

Public libraries and vulnerable categories of users

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Abstract:

This study deals with a current concept, that of social inclusion, in relation to the public library – an institution with a strong civic responsibility. Regarding the need of aligning with the dynamics of society, the library is constantly undergoing successive changes, assuming new roles and transforming from a passive space for documents storage, to an active centre for social interaction, a community space, a place of diversity and dialogue, a meeting place for all members of a community. The role of public library in facilitating the process of social inclusion, namely the inclusion of vulnerable people in the community, can be considerable, but the relationship between these concepts is still little explored, at least in the Romanian bibliographic landscape. The second part of this study presents a brief typology of vulnerable people in Romania. The choice of the described categories starts from the main problems facing the Romanian society at the moment, the emphasis being placed on the needs of vulnerable people and on the role that public libraries can have in satisfying them.

Keywords: public libraries, community analysis, social inclusion, Romania

Introduction

The role that the library has at the present moment in a society is quite different from the one with which it was initially invested or, better said, it is an expanded one. In principle, any library, regardless of the community it serves – public, school, or academic – must be focused on the character and needs of that community. There are still libraries today that spend too much time preparing books for use in proportion to the amount of time devoted to their actual use, or that focus too much on their cultural role, investing time and resources in promoting the image of the library as an elitist space, in proportion to the time and resources allocated to increasing the quality of life of community members. This is probably the reason why the possibilities of the library for social influence are so little recognized, despite the fact that social inclusion has become one of the most important themes in contemporary debates.

1. Literature review

Theoretically, the modern concept of the library as an institution dedicated to serving the general population appeared relatively late, starting from the 19th century, according to LIS specialists Pamela Richards, Wyne Wiegand and Marja Dalbello (Richards *et al.* 2015). The obvious

consequence of this paradigm shift was the emergence of studies on users' information behaviours, needs, interests and perceptions. In the late 19th century librarians began to recognize that in order to provide better library services, they needed to be more sensitive to the needs of those who step on their doors and more informed about their community and their surroundings. In 1896, Mary Cutler, a pioneer in library education, wrote in the *Library Journal* about a process that would later be known as *community analysis*, suggesting that librarians must be proactive in learning about their community, to catch the spirit of civic life and relate the library to the whole - “[the librarian] may catch the spirit of the civic life and relate the library to the whole...that he may select books, establish branches, open up new avenues of communication between the library and the people” (Cutler 1896, pp. 448).

Community analysis, an activity that involves gathering a wide variety of information about the community, in order to evaluate current services and establish a plan for the future, has been seen by specialists in the field, such as Debra Van Tassel and Haight Sarling, Larry Bone or Charles Evans, as being an important landmark in the strategic planning of a public library, an essential prerequisite for it to be able to provide effective services.

The approach to library services from the perspective of the needs of the intended users was accentuated in the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, evolving, shifting its focus from funds, human resources and collections to population and focusing on finding solutions to problematic situations that people face in their everyday lives – like studies and models of analysis by Brenda Dervin, Elfreda Chatman, Kirsty Williamson or Reijo Savolainen. Gradually, researchers' attention was directed to certain categories of population, especially to those disadvantaged, from well-defined geographical regions – we can mention Mary Bundy's doctoral thesis, published in 1960, on the use of the public library by the rural population of Illinois (Bundy 1960), Margaret Peil's study on low-income families in Chicago (Peil 1963) or Mindy Whipple and James Nyce's study on the information behaviour of the rural population in Lunca Ilvei (Whipple and Nyce 2007).

Vulnerable people have increasingly come to the attention of the most important international organizations and associations that promote free and open access to information for all, and represent in the same time the interests of those who rely on the services offered by libraries and the interests of LIS professionals. Thus, IFLA, in collaboration with UNESCO, developed a series of guidelines for the development of public library services, which represent important milestones in clarifying the role of the public library in the life of the community it serves and its contribution to the well-being of its members.

For certain categories of users, IFLA has developed dedicated guides: *Guidelines for Library Services for Young Adults* (1996, 2008), *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Children aged 0-18* (2003, 2006-2007, 2018, 2022), *Guidelines for library services to prisoners* (1992, 1995, 2005, 2023), *Guidelines for Library Services to Deaf People* (1991, 2000), *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia* (2001, 2014), or *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness* (2017). A series of articles and studies related to the categories of users with special needs have been published within *Division 3 Library Services*, which are available online, in *IFLA's institutional repository* – 28 are about library services to children (including babies and toddlers) and young adults, 205 about services dedicated to people with special needs and 78 about services for multicultural populations (the research was made by subject, in *IFLA Publication*, in all languages).

Starting from 2014, *American Library Association* has firmly directed its strategic direction towards social inclusion, by establishing a working group for *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion*. The main task of this group was to develop an action plan that promotes among ALA members, and all those are active in the library science field, as well as of the communities served by them, from all

over the world, those three concepts, both at a strategic – declarative level, as well as through the appropriation practices to support them. *Inclusion* has been defined by the ALA as an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and with respect, are valued for their distinct abilities, experiences and perspectives and have equal access to resources and opportunities.

2. Discussion

2.1. Users' typologies

Defined as a process of improving the conditions and possibilities of participation in social life, by offering opportunities, access to resources, equal rules with the rest of society, respect and the possibility of involvement in the decision-making process of a society, social inclusion refers especially to the vulnerable categories of population. Diagnosing a community and identifying the needs of these vulnerable categories in order to implement the most appropriate development strategy, is not only a challenge for public libraries, but also a measure of their value for society. Before identifying the needs, however, those segments of the population affected by certain vulnerabilities must be known (recognized). An users' typology, even a general one, from the perspective of the problems that people are facing can represent a benchmark for librarians from public libraries.

The existing users' typologies, at least in the Romanian librarianship literature, are made according to criteria like age and socio-professional status and, occasionally, the attitude towards library collections or reporting to new information technologies. Taking into account the limitation of Romanian research in this field, we cannot talk about an actual approach to the needs of vulnerable people, about a strategic direction oriented towards offering library services dedicated to them or about an inclusive library model, but, rather, of isolated events (influenced by certain situations or passing social trends or imposed by outside regulations/recommendations).

Although the vulnerabilities may be different from one community to another, each geographical area having its own particularities, there are certain trends that characterize, at a given moment, the society as a whole – the level of poverty, the degree of ageing, the ethnic attitude, etc. – and a typology of vulnerable people in Romania can be created starting from these trends or characteristics. In this endeavour, it is important to refer both to the strategic and legislative framework at national level – especially to national policies with impact on people considered vulnerable, to legislative documents related to combating and preventing phenomena such as anti-Semitism, xenophobia, marginalization, discrimination or to the protection and promotion of the rights of certain vulnerable categories of the population in our country – as well as to the EU's policies and strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation.

Having as a general reference points the *National Strategy regarding social inclusion and poverty reduction for the period 2022-2027* and the *2024 Country Report – Council Recommendation on economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Romania*, we find that the most vulnerable population category is represented by children, especially those who live in poor families in rural areas, the disparities between the different regions of our country being very strong.

2.2. Categories of vulnerable people in Romania and their relation with public libraries

Poverty is the main cause of vulnerability and social exclusion. Among the people particularly affected by this are people living in rural areas, the elderly, children and vulnerable groups (including the disabled and the Roma).

Romania's poor children are born in families that live in poverty and are socially excluded, have parents with a low level of education and qualification and few work opportunities or with a low work intensity. If they are not abandoned or institutionalized and in the absence of adequate help, children inherit, adopt and transmit from generation to generation a system of non-values and specific behaviours – they drop out school, do not use medical services, increase their family despite material challenges and never dream that they might overcome their condition. Marginalization also occurs when representatives of public institutions decide that what they are already doing for "everyone" meets the needs of a certain population, regardless of the conditions faced by that group.

In Romania, all public libraries have the obligation to hold specialized branches for children, where they carry out activities adapted to their age, most of them in accordance with their generally valid needs, following the previously mentioned principle, that services dedicated to "all children" can also satisfy the needs of vulnerable categories of children. Analysing annual activity reports displayed on the institutions' websites, it appears that programs and projects for children are best represented at the level of each county library, whether it is national projects, carried out annually, at the initiative of similar institutions in the country or non-governmental foundations, whether it is about local cultural-educational projects or holiday programs. Unfortunately, only a small part of these are dedicated to children with special needs, institutionalized children or those in hospitals, children with disabilities or vulnerable children from rural areas, from poor or broken families.

We believe that public libraries can serve as complementary spaces to schools, where, with the help of suitable infrastructure and qualified human resources, children can benefit from help in meeting basic needs – such as help with homework, but also aspirational needs, by getting involved in creative and participatory learning activities (tech clubs, STEM or DIY activities). Also, public libraries should consider organizing early childhood education programs and educational programs or workshops for families/parents.

In Romania almost a quarter of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 face severe poverty, which is the highest percentage in the EU. Here, the education and training systems face persistent challenges in terms of quality and inclusion, which leads to early school-leaving among young people. The phenomenon is caused by a series of other factors associated with poverty, such as the seasonal work performed by young people to support their families, the limited level of training of parents, a low degree of accessibility of education services or limited infrastructure.

Another problem of young people in Romania is that of socio-professional integration, as a result of the situation generated by poverty. The percentage of young people who are neither employed nor in any form of education or training – a concept known as NEET in English abbreviation – is among the highest in Europe. The recent Covid 19 pandemic has led to or coincided with an increase in mental health and substance use problems, increased risk of abuse and family violence, and dropping out school, especially among school-age youth.

Although young people are mentioned in most library documents as a distinct category of users, in terms of activities, they are included in the same types of projects and programs as children (of course, on a different level): library vacation programs, homework help, theatre and film workshops, reading clubs, creative writing competitions, programming and coding courses, robotics workshops, occasionally personal development or drug prevention courses. Young people from the NEET category are not mentioned at all.

It would be appropriate that national support policies applied to young people, aimed at combating school leaving, to include multidisciplinary teams from which librarians should not be absent. Also it would be useful if public libraries would implement support and professional training programs in order to recognize individual abilities, to develop certain skills (especially digital skills) or to identify employment opportunities.

Elderly people, especially single ones from the rural area, are also exposed to the risk of poverty, ending up living below the poverty threshold or at its limit, due to low incomes. Beyond loneliness and poverty, the older generation faces inherent health problems. The recent Covid 19 pandemic demonstrated that the representatives of the older generation also suffered the most losses, being the most vulnerable both in terms of the high risk of infection and death, as well as the degree of social exclusion caused by the distancing measures and self-isolation. Ageism – a term used to reflect the way of thinking about older people, based on negative attitudes and stereotypes about ageing – has recently become more evident as a form of discrimination.

Libraries can be an important source of reliable and trustworthy information to help elderly people learn new things, a source of computer access and digital literacy training to help them connect with family, friends, or learn about health and government services. Through engagement and education opportunities, dedicated programs and services, including mobile services, literacy and lifelong learning opportunities, or outreach, public libraries can become key players in supporting older adults. Moreover, elderly people are often one of the most active user groups of public libraries, as they offer them a safe meeting place and contribute to the expansion of social circles – many elderly users create social groups within public libraries, such as are the reading clubs.

The responsibility of public libraries to serve all communities and demographics, equitably and according to specific needs, makes it imperative that they direct significant efforts to the most marginalized groups in society, which obviously includes those without shelter. Almost half of the young people in Romania live in severe housing shortage. At the European level, the percentage is four times lower.

So-called "street children" represent a special category of the poor Romanian population. They end up like this firstly because of dysfunctions in the families of origin (domestic violence, emotional abuse, exploitation, alcohol, divorce, remarriage, multiple partners, etc.), and then, following the failures of reintegration by governmental or non-governmental institutions. Although it may seem like the main problem of homeless people is the lack of material and financial resources, in fact, is the effect of deeper, although less visible problems, such as the lack of education due to early school leaving or the lack of professional training, which make it difficult the process of their socio-professional (re)integration.

The challenges faced by homeless people can be effectively addressed if they are provided with the necessary information about jobs, public utilities, health services or shelters available in their vicinity – needs that can be met by a public library, but only if it is desired that its services be directed to a population group considered problematic and with negative intentions. Beyond meeting basic needs, homeless people's participation in civic life and their right to attend mainstream public places are important, as this allows them to experience belonging and move out of marginal spaces. Public libraries can provide opportunities for homeless people, because they legitimize their presence in the "prime" space, rather than the marginal one.

Similar to NEET young people, homeless people do not appear mentioned in Romanian public libraries reports or strategies. They could and even should constitute target groups of public libraries. It would be helpful if these public institutions would adopt measures aimed at facilitating access to information, finding employment opportunities, participating in public places, etc.,

Disability is a second major cause of social exclusion, not necessarily associated with poverty, although most of the disabled are over 65, a segment of Romanian population in the most risk of poverty. People with disabilities face a number of other problems besides medical ones, problems related to lack of autonomy and dependence on family or other people, social labelling in a way that considers them inferior and denies them the ability to work, limited access to spaces,

resources and services. In Romania, disparities based on disability criteria (as well as gender disparities) in terms of employment are very large, far above the averages recorded at the EU level.

Public libraries could play an important role in ensuring their independence and social inclusion. Unfortunately, most libraries in our country face a series of problems related to accessibility of collections and services, mainly generated by the lack of adequate funding. Even if a great number of them understand the important role they have in supporting people with disabilities, very few manage to provide accessible documents and assistive technologies or to rearrange their spaces, so as to facilitate physical access to documents and equipment for people with disabilities.

Belonging to an ethnic group can be an important determining factor for a person's situation or for the position on social scale, and this can be explained, on the one hand, by the discriminatory attitude of members of a nation/community towards foreigners, and on the other hand through the (self)victimization of the ethnic group members – a “consciousness of stigma”, as Ryan Brown and Elizabeth Pinel call it (Brown and Pinel 2003).

The Roma represent the largest ethnic minority in Europe, and in Romania they occupy the second place, after the Hungarians. Policies at the national level are advanced in terms of their inclusion in the community. Regardless of where they are, their main characteristics are that usually they live in difficult conditions and that they are often discriminated. Roma community members are being considered marginal and difficult to integrate both because of stereotypes and prejudices and of that "consciousness of stigma", previously mentioned.

The role of public libraries in the process of social inclusion of Roma is demonstrated by numerous examples at the European level. Public libraries in Denmark or Croatia, for example, have implemented and supported many programs dedicated to the promotion of Roma culture and traditions or to sensitizing the community to the problems faced by the Roma population in everyday life. Although there are several such examples in the Romanian space as well – the most recent is the *Roma children's library project* (2022), initiated by the *Communities of the Future Association*, together with the *Conțești Municipal Library*, the *Perșinari Library*, the *Șirna Municipal Library* and the *Măcin City Library* – we believe it is absolutely necessary that this inclusive role that public libraries can play regarding vulnerable Roma people, to be constant and persistent. An aspect worth mentioning due to its singularity is that the *Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens belonging to the Roma Minority for the period 2022-2027* recommends libraries among the solutions for Roma people social inclusion, as viable and credible institutions of training and identity representation, even if the recommendation refers to the establishment of new libraries and not to the exploitation of the existing ones potential.

A relatively recent phenomenon is that generated by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which caused some population fluctuations, with more than 83,765 Ukrainian refugees residing in Romania at the end of 2023. The integration problems faced by immigrants or refugees did not attract, in particular, the attention of Romanian public libraries before 2022, mainly because they were focused on the local community needs. The influx of Ukrainian refugees has triggered a transformation process, with libraries becoming support centres for third-country nationals, offering a wide range of services and programs aimed to facilitate their integration: educational and language support projects (Romanian language learning clubs, English language classes, creative and IT workshops cultural, coding and robotics clubs), cultural integration and emotional well-being projects (recreational activities for children, psychosocial support and emotional accommodation, cultural and reading activities, parenting and support workshops, cultural connections through native language materials), civic participation and community engagement projects (IMPACT clubs, community integration events), information and counselling services, access to digital tools and equipment, support for daily living and medical services.

Conclusions

Many of public libraries from our country have no other target than registered users (“loyal clientele” or people which are familiar with the library); their programs and activities are mainly addressed to children (all of them) – at least this was the situation until 2021. Starting from then libraries became aware of the crucial role they can play in the process of social inclusion. We can affirm that the critical point from which the process of library transformation began is directly connected to the two major crises – the COVID pandemic and Russian-Ukrainian war, especially because humanitarian aid involved a joint effort, an effort from which libraries could not remain indifferent. Those crises opened an intervention field for libraries, and they promptly responded, offering support to isolated people or to Ukrainian refugees through shared activities or new learning experiences.

We cannot yet talk about the existence of an inclusive library in our country – by inclusive library we understand a public institution capable to respond, practically and efficiently, to the needs of all members of a community, not only of a particular vulnerable category. But we are in the right direction. Although there should be a common direction and a set of unitary norms (non-existent in the Romanian librarianship landscape), there is no single size for all libraries and no similar approach regarding the development of services, resources or programs for public libraries, because each community is different and, in fact, the community itself contains several sub-communities, with distinct particularities. Differences may include, but are not limited to, the following characteristics: demographics, education level, income level, family size, poverty rate, race, ethnicity, interests, sub-community cultures, geography, cultural history, life challenges, knowledge gaps. All these variables, along with many others, influence the kind of programs the community will participate in, what books/informational resources the community members want to access or need, or how the library itself is viewed.

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Notes

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