

Vahl School Multicultural Library

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Abstract in English:

This case study concerns a multicultural library that has been set up in 1998 in the most multicultural primary school of Oslo, where the almost entirety of students belongs to ethnic minorities. The library is intended not just as a book box, but as a place where students can learn Norwegian by preserving their mother tongue. This important aim can be achieved thanks to materials, books in different languages, drama and theatre activities aimed at performing stories, using of ICT.

Abstract (in italiano)

Questo caso studio riguarda una biblioteca multiculturale creata nel 1998 nella scuola elementare più multiculturale di Oslo, in cui quasi tutti gli allievi appartengono a minoranze etniche. La biblioteca non è intesa solo come luogo di conservazione di libri, ma anche come ambito in cui gli allievi possono imparare il norvegese, conservando la loro lingua materna. Questo importante obiettivo può essere perseguito grazie ai materiali e ai libri in diverse lingue, e a attività teatrali finalizzate alla creazione di storie, usando l'ICT.

1. The practice

1.1 Description of the project

The transformation of Norway in a multicultural country is evident while looking at schools, in particular in the capital (Oslo), where percentage of immigrants are nearly 20% and where compulsory schools count 35% of ethnic minorities pupils.

Results for pupils are not always positive, and reading tests have demonstrated difficulties in school achievement. Therefore traditional education and traditional school structures must be revised. This is the premise on the basis of which the Multicultural Library has been created with the objective of increasing communication abilities of immigrant students, in Norwegian, but also in their mother tongue. This library requires and improves pedagogical and communicational skills of the librarians while using drama as a promising technique to improve language proficiency among pupils, by promoting the joy of reading, curiosity and language acquisition.

The Project carries out this activities:

- Readings at the library both in Norwegian and in mother tongue of students;
- Counselling and individual guidance on material and books in mother tongue;
- Activities related to reading and writing with use of ICT (with devices and instruments that allow to maintain the mother tongue, i.e.: Urdu or Arabic keyboard, Chinese books, Philippines toys);
- Realisation of storytelling by the mean of drama;
- Direct involvement of students who became library assistants for one day (they collect book, help schoolmate in finding books, toys, or materials, help the librarian to supervise the good use of library resources);
- Production of materials for the readings.

As a result of the activities carried out by the library, the level of understanding and communication abilities in Norwegian for ethnic minorities pupils have increased. Results of studies demonstrate that at Vahl School level of Norwegian learning are

higher than in other schools: 10% of the 2nd graders students, 54% of the 3rd graders, 42 of 7 graders resulted below the critical level defined by national studies (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS; 2001).

1.2 Time, structure and steps of the project

The building was built in 1897 and used as a high school, closed down and later renovated and used as a primary school from 1997.

1.3 Place and context:

The Education Act of 1998 (comma 2.8) states that municipalities must offer training to ethnic minorities pupils in their mother tongue, to give bilingual training and also to simplify curricular norwegian language. As a consequence in Vahl school pupils speak 23 languages and at least 5 mother tongue teachers help the librarian.

It's located in the eastern part of the Oslo city centre. The Vahl primary schools counts more than 95% of students belonging to ethnic minorities and is known as the most multicultural school of Norway. Vahl primary school has 7 grades, and in Norway children start school at the age of 6.

Among the 25 languages spoken in the school, Urdu, Arabic, Turkish and Somali are the main languages. The school achievement of ethnic minorities pupils was lower than that of Norwegian students as several studies demonstrated. Therefore the Municipality of Oslo tried to implement some Project in order to raise the reading level of pupils. This level has improved in 2002-3, but the figures shows a critical situation for non-Norwegian speakers, also at the beginning of primary school (7-8 year old), but especially in the 7th grade (13 year old). The Vahl School has succeeded in reaching better results.

The school is recognised as one of the best practice schools in Oslo from the multicultural point of view, and the best multicultural primary school.

library, situated on the upper 3rd floor of our building, painted in light colours, plants, with lots of specific teaching material.

1.4 Target

Pupils of the primary school and their families as indirect beneficiaries (258 pupils, 95% of them are ethnic minorities pupils).

1.5 Methodology:

The library is seen and used as an extension of the classroom, where the teacher-librarian ensure that a broad range of library activities focused on language acquisition and development as well as on creating enthusiasm and interest among the children.

Also, the use of Drama implies innovative methods that facilitate communication and that are particularly successful in multicultural context where a variety of languages is spoken. The methods used by the project are the following:

- Use of ICT and computer as instruments for learning: the children use technical equipment to create their own project, to download pictures, to produce presentations. They use digital cameras;
- Producing In-house printed materials (pupils set up their own "publishing company" called *Laseforlaget*, which printed more that 20 volumes);
- Involve children as Library assistants or Book Police (pupils are engaged in the management and care of the library by helping other children to find and to

- borrow books or to gathering in a trolley around the school books that must return to the library);
- Story telling (specifically addressed to 7-12 year old pupils) aimed at expanding Norwegian vocabulary. The story telling sessions are also used to understand what the children like more and mostly the level of understanding of Norwegian;
 - Drama: arranging of drama performances based inside and outside the school.

1.6 Authors, Funding and Networks:

The Library is funded by the school with national funds from the Ministry of Education. The Library also receive funds from the Municipality of Oslo.

2. HINTS FOR AN EVALUATION

2.1. Strengths

2.1.1 The organisation's perspective

Robert Vagaan, Associate professor of the faculty of Journalism at Oslo University College, and The Library Director, Mrs Gry Enger, in the article signed below (see point 4. Link) has identified three causes of success of the Project:

- Personnel profile: the personnel of the library represent itself as a teacher, a detective, someone who be trusted: in fact he/she does not act as a simple distributor of books. The librarian is a teacher because he helps children to understand what they read. This involves checking out comprehension levels for pupils in grade 4 and grade 6. while reading, the pupils are recommended to note down any difficult words they encounter in a little notebook. The children can choose among 15 different books to read in according to 2 skill levels. The children are awarded extra points for this and for correct answers. They also receive score for the effort they put into this type of work.

“...I have to be a teacher and find out each pupil's level and needs with regard to the Norwegian language.

In order to activate their language, I also have to be a detective and find out what thrills them, what bothers them – what interests them, - and finally, I have to be someone they can develop trust in – sometimes I can give them answers they won't get at home, and sometimes they pick me as the person they want to confide in...”

(Source: presentation to the Conference promoted by IASL international Association of School Librarianship, titled: *The Multiple faces of literacy: reading, Knowing, Doing*, Lisbon, Portugal, 3-7 July 2006, www.iasl-slo.org)

Also, a strong input has been given from the Director of the Library (Mrs Gry Enger) who is defines neither a traditional teacher nor a traditional librarian (she graduated in drama before teaching, she attended courses in library management and got a further degree in Religions): this variety of knowledge “facilitate this new breed – a teacher-librarian – the task of developing the multicultural Vahl Primary School library” (R. Vaagan, G. Enger, *Developing the multicultural school library*, in *New Library World*, Volume 105, Number 1204/1205 – 2004, p. 340).

- Children at the centre: the library considers the children not only the receivers of the books but also the centre of knowledge and information: the library is conceived as an expansion of the classroom where new methods are experimented in order to allow pupils to understand and to express themselves. The big variety

of books in different languages or theme-boxes containing objects related to their own original cultures (Urdu, Arabic, Turkish), especially for very young pupils is meant to put the student at the centre of the learning process.

- Use of drama as a teaching method: despite of long Norwegian tradition on drama pedagogy (John Dewey, Lev Vygotskij, Elsa Olenius, Helga Eng), drama is not conceived as a discipline in primary school. The librarian has applied this methods to a multicultural setting, stating that it brought successful results.

2.1.2 Interculture map perspective

The Project gives opportunity to students belonging to ethnic minorities thanks to the use of new teaching methods and to the methods chosen by the librarian.

The Project contributes to intercultural knowledge because it bases its activities on books and materials written and made in pupils mother tongue (Urdu, Arabic, Turkish, Somali), or by using objects related to original cultures of pupils. It is clear how the personal story and the family cultural system of the student are considered at the centre as a real resource to be put into value. The activities of the Library show how cultural diversity can be a tool for daily training, and not just something to be periodically evocated.

It can be considered innovative because it use non-traditional methods as drama or story telling, that enables pupils to improve their language while being protagonist of the activities: they are directed involved in drama or story telling and their own mother tongue is valued. This is a strong impact on self-esteem.

Also parents are involved in reading or story telling. The Director of the Library states that she has regular and strict relationships with the families that invite her at home.

The library is considered as an extension of the classroom and this allow pupils to learn also by using elements of their own culture which is not something to overcome or to forget, but a part of their own identity to start from and that is recognised by the school teachers and librarians.

The librarian gives certificates to pupils attending the library or involves them in library activities. This has an effect on self esteem, because the children appreciate the attention that the service put on them.

2.2.Critical points

2.2.1 The organisation's perspective

The Library states that results in the language acquisition must still be improved, in particular in 2nd and 3rd grade (as stated by Trine Hauger, the Head of the School. Vaagan, Enger 2004, p. 341). In this grades the language proficiency is difficult to gain because the pupils start facing more complexity in subjects' language.

Another problem which has come out has concerned the difficulty in the level of understanding of drama methods by pupils' parents: "...some parents needed to be convinced and reassured of the seriousness and relevance of drama as an educational method". Often, drama lessons were carried out in other places (i.e. the Deichman Oslo Municipal Library). While drama is immensely popular within children, parents, mostly fathers, occasionally doubt on the need for their children to take part in performances outside school boundaries.

2.2.2 Interculture map perspective

As stated by the librarian, main difficulties concerned the effort to be made to involve some parents within activities and to agree about this new methods.

The participation of parents can be very difficult to obtain if they are not involved in the definition of methods prior to the implementation of activities.

Another critical aspect could be linked to the fundamental impact of the “personal and professional biography” of the teacher-librarian. Maybe her own training and professional experiences have contributed to define a very complete profile: her expertise and knowledge (she graduated in drama and also in religion), allow her to cope with very different needs while approaching new methods and languages (drama and story telling). Since it is so difficult to find so various and complex (and interdisciplinary) profiles it will be hard to reproduce this high level of performances. The risk is maybe due to a strong “personal” character of the activities, which maybe cannot be carried out with the same results by a traditional teacher. The lucky circumstances of the Project can be hardly reproduced in other context/schools, if librarians have a traditional curriculum.

2.3. Conclusion: what is “exportable” in the project

2.3.1 The organisation’s perspective

The Vahl Primary School point out the exportable elements of the Project, that are demonstrated by the high number of visits and request of counselling and information to other school in order to help them to set up new multicultural library.

2.3.2 Interculture map perspective

Themes: story telling, drama, use of ICT instruments can be certainly exported in other school context.

Methodology: the methods can be exported in other school libraries, even if this exportation can work only if the whole school participates in this Project. The strong element of the Vahl School experience lies in considering the library as an extension of the school. This means that the whole school must be involved in a sort of transformation of what must be considered as school. To implement this kind of Project a school need to overcome the traditional idea of education, and conceive the non-formal education as a part of curricula, that deserve attention and credibility by the Head of Institute and by all the school staff.

3. LINKS

www.vahl.gs.oslo.no/skolenvar/biblioteket.htm

Multicultural Library web page

www.hio.no/content/download/45735/344570/file/050629-sandvik_vaagan_vogt.pdf

Article from Robert Vaagan and Gry Enger describing the project with interesting details on the context of migration in Oslo and on development of multicultural libraries in the city.