

Pupils' reading is better in schools with a librarian: evidence from Slovenia (Research Note)

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ABSTRACT

Using data from a representative sample of schools that participated in the IEA International Literacy Study, the importance of the librarian's contribution to the development of reading was investigated by comparing the reading test results of pupils who did not have access to a professional school librarian. The mean reading test scores obtained by pupils in schools employing a professional librarian (n=86) were found to be significantly higher than those obtained in schools where a teacher was responsible for the school library (n=50).

RÉSUMÉ

La lecture des élèves est meilleure dans les écoles où il y a un bibliothécaire: preuves venant de Slovénie

En utilisant les données d'un échantillon représentatif d'écoles ayant participé à une Étude Internationale sur la lecture-écriture de l'IEA, on a examiné l'importance de la contribution du bibliothécaire au développement de la lecture en comparant les résultats à un test de lecture d'élèves ayant un bibliothécaire professionnel employé dans la bibliothèque de l'école avec ceux d'élèves ne disposant pas de bibliothécaire scolaire professionnel. Les résultats moyens au test de lecture obtenus par les élèves des écoles employant un bibliothécaire professionnel (n=86) sont significativement supérieurs à ceux obtenus dans les écoles où un enseignant est responsable de la bibliothèque de l'école (n=50).

INTRODUCTION

At the primary level, a professional librarian employed in the school library is more important for the development of reading literacy than a non-professional worker.

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This conclusion is based on the results of an international reading survey (Elley, 1992) in which the respondents were 9-year-old pupils in the third-grade in elementary schools in Slovenia. They were chosen for the following reasons.

- In relation to the level of development of school libraries, these children had recent experience of its impact while learning to read.
- Experience of the library and the facilities it offers at the elementary level is believed to be an important motivator for its later use.
- These pupils had already mastered the skill of reading; they had encountered narrative and expository texts and documents and understood them.
- At this level, the factors connected with initial learning to read can still be identified.

The reading demands on third-grade pupils do not exceed the current state of development of the school library in Slovenia. With its library stock and methods of work it can satisfy pupils' needs. Among the factors that are important for the successful functioning of a library – besides a library collection which is extensive and well-organised – is a trained librarian.

For the purposes of this study, the importance of the librarian's contribution to the development of reading literacy was investigated by comparing the reading literacy test results scored by pupils who had a professional librarian employed in the school library with the results of pupils who did not have access to a professional school librarian.

METHOD

The data used were those obtained from a representative sample of pupils in 139 Slovenian schools in the framework of the 1991 IEA international study on reading literacy. In 1991 the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) carried out an international study on reading literacy in the grade levels of 9- and 14-year-old pupils in order to determine the average level of reading literacy and to identify important factors related to initial reading and reading development. Slovenia participated in that study and its contribution was organised by the Slovenian Centre for IEA Research based at the Institute for Education in Ljubljana.

For the purpose of the international study, reading literacy was defined as 'the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by the society and/or valued by the individual' (Elley, 1992, p. 3). Elley reported that third grade pupils from Slovenia ranked the Slovenian educational system 20th among 27 educational systems with an average score of 498 points on the Rasch linear scale. The results were reported on the Rasch linear scale with mean score of 500 points and a standard deviation of 100 points. In Slovenia better reading test results were closely related to the existence of large school libraries (approximately 7,000 books), large classroom libraries (approximately 60 books) and regular effective lending of books.

For the purposes of the present study in Slovenia, the following question was added to the international questionnaire: Who runs the school library? School principals were asked to choose between: 'librarian', 'teacher' and 'others'.

'Librarian' was defined as a library worker with a library technician's diploma or university-level study of librarianship; 'teacher' was defined as a library worker without specialist library knowledge, but who was qualified as a class or subject teacher. 'Others' were defined as workers who did not correspond to either of the above definition. The replies were correlated with the reading literacy test results.

RESULTS

The mean scores achieved by pupils in schools with different types of library workers were calculated, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pupils' mean reading scores by type of school library worker.

	Mean Score	Standard error	Number of schools
Librarian	502.97	3.02	86
Teacher	490.84	3.88	50
Others	500.25	29.29	3

The results from the three schools employing neither a teacher nor a librarian in the library are ignored in the following analysis.

Pupils in the 86 schools with a librarian employed in the school library scored 12 points higher on average than the pupils in the 50 schools with a teacher employed in the library. The difference was statistically significant ($t=2.46$, $df=135$, $P<0.05$).

We also investigated whether the positive impact of the librarian's work was noticeable in all environments. We calculated the mean scores by pupils in different types of community and with a librarian or a teacher in the school library. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Pupils' mean reading scores by type of school library worker and by type of community.

	Librarian			Teacher		
	Mean score	Standard error	Number of schools	Mean score	Standard error	Number of schools
Village or rural community	490.00	6.76	20	487.05	5.88	27
Small town	498.59	4.99	28	495.46	5.80	11
Medium-sized town	506.71	5.04	18	499.44	9.50	7
Large town	518.71	5.94	20	489.05	13.99	5

Though the numbers of schools in some categories were small, nevertheless there were two fairly clear tendencies:

- (a) Overall results were poorest in the countryside and best in large towns.
- (b) The presence of a librarian rather than a teacher had little influence in most environments, but made a significant difference in large towns.

CONCLUSIONS

We drew the following conclusions from this research. They should be taken into account in the development of school libraries and their contribution to the development of reading literacy in children.

- A library worker trained in librarianship is a positive factor in the development of reading literacy.
- Other important factors for the development of reading can correct the lack of librarianship knowledge by the library worker but they cannot replace it completely.
- The effectiveness of a school librarian's work is enhanced in urban environments where other motivating factors and influences also come into play.

REFERENCE

ELLEY, W. (1992) *How in the world do students read?* Hamburg: IEA.

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