

Acting together for the civil society and the quality education Acting under checked umbrellas

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Abstract:

In Hungary (Europe) 59 organizations together with the Hungarian School Librarian's Association have joined the Civil Platform for Public Education (CPPE) which is the expert platform of the "I would teach" movement, in 2016. The organizations of teachers, parents and students supported the movement, which found the recent changes and forced centralization harmful to the society.

The school libraries and the democratic and student centered schools are vital parts of the quality education. It is self-evident to support these values with information services, and critically thinking methods for raising responsible citizens. The collaboration of the civil organizations stands up for a modern, effective and equally accessible education system. For this purpose it creates background information which helps to put education in its proper place in the dialogue between wide ranges of groups in society.

By joining and participating actively in the civil movement the SLA can strengthen its cooperation with other teacher professionals, parents and students. As a result of the cooperation the aspects of school libraries are presented in the professional documents. The participation has raised the prestige of school librarianship.

This way through the work of the HSLA and its members we can think globally and act together with other professionals for our common mission; the quality education. Our participation underlines our support for civil movements and the sustainable development together with being supported by civil cooperation and strengthened in our mission to be professionals and responsible citizens at the same time.

Keywords: school-library, NGO, civic-responsibility, education-policy, Hungary

1 INTRODUCTION

What makes a small NGO of a small country join a civil movement, which declares even in its name to fight for the freedom of education and the professionalism? Despair? Professional awareness? The intention to cooperate with acknowledged experts of education? What dangers to face with? What benefits to achieve?

2 WHO ARE WE?

The Hungarian School Librarians Association (HSLA, Könyvtárostanárok Egyesülete) is a non-governmental organization for school librarians with 227 members in 2016. Its main goal is to provide professional support, inspire and train teacher librarians to meet the demands of the rapidly changing school environment since 1997.



The logo of the HSLA

“The HSLA has fought from the beginning on for the existence of the school libraries and for the acknowledgement of library science in the pedagogy and find its place in the curriculum. They also fought for getting the school librarian profession recognized by the leaders of education and other specialists.” (Balogh, 2012, 35.)

In 2016 the HSLA published the Hungarian translation of the 2nd edition of the IFLA School Library Guidelines. We think it is a really inspiring treaty which can guide us to improve our school library services and act proactively for quality education in our country.

3 THE CONFLICT

Hungary started to go to a direction where the Guideline’s values cannot be put into practise not only because of financial reasons, but also because of different education policy. There is a conflict between the Guideline’s definition of the school library which is responsible to apply the school’s pedagogical program and serve the school as much as possible to achieve its objectives. What is if the school’s values and standards are getting downgraded? While the Guideline supports democratic values, equal opportunities, tolerance and critical thinking but the education policy segregates, discriminates and suggests using only one centrally published course book? What a school librarian is supposed to do when basic values are devaluing in the education system which he is supposed to serve? What shall we do when the education policy reflects the policy of the governing party instead of professionalism?

4 DARK FUTURE?

Can we imagine a school library, where the librarian mainly circulates the centrally published course books? Where the new items on the shelves are expensive books presented by the government without considering the needs of the schools? Where the students are allowed to use only one source and are not inspired to think critically? Where only the teachers can work with the students in the library which is a comfortable learning space only to students from the middle class? Certainly not!

Especially not because the Guideline states: *“A school library is a school’s physical and digital learning space where reading, inquiry, research, thinking, imagination, and creativity are central to students’ information-to-knowledge journey and to their personal, social, and cultural growth.”*(IFLA, 2015, 16.)

The school libraries had always been parts of the democratic and student centred quality education. Its collection and services must support critical thinking and to use methods which help students to become responsible citizens, therefore the school libraries together with the school should stand for democratic values.

5 WHO IS FIGHTING FOR THE DEMOCRATIC VALUES OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Many experts think that the centralization of the education system caused damages. From 2012 on many teachers protested against the new regulations, but only one protest could break through and got public attention, it was the protest under checked umbrellas organized by the “I Would Teach” Movement in spring 2016.

In November 2015 the teaching staff of the Herman Otto High School from Miskolc published a treaty of protest against the changes in the education system and many associations and teaching staffs (958) and 35 000 civil protesters supported it within a short period of time. The HSLA was the 33rd organization which signed up for the treaty.



The umbrella protest 13/02/2016 (photo: Szigetváry Zsolt, MTI)

The organizations of teachers, parents and students together with the HSLA supported the movement, who considered the forced centralization in the education harmful for the society. The movement questions the education policy which necessarily involves political relations; therefore the board of the HSLA has asked its members to vote before joining the movement's professional platform called Civil Platform for Public Education (CPPE) of several non-formal civil organizations.

The treaty criticized the permanent changes of the legislation of the education, the centralized government funding which resulted in a chaotic under financing; and the restriction of the freedom of the teachers. They pointed at the lack of public and professional discussion before introducing the new legislation and the misleading communication about the high salary of the teachers. Their treaty asks the authorities to let them teach instead of burdening the teachers with lots of administration and allowing them to use only one course book etc...

The checked umbrella became the symbol of the movement because the biggest protest was in a cold and rainy day and one could see many thousands of umbrellas around the building of the Hungarian Parliament. A cynical statement of an undersecretary made wearing checked shirt the sign of support of the movement.



The logo of the CPPE and the IWTM

The organizations which supported the “I Would Teach Movement” (IWTM) have formed the Civil Platform for Public Education (CPPE), and the HSLA was invited to join it in 26 February 2016. The platform thematizes questions of the education policy therefore unavoidably it is a political movement as well. The board voted for joining this non-formal organization which is the team of experts behind the IVTM and 59 organizations take part in its work.

The object of the CPPE association is to improve the society; it wants quality education for everybody. For achieving this goal, they write background studies and help to make it accessible for the wide public in order to thematize the education and show democratic alternative.

This paper does not want to give an in-depth introduction of the CPPE, but its declared values are remarkable since it uses them as basic standards in every study:

1. Individualization; children and pupil centered approach in learning and education
2. Equity; non-discrimination and equal chances in education
3. Support the improvement of student competencies, including social and civic competence
4. Democratic functioning; open partnership with students and parents and with partner organizations, and with the public
5. Autonomy and accountability
6. Transparent, variable education without a blind alley from nursery to adult education

The 59 partner organizations share these values which enables them to build new connections with new partners who were unknown or with whom they had only a weak or formal relationship before. It is a long term professional investment which can be fruitful apart from the movement as well and can survive the change of political system too.

Thanks to CPPE, questions of education got public attention in papers and are in the agenda ever since. It forces the government to debate and act more.

6 WHAT IS THE POSITION OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN HUNGARY?

The faces of school libraries had always been drawn by the stormy Hungarian history. The school libraries as they are today, functionally separated but integrated into the school, trace back to the 18th century in accordance with the European tradition. (Mészáros, 1995; Tóth, 1995, 5-10.)

After WW2 the country was part of the soviet bloc, which on the one hand brought centralization but on the other hand strengthened the network of school libraries. The legislation demanded to have school library in each school with the professional support and supervision of the National Educational Library.

After 1970 some remarkable colleagues made their mark on the development of school libraries. Thank to them the school librarianship became an independent special field, sphere of work with professional self-awareness. Professional needs and interests were articulated and the methodology of library pedagogy was elaborated as well.

After the regime change in 1989 the legislation strengthens the prestige of the school libraries, it is obligatory to have a library with a school librarian in each school. Teaching library instruction became part of the national curriculum and found its place in information technology lessons as a cross curriculum. After 2006 the independent teacher librarian education started as well thanks to the Bologna Process.

Despite the good legislation the practice is not perfect. The official statistics states, that in 1991 only 85% of the schools had library, in 2006 the number dropped 62%. Currently in 2016 the ratio is only 52%. There is no budget for acquisition in many schools. Despite the curricular regulation they do not teach library instructions even in schools with school library. In our experience there are few schools where they can systematically accomplish the library science lessons.

The new education act in 2012 and the National Core Curriculum has changed the education policy drastically, further reduced the possibility to deliver quality services at the school libraries. Fusions of schools resulted less school librarian status. Those librarians who had no teacher degree lost their teacher librarian status. Due to free course book supply by the states the school libraries are flooded with course books. The budget of acquisition is tightened year by year. The last regional educational libraries were closed.

The Hungarian school librarianship has much strength but needs to be improved in many fields yet. Our strengths are that despite difficulties there are well operating libraries, committed teacher librarians and a good legislation. Library science is built into the national curriculum and included in the information science final exam. There is teacher librarian education in several universities; we have journal and a nationwide library research skill competition. We have the School Librarians Association as well.

Notwithstanding the existence of school libraries, the maintenance of standards and teaching library science requires increasing clout locally and nationally, consequently the number of the members of the Hungarian School Librarian Association has increased.

We believe that school libraries are essential for the quality education, therefore our association works for achieving the necessary support from the government, the financial support of the school libraries, and the optimal professional background. Our aim is to stop negative tendencies in education.

Our history

The idea to form an association of Hungarian librarians first occurred at 1885 according to written sources, 9 years after the first librarian association of the world. The organization was finally formed at 1935 as Association of Hungarian Librarians and Archivists. (Bényei, 2011)

From 1970 after the position of the school librarians had improved more and more of them become members of the association. Those who worked in high schools joined the Youth Section (1973) and the primary school librarians found their place in the Children's Librarian Section. (Balogh, 2012, 10.)

The School Librarian's Section was formed in 1986 after a three years long debate and preparation within the Association of Hungarian Libraries (AHL). Their aim was to have a platform for school librarians where they can debate their special questions, and can take decisions and form their own profession. (Balogh, 2012, 11., 38.)

The next step of independence, to form an independent association was fuelled by professional reasons and individual ambitions as well. In 1997 the Hungarian School Librarian Association was formed as a partner association of the AHL, but declared to be an independent teacher's union as well. They wanted to emphasize that the school librarians are on the verge of two professions. They expected to achieve more funds and to clout more effectively in education policy. Today we can assume that the school librarian profession got more attention and possibilities as well.

7 OUR ACTS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

The constitution states that the main focus of the HSLA is to improve its member's professionalism and commitment to school librarianship. Cooperate with other professionals and build professional relationships with different sectors of education and librarianship.

In accordance with its mission the HSLA supported the quality education in two ways: on the one hand it organized trainings, conferences, published methodology handbooks and organized field trips; on the other hand, acted for professional law enforcement gave legal opinion on draft law, took part in meetings, made statements, consulted, gave personal advice and supported local law enforcement, took the floor on conferences of different organizations, disseminated.

The history of HSLA as presented above showed that the association is rooted in librarianship mainly. After becoming an independent organization in 1997 the association became an educational organization, but the cooperation was better with other librarian associations, especially with the children's librarians and other reading societies like HUNRA (Hungarian Reading Association), IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People). There were initiations to cooperate more with other pedagogical organizations as well, but we need to make more effort to make it work.

The reduction of services for school libraries, the changing legal environment and the decaying education system made the work of HSLA more important, consequently the number of the members has increased and more colleagues are interested in our conferences and publications.

The demands and tasks are getting overwhelming. The administration and the two or three conferences and trainings yearly, the publications and competitions and the large number of draft law opinions, and the up to date communications with the members, partaking in conferences uses up the energy of the 9 board members who volunteer for running the association. The HSLA has no paid worker its main resource is the membership fee and applies for funds for its programs and publications. In spite of the modest possibilities the association does a great job for quality education and for the society indirectly.

The HSLA has no explicit society program it serves mainly the community of the school librarians, though it supported some book collecting campaigns and advertised some programs.



The Civil's Day; Protest against the new civic legislation in front of the Hungarian Parliament, 05/02/2017

8 ACTING UNDER CHECKED UMBRELLAS

By joining to and participating actively in the CPPE's work the HSLA can strengthen its cooperation with other experts of education and with parents and students. As a result of the cooperation the aspects of school libraries are presented in the publications. The participation has raised the prestige of school librarianship.

Our association have the possibility to be involved into the work of several fields of education apart from school librarianship like the questions of student's books, equal opportunity and digital education. This way we can think globally and act together with other experts for our common mission; the quality education.

Our partaking in the work of CPPE is a result of recognizing our democratic responsibilities. Since our position in education as school employees, librarians, teachers, intellectuals entitles us not only to fight for our professional goals but also act for the wellbeing of our society.

We always saw our main mission in supporting the students and this way building our society, but now we have also courage to stand for values which are not directly connected with our profession. We form our opinion not only in questions of the school library but also in general questions about education. We take responsibility in assessing the whole education system, its structure and its types of schools, we form our opinion about the structure of the final exam, about the establishment of the one-course book system and we take care for the students with learning difficulties and the LGBT students too.

We inform our members about the work of CPPE and forward their newsletters, and we are present in their meetings, protests we give interviews and represent the values of CPPE in our opinions about draft laws as well. We do not take part in meetings which are held by governing committees which were not elected democratically even though it would be advantageous professionally. We presented our organization in public meetings as well, and we find it essential to start communicating with the wider range of people more.

We had two conferences where the education policy of the CPPE was discussed. We want to help our colleagues to interpret it to their situation and see their work and possibilities through its lenses. We want to help them to find their ways to act for these objectives together with well-known experts. These experts started to appreciate the devoted school librarians This way our prestige has increased.



The Spring Conference of the HSLA; What is the essence? What school libraries can do for the quality education? 30/03/2017

Full album: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/152107005@N05/albums/72157678719229394>

The next move for HSLA is to write the school librarian aspect of the platform's education policy analysis, and organize its debate with the society with the support of the civil organizations.

9 CONCLUSIONS

Our association stands for quality education and democracy as well. We want our schools to develop according to democratic values. We are open to widen our perspective beyond our professional interest and deal with important issues of the society too.

We believe that a good school library is essential for the quality education and every student deserves it.

The websites of the presented organizations

- Civil Közoktatási Platform [Civil Platform for Public Education]:
<http://ckp.tanitanek.com/>
- Könyvtárostanárok Egyesülete [Hungarian School Librarians Association]:
<http://www.ktep.hu/english>
- Magyar Könyvtárosok Egyesülete [Association of Hungarian Libraries]:
<http://mke.info.hu/english/>
- Tanítanék Mozgalom (I Would Teach Movement): <http://www.tanitanek.com/>