

Services of the Maribor Public Library for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing People

Dragana Lujic

Developmental Analytical Service, The Maribor Public Library, Maribor, Slovenia.

E-mail address: dragana.lujic@mb.sik.si



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Abstract

The paper deals with the approaches and programmes of the Maribor Public Library to make its activities more accessible to the deaf and hard of hearing in the local community. It shows the organization of certain services that support the deaf and hard of hearing at the local and national levels. The author examines various forms and possibilities of cooperation between libraries and institutions, whose mission is to serve the deaf and hard of hearing people.

The paper also describes initial organizational difficulties, gained experiences, achievements and failures on the way to integration and socialization of this special needs group.

It presents the process and procedures to gain qualification and additional professional knowledge and their use by training the library staff to work with the deaf and hard of hearing at the Maribor Public Library. The highlights of the paper include the model of training the library staff, and the ways of communication with the hearing impaired. At an early stage of cooperation between the library and other organizations, this has proven to be of vital importance for diminishing the obstacles and unease in contact with the deaf and hard of hearing in human and professional aspect.

Based on practical cases, the paper demonstrates a range of programmes and different ways of working with the hearing impaired in order to encourage this special needs group to use library services and to engage actively in developing and implementing public library services in the local community.

The author attempts to evaluate objectively the results of a year's work and the collaboration between the Library and the hearing impaired in the local community. The benefits of this cooperation and the Library's plans and strategic guidelines for the social inclusion of persons with this type of disability are presented.

Keywords: Maribor public library, library services, persons with special needs, deaf and hard of hearing people, social integration.

Introduction

The fundamental human right of access to culture, education and information is defined by the following international documents: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1988), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) and IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994). In the Slovenian legislation and regulations in the field of librarianship, the care for the people with special needs is defined in the Librarianship Act (2001), Rules on Conditions for Providing Library Services as a Public Service (2003) and The Code of Ethics of Slovenian Librarians (1995). In addition, the Slovenian public libraries follow the Slovenian Public Libraries Development Strategy 2013-2020, and they promote and support active partnership in the area of social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

The basic data on the Maribor Public Library

The Maribor Public Library is one of the ten central regional public libraries in Slovenia. The Library system includes 19 branches and mobile library service which includes:

- stops at 45 locations
- offers nine deposit collections – for special groups who are physically unable to visit the library in their own area (residential homes, etc.)
- provides home and hospital library services.

The Library operates in the area of 12 municipalities with approximately 182.000 citizens. As a central regional library, it is responsible for the public library service development in the wider area of 22 municipalities. Statistical data for 2018:

- 31.959 members
- 945.738 visitors
- 1.496.894 borrowed items
- 874.999 physical units
- 1111 events and other activities.

Like other public libraries, the Maribor Public Library offers various programmes for the development of literacy, and supports reading, formal and lifelong learning, education and training. It is a cultural and information centre for the local communities in the wider Maribor area and the surrounding municipalities. The Library aims to provide services and programmes for all user groups, including the persons with special needs, the marginalised and other vulnerable groups.

General objectives and starting points for working with people with special needs

In the Library's social environment, there are citizens who are not users of library services for a variety of reasons. People with special needs are among them and the Library's space as a cultural and information centre is still often unknown or strange to them. The Maribor Public Library follows the general objectives and starting points to involve these groups to use the library services.

General objectives:

- to provide equality of access for all members of the community
- to encourage reading and contribute to the development of literacy
- to encourage active and quality leisure time

- to offer equal opportunities for lifelong learning
- to contribute to the social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

General starting points:

- to prepare the contents in co-operation with the representatives of disability organizations and experts who know a certain type of disability
- to involve people with special needs in the regular Library programmes: bibliopedagogical activities, information literacy, library events, storytelling, university of the third age activities
- to adapt library services to the wishes, interests and needs of the people with disabilities
- to commit to maintaining the programmes' continuity
- to encourage continuing education of staff on different types of disabilities, approaches and ways of working with people with special needs
- to provide free library services for people with special needs, collaborate and participate in the European projects (e.g. EU Disability Card).

Working with the deaf and hard of hearing people

Until 2009, the experiences that we gained by working with the deaf and hard of hearing mainly came from the long-term cooperation between the Library and the Centre for Hearing and Speech Maribor. This is the main institution for working with the deaf and hard of hearing children in the northeast Slovenia. The lip reading method has been used in the education of the deaf and hard of hearing children. Since the beginning of our cooperation in the 1980s, we have included the deaf and hard of hearing children equally in all the bibliopedagogical and other activities that we have organised for the preschool and schoolchildren, including programmes for developing information literacy, storytelling, workshops, etc. One librarian with a special passion for working with children with special needs has led the programmes. She has also taken into account the basic recommendations for achieving quality communication, such as calm atmosphere, slow and clear speech, etc. In addition, the librarian has been supported by experts who have accompanied the group. Also the deaf and hard of hearing children, who have been integrated into regular primary schools, have been involved into the library programmes and services.

Development and improvement of activities

Since mid-2009, various organizational and social changes have had a positive impact on the development of activities for people with special needs, including the projects for the deaf and hard of hearing.

“Internal” changes: the changes in the Library's organizational structure and different approach to operation:

- We have established a working group for users with special needs to bring together individual processes (acquisition of library materials, loan, preparation of educational and cultural contents, etc.).
- The provision of care and support for people with special needs has gradually been integrated into the tasks of all departments and services.

- We carried out an analysis of the Library environment (for the purpose of the Library) and created an internal register of disability organizations and other institutions in the wider Maribor area that take care of vulnerable groups.

The key institutions for the deaf and hard of hearing people in the Library area are:

- The Slovenian Deaf and Hard of Hearing Association: the Association operates in the public interest in the field of social welfare; it comprises 13 regional associations and unites approximately 6.500 members.
- The Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing People Podravje Maribor: it covers the wider region of northeast Slovenia and joins approximately 800 members.
- The Centre for Hearing and Speech Maribor: a central institution in the northeast Slovenia, which takes care of the deaf and hard of hearing children and adults, and the children and adults with speech and language disorders. The Centre provides a range of activities in:
 - the medical unit (multidisciplinary diagnostics, therapy, counselling, etc.)
 - the primary school and kindergarten: hearing and speech rehabilitation, educational programmes for the deaf and hard of hearing children, children with speech and autism disorders.
- School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ljubljana: it offers adapted programmes for primary and secondary schools.

Based on the results of the Library's environment analysis, we have worked systematically and proactively:

- to establish contacts with disability organizations in the local community
- to sign cooperation agreements
- to jointly draft a plan proposal with the aim of involving persons with a certain type of disability in the use of library services
- to coordinate proposals in the Library
- to specify the objectives
- to include the goals in the Library's annual and strategic plans.

In order to maintain the continuity of the programme, we work on:

- regularly visit disability organizations
- providing selective dissemination of information service through different channels involving people with special needs: the portal, the meetings of disability organizations in the local community, the culture working group in the municipality, personal contacts with representatives of certain disability organizations, promotional contributions for printed and other media, participation in thematic expert meetings
- developing and gradually expanding collaboration to new library contents and programmes

“External” changes: changes in the organization and the way of operation of disability organizations in the local community:

- In 2009, the Council of People with Disabilities of the Municipality of Maribor was established - an advisory body of the Mayor of the Municipality of Maribor, which has united the disability organizations in the municipality. From the outset, we participate actively by attending the sessions and following the activities of the disabled people. We also take part in public debates and disseminate information on the role of the Library in the local community. We participate in partnership projects

(e.g. *Maribor – the European Capital of Culture 2012* and *Maribor – a Municipality Tailored to the Needs of the Disabled Community*). We contribute in the preparation and implementation of strategic municipal plans, such as "The Action Plan for the Development of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the Municipality of Maribor" (the fields of culture, librarianship, etc.).

Cooperation with the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing of Podravje Maribor

In 2010, we started to cooperate with the association for the deaf, hard of hearing and deaf blind persons in the area of Maribor and surrounding municipalities. The Association is very active and well organised and has been serving the community for 85 years. The management and the professionals who work with the deaf and hard of hearing persons are interested in cooperation with the Library and their participation in the programmes of social inclusion of the hearing-impaired persons. In the beginning of our cooperation, we first collected the information on deafness and hard of hearing, the details of this type of disability, the systems at the local and national levels, and organization of the institutions that take care of the deaf and hard of hearing persons. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) classification, deafness is one of the most severe forms of disability (2015), and the hearing impairment represents the main communication barrier for the deaf persons. The basic problem was that librarians did not have enough knowledge on deafness and hard of hearing and the ways of communication with the hearing-impaired persons. In order to facilitate the process of convergence and elimination of disadvantages and obstacles in communication, the training of library staff was organised, and the Association was asked to cooperate in the implementation of training.

Training of library staff

Together with the Association, we defined the form and contents of training:

- 4 workshops (4 hours each / October - November 2011)
- basic knowledge and information on deafness/hard of hearing, the rights of the deaf and hard of hearing people (Act on the Use of the Slovenian Sign Language, 2002), the system and organization of institutions that provide advocacy for the deaf and hard of hearing people
- the basics of the Slovenian sign language
- an agreement that deaf and hard of hearing people participate in the programme
- an agreement that the forms of further cooperation are defined together at the end of the workshop
- an agreement at the Library level: two librarians are additionally trained for working with the deaf and hard of hearing people: attending basic and advanced courses in the Slovenian sign language.

All 60 librarians, who are in daily contact with the visitors in all Library departments, attended the workshop. They acquired the basic information on the ways of communicating with the deaf and hard of hearing people and gained the basic knowledge of this type of disability. The positive atmosphere was influenced by the relaxed way in which the deaf people, with whom most librarians were in contact for the first time, presented and approached the "world of silence" and helped the librarians so that they were relieved of fear and discomfort in communicating with the hearing-impaired. After the training:

- collection of the impressions, ideas and suggestions of librarians

- in collaboration with the Association members, evaluation of the current situation and drafting the plan and defining joint activities with the aim of gradually involving the deaf and hard of hearing Association members into the library services and increasing the number of the deaf and hard of hearing readers in the Library
- the public is informed regularly about the current projects
- the implementation of activities started immediately after the training.

The ways of cooperation

- Adapting to the Association's organization, we use the existing channels of communication and transmission of information to the deaf and hard of hearing: Wednesday afternoons (members' meetings), portal of the Council of People with Disabilities, journals Our voice and World of People with Disabilities, TV show World of Silence (web TV).
- We meet regularly to decide on further cooperation.
- We encourage the active involvement of the deaf and hard of hearing in the preparation of library contents for all users.
- We collect feedback, ideas, impressions, suggestions, and remarks, and integrate them into work plans and consider them in different fields of activity: e.g. plans for adaptation of the Library (purchase of an induction loop), upgrade of the Library web site, etc.
- We work with a permanent sign language interpreter whenever possible.
- We provide all services free of charge.

Library activities and programmes for the deaf and hard of hearing persons

Most of the programmes where the deaf and hard of hearing are involved are implemented with the help of a permanent sign language interpreter (simultaneous translation). These general programmes are intended for other users as well. In arrangement with the Association, we also adapt certain contents for the deaf and hard of hearing people. In addition to special programmes for the deaf and hard of hearing, we pay more attention to:

- systematic acquisition and subject cataloguing of materials intended for the deaf and hard of hearing people and other interested persons: the journals World of Persons with Disabilities and Our Voice, publications of the Slovenian Deaf and Hard of Hearing Association (video news for deaf and hard of hearing), sign language manuals, easy-to-read materials
- systematic acquisition and subject cataloguing of material on deafness and other types of disabilities
- preparation and selective dissemination of information (in electronic and printed versions, through a web site, etc.): library events, new issues of easy-to-read materials, information on how to communicate with the deaf and hard of hearing people, useful links, etc.

The programmes for the deaf and hard of hearing (adults) and other users (2011-2019):

- Organised and guided Library visits: training on library services, library collections, e.g. using the game collection, conditions and use of the library, independent searching and finding resources and information in the library, etc.

- Information literacy programmes for the deaf and hard of hearing: the Co-operative Online Bibliographic System and Services (COBISS system) - the use of online catalogues and electronic services.
- Thematic workshops for the development and improvement of information literacy: the use of digital information databases, etc.
- Presentation of new library services, e.g. access to digitized material on the local studies portal (Kamra 2015).
- Organised visits and presentation of the mobile library services.
- Bibliopedagogical programmes, storytelling and workshops for children and adults.
- Presentation of bookbinding, sewing, preservation and conservation of library material.
- Exhibitions in the Library, e.g. "Understand and Be Understood", "Live in a World of Silence" (on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Podravje Maribor): exhibitions are organised with the help of the deaf and hard of hearing people presenting the Association's activities, basics of the sign language and hearing aids.
- The final exam of the basic course of the Slovenian sign language is organised in the Library premises.
- A pantomime performance "Enter the World of Silence Together" was held in the Library: the deaf and hard of hearing presented the basics of sign language to other users.
- A pantomime performance by the deaf artist Damjan Šebjan "Travel around the World" was held in the Library.
- Preparation of the TV show "Listen to Silence" on training the librarians and the visit of the deaf and hard of hearing in the Library.
- A joint presentation of the Library's programme for the deaf and hard of hearing at the Cultural Bazaar in Ljubljana, which is a national project of the Ministry of Culture. It aims to enhance arts and cultural education and provide information on cultural events (2015).
- Library Reading Groups: based on the gathered information on the subjects of interest of the deaf and hard of hearing, we organise thematic meetings, where we present the selected materials (considering easy-to-read materials) and discuss a certain subject (e.g. healthy lifestyle). After the meeting, the participants can become new members and borrow the library material (if necessary, the due date is modified).
- Creation of a library programme for the inclusion of young adult deaf and hard of hearing people in the Library: in collaboration with a clinical psychologist and sign language interpreter. It is intended for young adults who are usually not members of the deaf and hard of hearing associations.
- "The Maribor Public Library Day" is celebrated on the second Saturday in June every year: sign language simultaneous translation is provided for the deaf and hard of hearing, who participate actively in cultural and recreational activities. Thus, the public is made aware of the rights of the deaf and hard of hearing to access cultural content.
- Joint presentations at expert meetings: e.g. in 2018, the Library and the Association presented the process of inclusion of the deaf and hard of hearing people at the round table "Access to Libraries for Persons with Disabilities" organised by the Culture Working Group of The Council of People with Disabilities of the Municipality of Maribor.

Conclusion

Based on our observations, the deaf and hard of hearing people rarely attended the Library until the beginning of our cooperation. They borrowed library materials mostly through other people. After the training of librarians, more and more deaf and hard of hearing have become members, usually after the organised visits to the library. In the beginning, library materials were borrowed through the Association in order to facilitate the process of joining the Library for the deaf and hard of hearing.

The experience gained so far indicates that the deaf and hard of hearing prefer to visit the library in organised groups. Individually they respond to a smaller extent. They are very happy to participate in the Library's events as performers in order to present the basic information about deafness and the basics of the sign language to other visitors. We consider all these conclusions in our plans; nevertheless, we also encourage their independent visits to the library.

Our previous experiences show that the process of involving people with hearing impairment in the use of library services is very complex and depends on many facts. In addition to the continuity and diversity of the programme for the deaf and hard of hearing, it depends largely on human resources, especially on professionalism of librarians and on willingness to cooperate, as well as the involvement of all participants in this process.

The main Library's objective by working with the deaf and hard of hearing people is based on collaboration with the Association and other institutions, which unite the deaf and hard of hearing or work on the social inclusion of persons with special needs at the local and national levels. Thus, we can easily establish contacts with the deaf and hard of hearing people who are more responsive and involved in our programmes within a group. However, in this way, we include less people who are not members of the Association. With the stops of deposit collections, we provide access to material and information to a certain extent to elderly people, who are hearing impaired, in the residential homes or through home library service, intended for people who are not able to come to the library.

In addition, we advocate for the systematic development of an information point in the main library. Its tasks would be to continuously collect, process and communicate (in electronic and printed form) quality information and a variety of material about deafness and hard of hearing. It would provide data on the institutions that take care of the deaf and hard of hearing and the rights of the deaf and hard of hearing and other persons with special needs. It would be responsible for the organization of user training, presentations of technical aids for people with disabilities, etc.

As shown in the paper, we collect materials for the deaf and hard of hearing people that are of special interest to them. In addition, we motivate them in various ways to become and remain our users. We encourage them to participate actively in the preparation and implementation of library activities in all branches of the Library network. The library services are available at various locations in the Municipality of Maribor, the surrounding municipalities and the wider Maribor area. We also respond to special events, like anniversaries, e.g. the anniversaries of the Library, the Association, etc. Thus, the hearing-impaired people gradually become acquainted with the library network and the diverse library offer, and other library users can meet them and get to know this type of disability.

In this way, the Library becomes and remains a place to learn about diversity. It encourages tolerance in its social environment, with a clearly defined strategic orientation to enable all citizens in the local community to enjoy the equal use of library services and access to quality information about deafness and hard of hearing and other types of disabilities.

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