”.
- Three elements compose the *Quality traits*, as they deal with the way librarians and libraries work and represent the ways in which a quality library is involved in the life and work of its institution: “Interactive”, “Accessible”, and “Integrated”.
- Two more elements reflect the *Outcomes* of the librarian and the library; they are therefore about where and in what ways the work of a quality library can be perceived: “Important and popular” and “Effective”.

The content of individual elements within each layer was also more precisely defined:

1) Basic conditions for library work:

- **Work conditions:** Good work conditions must be ensured. These conditions include high-quality, sufficient, and appropriate materials; a sufficiently large and suitable space with appropriate equipment; and technology placed in a central location within the school. This also includes adequate financial resources; in this context, we can also put the urgently needed dedicated or systemic funds for the school library because it is high time that the operation of school libraries ceased to be financed as part of school material resources.
- **Librarian:** The pillar of a quality school library is a competent, active, and committed school librarian, who is characterized by librarian, pedagogical, and general competencies and values. A librarian’s lifelong education is urgently needed.
- **Development strategy:** Educational institutions must have a prepared strategic document in which they define the vision and direction of their development in the next three to five years; its essential component is the school library development strategy. The annual work plan of the institution is placed in the context of this document in which its



**FIGURE 3.** *Model of Quality School Library* (Source: Vilar and Novak Zabukovec, 2022: 233)

library must also be represented with its annual plan of both professional and bibliopedagogical work.

2) Quality traits of the librarian and the library:

- **Interactive:** The library's interactivity can be perceived through its direct activity inside and outside the library. This is seen in terms of direct involvement in educational work, as well as in all other activities where it is present in the life and work of the institution. Undoubtedly, the main element of such a library is an active and committed librarian, who is also involved in its internal and external promotion and advocacy.
- **Accessible:** The element is designed simply: the library must be physically and digitally accessible to users. The library must also follow recommendations regarding accessibility for people with disabilities. In addition to physical accessibility, adequate openness of the library must also be ensured.
- **Integrated:** The integrated operation of the library is ensured when it is regularly present or integrated in all levels of educational work with its operations and materials. This can be seen in teaching preparations

and in the implementation and evaluation of educational work and is realized through collaborative teaching by the librarian and teachers. The librarian is also present at all meetings in the institution (activities, pedagogical conferences, and meetings with parents).

### 3) Outcomes of the librarian and library activities:

- Important and popular: Due to all the preceding elements, a quality school library holds a high reputation and plays an important role in its institution, it is indispensable for professional work, and it is also popular and appreciated by all users: students, teachers, and other professionals, the management of the institution, and, also, parents. There is no issue with the library also being used by non-teaching staff.
- Efficient: A library that meets all the aforementioned conditions is also efficient, as it participates in its institution and has an influence on the development of literacy, knowledge, and values. As a result, it contributes to the establishment of a positive atmosphere in the institution.

Vilar (2024) reports a pilot study to verify the model among Slovenian school library practitioners with interesting results. Most librarians had positive opinions of the model. The most important element, crucial for the identity of the library, was the qualified, competent, and active librarian. The composition of the model, with its layers, was assessed as appropriate, and it was also pointed out that some areas are more basic than others and that, without basic conditions for work, the further elements are very hard to realize. Accordingly, the librarians see as most pressing the issues pertaining to the first layer of the model: a lack of qualified staff and a lack of time for all the librarians tasks (both of which also negatively influence the accessibility of the library); inadequate and, to some extent, even harmful work norms; inadequate work conditions with regard to finances, premises, technology; inadequate or outdated materials; a lack of management support; and, above all, the problem of library not having its own financial means within school budget. The model was found useful for assessing the effectiveness and influence of the library, although most librarians did not objectively measure the impact of their services and complained to often

not having insight into the outcomes where their work is influential, such as student achievements in competitions and their written projects. The impact of the library is most visible through encouraging reading among students and teachers, activities involving the librarian's participation in the teaching/curriculum, and collaboration with the local public library, positive attitudes of the library users, use of the library for schoolwork and leisure-time activities (not only reading), positive feelings in terms of not only atmosphere but also safety, and viewing the library as a social space as well. If the librarian was absent, the users missed him/her and the library. Following this pilot study, we conducted a larger qualitative study with 123 school librarians. Initial results indicate that the model highlights important areas for quality work of school libraries and the need for their development. The areas that are most needed of further development include assessment, strategic planning, organization, proactivity, and training. At the same time, as it often happens with modelling, the model is demanding and, to some extent, theoretical. In other words, it differs greatly from the everyday situation in which librarians carry out their work. What is already evident is that Slovenian school libraries must be provided with professional standards, regulated work norms, and, above all, their own financial resources, to be proactive agents of information literacy development.

As argued by Vilar and Novak Zabukovec (2022), the model of quality school library can be used in a slightly simplified form in the context of kindergarten as well, which was attempted by Vilar and Haramija (2022; Figure 4). Firstly, we need to acknowledge the terminological contribution of the authors: Since they were talking about a library that has not yet been set up (especially in the case of libraries in independent kindergartens), they decided to establish a term *preschool library* and, consequently, named their model *the quality preschool library model*.

The authors pointed out some serious formal obstacles, identified in addition to the previously recognized difficulties in the context of school libraries. In the preschool period (the age of children is between 1 and 6 years), as in the whole educational vertical in Slovenia, it is very important for children's development to systematically develop their pre-reading competencies, followed by reading competencies and literacy. It should be noted, however, that the role of the school library in the early childhood education system in Slovenia

has not been systematized, since in half of the Slovenian public kindergartens, which are independent and not attached to a primary school, libraries have not yet been set up in a form that could be defined as a school library. Additionally, even in those kindergartens which are attached to a primary school, for primary school librarians the work with kindergartens is not recognized as part of their professional duties. This unfortunately results in very different solutions regarding library services for kindergartens, which are, put bluntly, left to the ingenuity and dedication of individual librarians. These are therefore the two biggest changes needed in Slovenian school librarianship. The next, equally important change is the regulation on designated funds for preschool libraries.

Since school libraries in kindergartens have not yet been set up in a systematic way, the authors used recommendations for school libraries and children's libraries as a basic general starting point for defining the characteristics and tasks of preschool library. Since the decision-makers and the financiers have been looking for a starting point for setting them up, the moment was certainly appropriate to establish a general starting point.

In terms of potential users, materials, space, and the librarian's work (professional librarianship and bibliopedagogical work), as well as other library segments, it would be comparable to a primary school library, especially regarding its integration into the kindergarten's professional work. Preschool libraries have the same target user groups as primary school libraries:

- children (of the kindergarten), who need to have access to fiction and informative literature and resources in a variety of formats,
- educators, who need professional literature and technology,
- other kindergarten staff,
- parents.

In shaping the model, the authors drew on the model of quality school library and therefore the Model of Quality Preschool Library (Figure 4) is its simplified "sibling".

Like the base model, it is comprised of three mutually reinforcing levels: (1) Basic conditions, (2) Quality traits, and (3) Outcomes; and within these, the following elements:

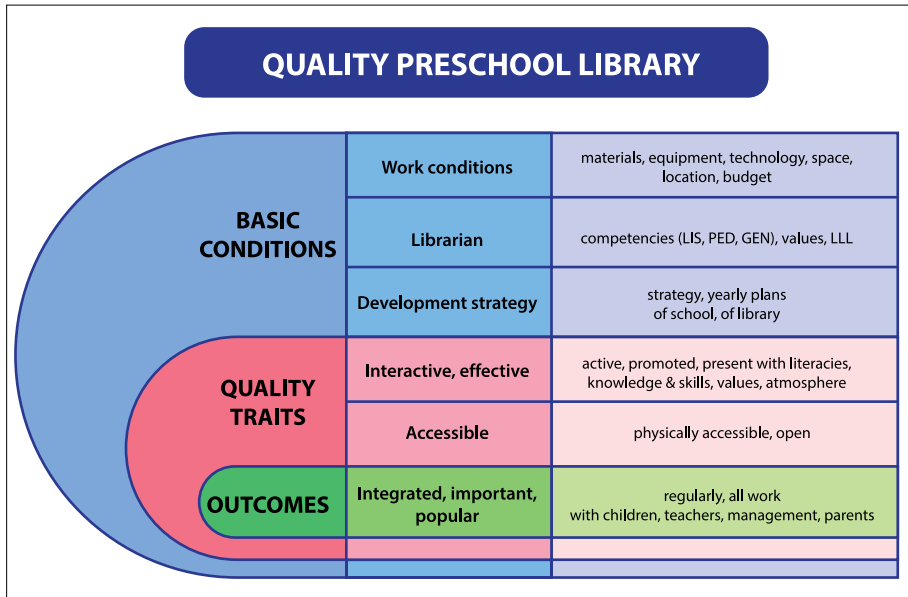


FIGURE 4. Model of Quality Preschool Library (Source: Vilar and Haramija, 2022: 240)

a) Basic conditions:

- Work conditions: Every library needs good work conditions from the outset: materials, space, location within the institution, equipment, technology, and systematically secured funding. For children’s materials, it is important that they are available for all age levels and are of good quality; the library may also have a special collection, e.g., toys and games; materials for the kindergarten teachers should be up-to-date and cover all areas of activity and support professional development. It must be possible to use the materials within the institution and to borrow them for home use. Given the nature of professional work in kindergartens and the cross-curricular nature of kindergarten work with children, both forms of library organization are appropriate: centralized and decentralized, which means a library in a central space and book corners in the playrooms. The latter are mostly already in place but need library expertise and systemic approach (appropriately selected, processed, and organized materials in different formats; the collection should have appropriate structure: some of it is used for pedagogical purposes in all the

kindergarten's activities and, in this context, also for lending to the children, and some of it is used for the professional development of the educators). The organization of the central library depends on whether the kindergarten is organized independently or as part of a primary school. In the former case, it is most often yet to be set up; in the latter case, the school library is already in place but must also work systematically with and for the kindergarten, perhaps with a separate collection.

- Librarian: A kindergarten library needs a qualified librarian; this type of work cannot be carried out by educators alongside their regular work, which means that the librarian's position must be systematized in accordance with the law (*Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja*, 2007: Article 92). The kindergarten librarian must, as in other libraries, have library, educational, and general competencies and values, and must also be a lifelong learner. He/she must ensure systematic and centralized acquisition and cataloguing, keep abreast of new developments and promote them. He/she must understand the developmental characteristics of children, as well as the characteristics of quality children's literature, and must be familiar with the materials and resources available to the teachers, as well as with modern technologies, which are the basic conditions for the librarian's appropriate selection of materials and advice on materials.
- Development strategy: Every educational institution, including kindergartens, must have a vision for its development and an annual work plan for each school year (*Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja*, 2007). Its vision for development and its objectives are written in its development strategy. Accordingly—and also in accordance with the Law on Librarianship (*Zakon o knjižničarstvu*, 2015)—a quality preschool library should have a development strategy as part of the development strategy of each institution and be included in the annual work plan of the preschool.

#### b) Quality traits

- Interactive, efficient: It is important to what extent and in what ways the school library is present in its educational institution: what activities and services it provides inside and outside the library and

how it is promoted to different user groups. An important quality criterion is its contribution to the knowledge and competencies, literacy, values of all users, and the atmosphere of the educational institution. A quality library is one that the users perceive or are aware of as contributing in various ways to the development of its curricular areas, and that is recognized as such by various stakeholders, on various occasions, and in various documents.

- Accessible: The library's opening hours and physical accessibility are important and must be suited not only to the needs but also to the presence of the users (it must be open so that the users can visit it). The library must be accessible to users with disabilities, and users must be considered in planning activities, services, and promotion. All this is, naturally, closely linked to a competent librarian and good library conditions and has an impact on the image of the library in the eyes of users in terms of popularity and usefulness.

c) Outcomes

- Integrated, important, popular: The library must be regularly integrated into the educational work of the kindergarten, as is evident from the curriculum and from all pedagogical and other meetings of the teaching staff, parents, and others. A quality library is highly valued by its users and perceived as essential, making it difficult for them to imagine functioning without it. They use it according to their needs: children as a source of reading, learning, and entertainment materials; professionals as a source of materials, resources, and information for their work and development; management as a source of professional information; and parents as an enrichment to their home library and a source of information and knowledge for their work with their children, for entertainment, and others.

Vilar and Haramija (2022) attempted to validate this model as well, using all available data, and encountering significant difficulties, as data on kindergarten libraries are even poorer than on school libraries. This means that it

was more difficult to assess the implementation of the segments of the model, even in a simplified form. The authors resolved to use some existing data regarding kindergartens in the whole of Slovenia collected for a pilot study (Zabukovec, Vilar & Fekonja, 2019) and expanded a year later (Vilar, 2022), to use some data gathered within the project OBJEM (Svetlik, 2020a, b, c), and to collect some data themselves within this same project (noting that the sample of kindergartens included in the project is not representative). They were clearly not satisfied with their findings. They expressed concern that school libraries are not mentioned at all in national professional documents for early childhood education, e.g., the Kindergarten Curriculum (Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999), and are also rarely mentioned in the discussions of early childhood development experts, which leads to a conclusion that few professionals outside librarianship consider them as an important factor in the education of children in the kindergarten. This is not surprising, given that most independent kindergartens do not have libraries at all. Most existing data and studies on school libraries in relation to kindergartens do not paint a very optimistic and promising picture either. Zabukovec, Vilar, and Fekonja (2019) and the subsequent unpublished study found that library activities, materials, and especially librarians are not a regular part of kindergarten life and work and that public libraries, with which kindergartens mostly cooperate on a regular basis, play a much more important role than school (kindergarten) libraries. While educators in both studies reported that most independent kindergartens have some kind of a library, they also reported that these are not available at all times when the kindergarten is open. Quite often, kindergarten libraries can only be used by the teachers, which means that the children do not have direct contact with the kindergarten library. In terms of activities, both studies find that in-house lending (most often to educators) and reading aloud to children are common, while some other user-oriented activities are rare (ICT teaching, creative activities, home lending). Printed books (fiction and informative for children, professional for educators) are the most commonly represented material. Pre-reading and reading literacy skills are therefore supported, but not multimodal literacy skills. The two studies also found or confirmed that the situation regarding opening hours, materials, and work with users, especially children, is much better in kindergartens that are part of or attached to a primary school where library activities are carried out by the school library

and the school librarian. There are also differences between the first and second kindergarten level educators: the latter seem to have a better developed understanding of the importance and role of the library and its activities in children's development; at the same time, in the second cycle, they also integrate library activities more into their work with children. For school principals, it was found that they have the greatest overview, understanding, and sympathy for the situation and possibilities. The positive attitude of teachers and management towards cooperation with the library and the librarian, as well as towards the development of pre-reading and reading competencies in general, can be considered as positive.

### *5.1.3. Implications*

Looking back and overviewing the work which has been done until now, we can say that we have come a long way, but not to the end of the road. There are still many unanswered questions and unfinished tasks.

One of the questions that we can answer is: How can we describe a quality school library in the Slovenian environment? The most direct description is that it is a school library with good basic conditions, due to which it can plan, implement, and evaluate its operation in appropriate ways. It is interactive, accessible, and integrated. It is visible in the results of its work as viewed by its importance, popularity, and efficiency. This is a library where, by monitoring and evaluating each of the elements within the layers, we can check and identify positive values or trends, and a library that is constantly developing in all fields and elements. The ways of fulfilling the conditions are, without doubt, very different and depend on the specifics of the individual library, its institution and environment. We are, therefore, not talking about equal libraries, but comparable ones in terms of quality, as each library is specific according to its environment, type of institution, and target user groups.

Secondly, how do we address the question of school librarians' competencies? Available data shows that, on the one hand, the image, effectiveness, and popularity of the school library largely depends on its librarian(s). Besides the "usual" librarian knowledge, a good librarian possesses abundant general knowledge, various skills, abilities, aptitudes, and personal qualities, rich pedagogical knowledge, is technologically competent and aware of ICT

developments, can use various information resources, and is therefore able to function as a “hub” of his/her school.

Coming to the unfinished tasks, challenges, and obstacles, the first thing we must mention is that besides discovering areas with a serious lack of data, we cannot be satisfied with the findings for most segments and elements of the model, indicating that there is still a lot of work to be done in the area of quality of school libraries in Slovenia. We must therefore admit that, in reality, we are often rather far from the perfect picture painted in the model. As it often happens with modelling, the model is demanding and, to some extent, theoretical. In other words, it differs greatly from the everyday situation in which the work of librarians takes place. Many libraries lack even basic conditions for quality work. The librarians face many challenges and obstacles, both inside and outside their institutions, starting with the attitude of management, colleagues, teachers, users, parents. Their knowledge and competencies—it would be unfair not to admit their complexity—vary and would require constant development at a personal and systemic level, as well as monitoring. We found that the areas that are most needed of further development include assessment, strategic planning, organization, proactivity, and training. What is also evident from our research is that Slovenian school libraries must be provided with professional standards, regulated work norms, and, above all, their own financial resources, to be reliable and proactive agents of information literacy development. What is required is strategic approach, starting with a national strategy for the development of school libraries, followed by the preparation of development strategies at the institutional level, as well as legislation to support such development. Another large obstacle is a lack of constant monitoring and gathering of good quality data, both quantitative and qualitative. This would give us information on the direction in which Slovenian school libraries are going. The models provide us with the direction and the goal, as without them we would not know where we want to go and recognize when we have arrived.

Relating our findings to Todd’s model and its most prominent contextual element, namely the perceptions and experiences of the students in regard to the school library, it must be noted that our model is constructed to allow the estimates of the same element for the Slovenian environment.

Even more, the model also aims to include insights from other library users: teachers, school management, parents, and others to understand the context and to link all contextual elements which comprise the quality of school library. However, as we warned, the available data does not yet allow this evaluation—and the system for collecting the appropriate data has yet to be established, which requires readiness of relevant stakeholders in both education and library system. Therefore, at this point we cannot make any comparisons between the models.

## ***5.2. Developments in Croatia***

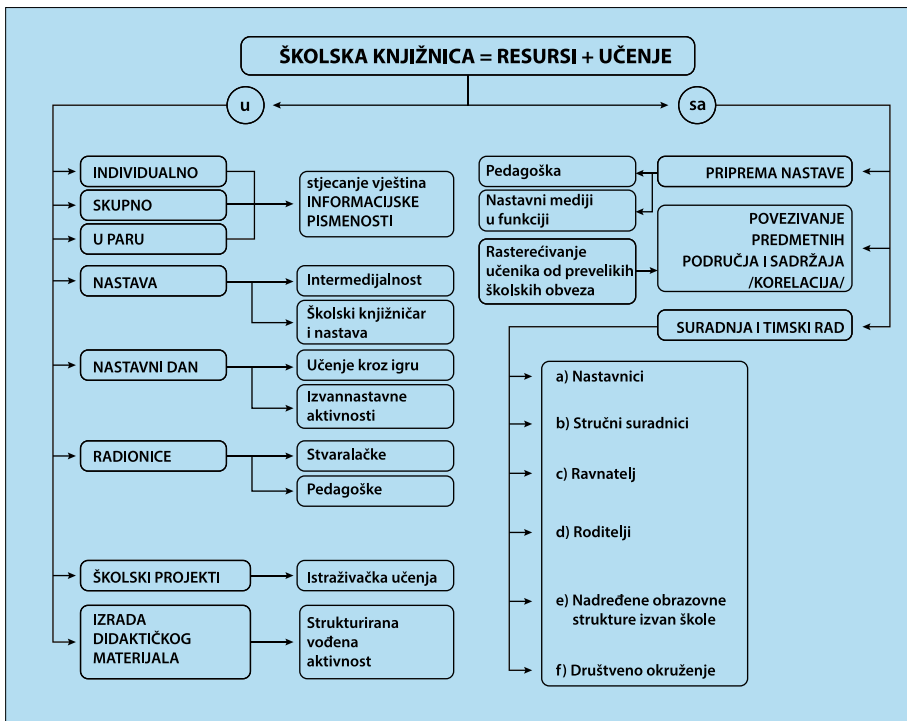
Although in Croatia the research on school libraries has not yet been conducted to the same extent, there have been some important theoretical attempts at modelling the school librarians' competencies related to the quality of school library. Banek Zorica and Dukić (2016) attempted to form an overview, based on their research of primary school libraries in Croatia. The responses from school librarians provided them with the basis to discuss the major barriers that school librarians experience in performing their roles. Librarians cite a lack of funding, time, and administrative support. However, more than half of the respondents also stress that they receive support from the school principal and teachers, as they understand their role and how to perform it. Additional research would be needed to gain insight into how the librarians fulfil their role (or believe to fulfil it), as well as the competencies required for it. Lovrinčević, Kovačević, and Barišić (2010) argued that school librarians' competencies comprise three groups:

- Professional,
- Educational-psychological,
- Didactical-methodical.

Kovačević, Lasić-Lazić, and Lovrinčević (2004) also shaped a model of school library (Figure 4) which attempts to show, on the one hand, where and how a school library can be integrated (right part of the model) and, on the other hand, what can be done in a school library (left part of the model), and it is in this part actually very descriptive, i.e. “handbook-like”:

- a) The school library is linked to the preparation of lessons in terms of pedagogical preparation and reflection on the use of different information resources (learning media), cross-curricular integration, which also alleviates the burden on students and fosters cooperation and teamwork with all relevant stakeholders.
- b) The school library (including, where appropriate, the resources made available by the school library) can be used for all forms of information literacy skills, lessons, activity days, workshops, projects, as well as for the production of didactic materials.

This is expected, since the model was comprised based on the available literature 20 years ago, which had not yet encompassed topics of school library quality, especially not the one based on empirical research. As such, this model is a combination of the existing and desired situation and can serve



**FIGURE 5.** Model of school library (Source: Kovačević, Lasić-Lazić & Lovrinčević, 2004)

in reframing towards contemporary conceptualizations of the school library and the development of its role from information to transformation (from resources to knowledge).

It is therefore a model that directly identifies the elements that a school library must have in place to be able to carry out its work and tasks well, as well as the areas and ways of quality work in which the library can be involved with its activities. Looking from this perspective, this model can be viewed as a prerequisite for the model of quality school library.

In Croatia, a curricular reform called Wholistic Curricular Reform<sup>14</sup> was brought out and step by step partially implemented in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In the documents of the above-mentioned reform, the role of the school library is discussed in the context of information literacy as embedded in all school subjects, or in the approach where information literacy is discussed as cross-curricular content, i.e., as “Curriculum of Cross-Curricular Themes—Usage of Information and Communication Technology”<sup>15</sup>. In addition to cross-curricular themes, information literacy is taught within the curriculum of library education developed by school librarians of primary and secondary schools. An overview of these curriculum developments is given by Stričević and Perić (2021). In their work, they problematize the approach where the role of school librarians is viewed only through information literacy themes, but the concept of information literacy as a cross-curricular theme does not provide clear guidelines on who teaches these topics and how acquiring these competencies is connected to meaningful learning. The authors stress the need to build a model of teacher-librarian collaboration according to the model by Montiel-Overall (2005): how to develop from a low level of participation in the work (coordination) to the highest level of participation—an integrated curriculum. In practice, the implementation of library education curriculum often depends on the degree of collaboration between the teacher and the librarian in an individual school. For this reason, it is not possible to speak about a unified approach and realization in all Croatian schools, although documents exist that outline specific

<sup>14</sup> Cjelovita kurikularna reforma (<http://www.kurikulum.hr/>),

<sup>15</sup> Kurikulum međupredmetnih tema (<http://www.kurikulum.hr/kurikulumi-medupredmetnih-tema>)

contents of library education, which are the result of a decades-long path from a teaching plan and programme in school to curricula of individual subjects in which the role of school librarian in teaching information literacy can be observed. In general, in Croatian literature, information literacy related to school libraries is much more present as a topic than other elements which are also crucial for the development of quality school library (e.g., Stričević & Perić, 2017).

Perić et al. (2021) provide guidelines on how to connect the curricular themes from the Wholistic

Curricular Reform to library education and the school library programme. Such works of experienced school librarians, who have extensive knowledge of both the reform and the educational context, are very useful for application in practice. Unfortunately, even they cannot solve the problem that the role of the school library as a learning agent is not clearly identified in the curriculum documents, as Todd sees it in his model of a quality school library. In the curricular reform, there is a possibility of linking inter-curricular topics, especially with the concept of “learning to learn”, but unfortunately it is not entirely clear how to work in coordination and how the school library can develop its operation from acting as a “loan centre” to a “learning agent”, the latter being the essence of quality school library model. In Croatia, in 2019, a translation of the book *Guided Inquiry* by Kuhlthau and colleagues

(Kuhlthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2019) was published. It contextualizes the topic of information literacy into a change paradigm of the school and the school library as crucial in the collaboration of librarians and teachers, and in the development of the “guided inquiry” approach as a method and concept in the learning community, i.e., the community which learns.

Even if the central topic is (only) information literacy as a topic and an approach, these curricula documents definitely provide a good basis for the development of understanding how to develop the quality of school libraries, or, more accurately, how important it is to focus on their development. However, what we need is further research and a change of a paradigm in practice to allow this model to be tested in practice, and guidelines for the quality library in Croatia to result from this research.

In the methodological sense, it is necessary to identify the basic elements

of school quality (indicators that do not exist as unique in Croatia) for the research. The Standard for School Libraries, published as a national binding document in 2023, will certainly contribute to this in the coming period (Standard za školske knjižnice, 2023), 23 years after the last standard, which was created well before curriculum changes, before the advent of digital technologies and before the contemporary international research in this field. The recent Standard contains three key dimensions of the activities of libraries in the educational context—educational, professional-library, and cultural and public activities. Due to the different level of development of school libraries in practice, it also provides a feasibility quotient for individual elements and predicts the complete development of the library by 2027, with most requirements determined by a quotient of zero (0), which means immediate application and without delay, for example professional training of librarians. Its purpose is multiple—from requests to library founders to external evaluation and self-evaluation. Research on the quality of school libraries can be carried out immediately, but it will gain full meaning only after the implementation of the Standard, when it is expected that all school libraries operate under approximately uniform conditions, which is not the case now.

### ***5.3. A Look in the Future***

Viewed together, we can observe two major differences between the two neighbouring countries. While modelling efforts, based on empirical research, have been more intensive in Slovenia, on the other hand, in Croatia there has been much more research done around the role of school librarians in teaching information literacy. Another very important difference—taking into account the attitude of the entire society towards knowledge, learning, reading, independent and creative thinking—is the curricular reform, which has been carried out in Croatia and is only now emerging in Slovenia. An important part of this reform are normative documents for school libraries.

Therefore, both countries have something to learn and follow from each other: Slovenian research can serve as a model for further research in Croatia, while Croatian approach is likely to result in quicker positive results for

school libraries. Viewed together, the implications of these findings from the two countries can be summed up as follows:

### *5.3.1. The focus on research*

As Todd often emphasized during his presentations of the Ohio study, it is important to investigate *good* schools and *good* school libraries, instead of investigating *all of them*. Equally important is to include *all stakeholders* in the research, with emphasis on the students. These approaches are necessary in order to establish *what makes the school library good*, i.e., what comprises its quality. This opens space for new research paradigms which move away from the quantitative methods and representative samples. Since the model of quality school library (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a, 2005b) is the result of such research, this is, at the same time, the proof that future research should focus on identifying and investigating the elements of quality, as well as test the existing model(s).

As we said, it is possible to say that Slovenian research can serve as a model, or perhaps better an inspiration, for further research in Croatia. This, naturally, does not mean copying or replicating it—but rather a collaboration of the research communities in both countries—looking at approaches, mistakes, and obstacles in terms of content, methodology, and others, taking into account the characteristics of the country, its public systems, state of libraries, and their practitioners and society as a whole. One thing that is definitely needed—we should establish longitudinal investigation, which requires a systemic approach and continuous funding, since only findings that are valid for longer periods can reveal trends and developments, thus helping identify recommendations for change.

### *5.3.2. The focus on professional solutions and continuing development*

It is good to see that the development of a professional field of school librarianship in both countries is more connected to national and international professional guidelines and research than to local legislative and social frameworks. The library field is first and foremost a professional one, linked

tightly to the environment. Compared to many other countries, Slovenia and Croatia have well educated, highly competent and motivated school librarians who mostly perceive their work as an important mission. Taking into account the fact that the library's identity and image depend to a large extent on the librarian, this is a very good starting point for future development of quality school libraries. Well educated and competent librarians are a human capital, which adds to the professional approach—the school librarian profession cannot and should not rest on individual enthusiasm and local (institutional) management approach. This does not mean that special traits of individual schools and libraries should not be considered—in fact, quite the opposite. It is also possible that the Croatian example of the new Standard for School Libraries (2023), which is, through its measures (factors/coefficients) of implementability, also “sensitive” to momentary unequal conditions, will, after a few years, demonstrate how (much) such a standard (viewed as a framework for library work) can contribute to professional solutions. Similar questions arise with the efforts to establish national and institutional development strategies for school libraries, as well as efforts to systematize school librarians' education. Such new rules and frameworks would certainly make the life of school librarians easier and contribute to the systematic development of school library field, giving the libraries the opportunity to use their proactivity to demonstrate their real power and influence in the development of lifelong learning competencies of their users.

### 5.3.3. *The focus on users*

There is another important aspect of quality of school libraries—namely its influence on the users. Not only should the users be included in any investigation of school library quality, but they are also the target of the most aspects of library work. The school librarian is a role model to children—as are all other adults who work with children or care for them (teachers, parents, etc.). All of them are potential users of school libraries and should be the focus of their work. Both research and library practice should therefore be grounded in the needs of the users.

## 6. Conclusion

The perspective that stems from these implications is definitely positive for further development of quality school libraries in our two countries. There are, without doubt, some challenges and obstacles—there always are—but the perspectives are good.

The situation in Slovenia and Croatia shows good legislative conditions to start with: each school has a library, they are staffed by well educated, highly competent, and motivated librarians. Accessible international research provides a very good starting point for the development of additional areas of school library quality. The monitoring of quality should be supported with good quality data and systematized analytics—this is an area that will need further development in both countries. Besides many partial studies (especially in Croatia), what we need is wholistic research which will include all stakeholders (librarians, management, teachers, students, parents) and will have support from decision-makers and financiers who must agree to use the findings in shaping policies. The models need to be tested in all environments to enable minimizing the inequal conditions and use local context to form conclusions and provide guidelines that will lead in the direction of future development.

In today's time of technological change in accessing and using information, in the time of learning in the rich digital environment, a quality school library which is no longer a loan centre but an active learning agent, there is, in fact, no alternative to the concept of quality school library. The Slovenian example of using empirical research to form theoretical models, especially if supported with good legislative and system support, as shown in the Croatian situation, can serve as a basis for further research, even as a model and inspiration to others outside our two countries. Slovenia may have gone one step further, but together we can certainly go the entire way.

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