



PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF READING AND READING COMPETENCIES OF ADULT CITIZENS¹

NARODNE KNJIŽNICE I POTICANJE ČITANJA I ČITATELJSKIH KOMPETENCIJA ODRASLIH GRAĐANA

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UDK / UDC: 027.022:028-053.8

Original scientific paper / Izvorni znanstveni rad

<https://doi.org/10.30754/vbh.68.1.1335>

Primljeno / Received: 26. 12. 2024.

Prihvačeno / Accepted: 19. 3. 2025.



Abstract

Purpose: The paper links the fields of adult reading literacy and the role of Slovenian public libraries in promoting reading and strengthening reading competencies of adults. It reviews the relevant literature and, based on the review, develops theoretical reflections on the basic laws of adult reading competency development, the tasks of the

¹ 1) The paper is the result of research within two research frameworks: The targeted research project CRP V5-2361 Reading role models: reading habits of professionals in kindergartens, schools and faculties, and public libraries (headed by prof. dr. Dragica Haramija), which is co-financed by the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency and is financed from the national budget. 2) Research Programme P5-0361 (Modelling of Bibliographic Information Systems), co-funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency and financed from the national budget.

public library service in the context of public libraries, and the link between the two areas to present the potential of Slovenian public libraries in raising adult reading competency. The aim is also to provide an overview of contemporary Slovenian literature in the field of public libraries and adult education.

Methodology/approach. We used the content analysis method to analyse literature in two content segments: 1) Reading incentives in adulthood and the societal importance of adult reading ability. 2) The role of public libraries in enhancing adult reading ability. The sample included two segments of literature: 1) professional and scientific publications, mainly in the Slovenian area or by Slovenian authors, regardless of the publication year (114 works) and 2) more recent publications (in 2016–23) in the journals *Knjižnica* and *Organizacija znanja*, which are the only Slovenian scientific and professional journals in the field of librarianship and related fields (219 works), a total of 333 publications.

Results. We found that strengthening adults' reading competencies is part of the public library's mission on the local level, as the literature reviewed highlights this link. However, among the articles published between 2017 and 2023 in the two selected journals, we did not find any that would address this link or otherwise linked adult reading outcomes and the role of the public library in strengthening adult reading skills.

Originality/applicability of the research: The results indicate theoretical premises that link the fulfilment of the mission of Slovenian public libraries to the strengthening of adults' reading competencies, with an emphasis on those adults whose reading competencies have not been developed in a form that would enable them to integrate smoothly into modern society. Taking into account the theoretical foundations and using the results of international research, the possibilities for public libraries to strengthen their position as promoters not only of reading in general but also as implementers of programmes to strengthen the reading competencies of adults who do not have these competencies in the strongest possible form, are suggested. However, this requires the application of these foundations to professional library work, and it is therefore necessary to strengthen the pro-activity of libraries in this area.

Limitations of the study: The study limitations are related to the relevance of the data from the PIAAC 2016 international survey and the national survey on reading and shopping habits of adults in Slovenia. The latest data from the PIAAC international survey will not be available until 2028, while the latest results from the national survey will be published as early as 2024.

Keywords: adults; adult readers, adult literacy; public libraries; reading competencies; reading culture; reading literacy

Sažetak

Cilj/Svrha. Rad povezuje područja čitateljske pismenosti odraslih i ulogu slovenskih narodnih knjižnica u promicanju čitanja i jačanju čitalačkih kompetencija odraslih. Analizira relevantnu literaturu i na temelju toga razvija teorijska promišljanja o osnovnim zakonitostima razvoja čitalačke kompetencije odraslih, zadaćama knjižničnih pro-

grama i usluga u narodnim knjižnicama i vezi između tih dvaju područja kako bi se prikazao potencijal slovenskih narodnih knjižnica u podizanju čitalačke kompetencije odraslih. Cilj je također pružiti uvid u suvremenu slovensku literaturu na području narodnih knjižnica i obrazovanja odraslih.

Metodologija/pristup. Metodom analize sadržaja analizirana je književnost u dvama sadržajnim segmentima: 1) Poticaji čitanja u odrasloj dobi i društvena važnost sposobnosti čitanja odraslih. 2) Uloga narodnih knjižnica u jačanju sposobnosti čitanja odraslih. Uzorak je uključivao dva segmenta literature: 1) stručne i znanstvene publikacije, uglavnom na slovenskom području ili slovenskih autora, neovisno o godini izdanja (114 radova) i 2) novije objave (2016. – 2023.) u časopisima *Knjižnica* i *Organizacija znanja*, koji su jedini slovenski znanstveni i stručni časopisi iz područja knjižničarstva i srodnih područja (219 radova), ukupno 333 publikacije.

Rezultati. Utvrđeno je da je jačanje čitalačkih kompetencija odraslih dio misije narodnih knjižnica u lokalnom području, s obzirom na to da pregledana literatura naglašava tu vezu. Međutim među člancima objavljenim između 2017. i 2023. godine u dvama odabranim časopisa nismo pronašli nijedan članak koji bi se bavio tom vezom ili na neki drugi način povezivao ishode čitanja odraslih i ulogu narodne knjižnice u jačanju vještina čitanja odraslih.

Izvornost/primjenjivost istraživanja. Rezultati pokazuju da postoje teorijske postavke koje povezuju ispunjavanje misije slovenskih narodnih knjižnica s jačanjem čitalačkih kompetencija odraslih, s naglaskom na one odrasle čije čitalačke kompetencije nisu razvijene u obliku koji bi im omogućio neometanu integraciju u suvremeno društvo. Uzimajući u obzir teorijske temelje i koristeći se rezultatima međunarodnih istraživanja, predlažu se mogućnosti da narodne knjižnice osnaže svoju poziciju ne samo kao promicatelji čitanja općenito već i kao provoditelji programa jačanja čitalačkih kompetencija odraslih koji te kompetencije nemaju u najjačem mogućem obliku. No to zahtijeva primjenu tih temelja u stručnom knjižničnom radu, pa je potrebno pojačati proaktivnost knjižnica na tom području.

Ograničenja studije. Ograničenja studije povezana su s relevantnošću podataka iz međunarodnog istraživanja PIAAC 2016. i nacionalnog istraživanja o čitateljskim i kupovnim navikama odraslih u Sloveniji. Najnoviji podaci međunarodnog istraživanja PIAAC bit će dostupni tek 2028. godine, dok se očekivalo da posljednji rezultati nacionalnog istraživanja budu objavljeni 2024. godine.

Ključne riječi: čitalačka pismenost; čitalačke kompetencije; kultura čitanja; narodne knjižnice; odrasli čitatelji; pismenost odraslih

1. Introduction and literature survey

A key feature of reading is its interdisciplinary character. Grosman (2004: 2) emphasised this twenty years ago: "The study of reading is so dynamic that knowledge about reading is constantly being updated and changed by new discoveries and ways of studying the processes of reading and the brain's functioning in

reading.” Reading, as well as history of reading, are also “slippery research areas” (Phillips and Kovač, 2023: 63), as reading has rarely been considered worthy of research attention by those who have worked on reading – also, reading as a complex cognitive process with a range of effects and influences has only received special attention in the last decade and a half. Unfortunately, this is not always recognised as a fact, as reading is “an activity that leaves few material traces” (ibid.).

Reading as a leisure activity alone has long ceased to be a focus of attention, instead reading at different stages of life and in different contexts has become a subject of research, with an increasing emphasis on identifying its impact. Reading, according to Vogrinčič Čepič (2024: 27), “inscribes itself in a concrete time and space and implies any kind of encounter between a concrete body of text and a concrete carrier of this text”. Reading is also institutionally subject to different environments, as it moves from the primary intimate environment, i.e., the family, to various public environments, e.g., kindergarten, school in different forms and levels, library, day-care centre, health centre, old people’s home. As this is a very important but often under-addressed area in various contexts, the topic of this paper is therefore the link between adult reading literacy and the role and activities of Slovenian public libraries in promoting reading and strengthening adult reading competencies.

The research, professional and general publics in Slovenia have placed reading literacy in 2023 at the forefront of their interest. This interest has been triggered by the low results of Slovenian pupils in the most recent international PISA survey 2022 (PISA, 2023). In this paper, we link these youth reading literacy results (from the year 2022) to the results of the last international adult reading literacy survey (published in 2016) (Javrh, 2016; Raziskovalno, 2017), which is so far the only comprehensive and internationally comparable survey of its kind for Slovenian adults. We relate the latter to the question of the mission of public libraries in strengthening adult reading skills.

The presentation of the PISA 2022 results for Slovenia on 6 December 2023 received a lot of media attention and reactions from both professional and academic circles. For example, the RTVSLO portal (Med slovenskimi dijaki..., 2023) pointed out that Slovenian pupils showed a decline in all three types of literacy measured by the survey: mathematical, scientific and, above all, reading literacy. The reports in other media were similarly alarming. Among the alarmed reactions of experts, we mention publications referring to the results of the PISA 2022 survey (cf. Žagar, 2023) as well as related surveys such as PIAAC (see e.g., Klemenčič and Mirazchiyski, 2023). Alongside publications in the media, an increased number of thematic posts on the issue of lower reading literacy of young people could also be detected on various social networks (Vogel (2023)). The increased media attention lasted for about two months, i.e., between 6 December

2023 and 6 February 2024, but it has also been observed later, e.g., in March 2024 (Ahačič, 2024), June 2024 (Kuralt, 2024), and see for example *Med slovenskimi dijaki* (2023), *Mediji o objavi podatkov raziskave PIAAC* (s. a.), although later posts dealt with it increasingly indirectly, in connection with the national curricula reform. Various reflections on the state of reading literacy among Slovenian pupils also suggest a link between adult reading competence scores and reading literacy (cf. Žišt, 2023; Volk, 2024). In both cases, this highlights the responsibility of adults for young people's outcomes, not only in terms of teachers' responsibility within the curriculum, but in the context of general learning, most often referred to as lifelong learning in adult education. Žišt (2023) states that reading also implies attitude and provides role-models, ie., adults who read invite young people to join the "reading train". She also argues that the 2016 survey of adults showed that one in four adults does not and cannot function because their level of reading culture, functional literacy, is inadequate. In the first part of the article, Volk (2024: 5) summarises the results of PISA 2022 in the area of reading literacy, refers to the results of the 2016 PIAAC survey and the results of the "Book and Readers V" survey (2019), and similarly highlights the issue of adult reading as not being able to expect young people to read if the adults don't read. Adult reading skills are crucial because adults can inspire young people to read. However, encouraging reading is not a given. If adults genuinely want to motivate younger generations to read, they must overcome any reading difficulties they may have and also possess a solid understanding of why reading is essential for success in everyday life, not just for young people but for themselves as well.

The increased media attention was due to the lower performance of 15-year-olds in the PISA 2022 international maths, science, and reading literacy survey, compared to previous editions of the survey. While the results in mathematical and scientific literacy remained above average, the results in reading literacy fell below average and below the results of Slovenian 15-year-olds in previous years of participation in this survey. In 2018, 82% of Slovenian 15-year-olds reached the basic level of reading literacy, but this has fallen to 74% in the 2022 survey. Only 4% of Slovenian 15-year-olds have the highest level of reading literacy, compared to an average of 7% in OECD countries (PISA, 2023).

When we compare these results alongside the 2016 results on adult reading skills (PIAAC, 2016), which have not received as much social and media attention (Media coverage of the PIAAC data release (b. d)), we begin to see an important issue. This issue is the connection between reading habits and reading skills across generations, both in family environments and in broader social contexts. In fact, the overall results of the Adult Skills Survey – PIAAC (2016) show that one in four Slovenian adults, aged between 16 and 65, has very weak reading skills (Javrh 2016). The PIAAC results also show that the adults who showed the lowest levels of skills on all three surveys are all less educated, typically over 45

years of age, from disadvantaged social backgrounds, often immigrants, less often involved in organised education and have lower incomes, are more likely to be inactive in the labour market, less healthy, less trusting of institutions, less likely to participate in voluntary activities than other adults, and have a less developed reading culture and reading habits (PIAAC Research Report – Expert Basis and Recommendations, 2017).

The national survey on reading habits of adults in 2019² is between these two surveys. It is actually the most recent survey on reading culture and book purchasing in Slovenia (Rupar, Blatnik, Kovač and Rugelj, 2019) and presents the state of reading culture in Slovenia among adults (aged 18 to 75). Its findings can be linked to the results of the two international surveys on reading literacy mentioned above. Data on the reading habits of adults in Slovenia in 2019 showed an increase in the percentage of people who describe themselves as non-readers, a decline in those who read every day, a decline in those who read more than 20 books a year, and a decline in those who visit the library at least once a month (Rupar, Blatnik, Kovač and Rugelj, 2019). At the intersection of the results of the above-mentioned surveys is the social value system. Values are, as Pečjak (2021: 464) points out, the basis for the importance people attach to reading, books in general, the roles they play in personal development, etc. These beliefs and values in turn form the basis for people's attitudes, expectations, prejudices, stereotypes, and habits regarding reading and books. These attitudes influence people's interest in and behaviour towards reading, which is reflected in the frequency and length of reading, leisure reading, the number of books read, library visits, the number of books borrowed and purchased etc. Values also shape attitudes towards reading and, as a result, develop reading skills. In this context, Potočnik (2024) highlights that reading as a value stretches beyond the acquisition of information towards the need to experience artistry and entertainment. Many authors (cf. Potočnik, 2024; Schüller-Zwierlein et al. (2022, 2024a); Fideršek, 2020; Grilc, 2015; Kovač, 2015) argue that reading as a value is a key tool for personal development, social connectedness, critical thinking and cultural awareness. Potočnik (2024) attributes a special role to reading as a value in the context of today's society, which is a society of fake news, manipulation of information, and distortion of reality, by arguing that in a modern society in which there is a flood of untrustworthy and false information, the ability to read critically and to understand what is being read becomes all the more important.

The individual is formed on two sides of a value system. According to Pečjak (2021), on the one hand, the value system of society directs social and cultural factors and institutions (parents, schools, libraries) to shape the individual's value

² The survey, which is conducted every five years, was conducted again in 2024, but the results have not been published yet, so we do not include it here.

system indirectly, while, at the same time, this system directly guides individuals in their behaviour and interactions in a way that corresponds to the fundamental values of society, thus enabling the reproduction of society and culture from one generation to the next. The value system of society thus mediates directly and indirectly between society (culture) and the individual.

The family environment has a decisive influence on the establishment of reading habits and reading competencies of individuals, which is also reported in the 2019 survey on the reading habits of Slovenian adults (Rupar, Blatnik, Kovač and Rugelj, 2019, p. 19). Participants in the survey pointed out their parents, relatives and home environment as the most important factors influencing their reading. The family environment was therefore found to be the most important factor in shaping good reading habits, while the same study also found that Slovenian parents read less to their children in 2019 than they did in 2014.

Libraries and librarians linked at the highest international level under the umbrella of the International Federation of Libraries, Societies and Librarians have identified the issue of adult literacy as an extremely important and crucial area of contemporary society. IFLA places library support for adult literacy at the heart of library programming. In its document entitled *Everyone, Everywhere at Every Age: The Work of Libraries in Supporting Adult Literacy Globally* (n.d.), IFLA highlights the view that libraries have a unique role to play in supporting literacy, particularly outside the formal education system, mainly due to the following characteristics of libraries: proximity, flexibility, and the ability to bring together different stakeholders. This is clearly underlined by the caveat that the various literacy programmes should not forget or overlook adults. In this context, the *Public library manifesto* (2022) should be highlighted, which emphasises the mission and the role and impact of libraries in literacy programmes for all age groups.

The American Library Association (ALA) has also addressed the question of why adults should be the first to be offered literacy programmes in the library, highlighting the core values of library policies: the lifelong learning orientation of library activities, the accessibility of library content and the community focus, while emphasising the range of resources needed: space, materials and competent staff (Literacy for all, n.d.). Libraries are given the responsibility to make literacy a top priority in planning library services, and are urged to review their programmes so they could be linked to literacy programmes, if this is the focus they need.

In the field of adult education, public libraries thus play an important role by fulfilling an internationally agreed mission. The public library promotes the values of development, information, education, and culture, as well as social and community cohesion (bridging differences, intercultural integration, etc.) (Nelson, 2008; Anderson et al., 2013; IFLA public library service guidelines, 2010; Strokovna poročila, 2018). Different models of cooperation between educational organisa-

tions and other types of organisations are evident in practice in the field of adult education; for libraries, four models are relevant (Stang and Irschlinger, 2005):

- the organisational integration model, where the two organisations are linked in areas such as finance and legal services;
- the spatial integration model, where the two organisations are combined in one building, but unlike the first model, are legally and financially separate organisations;
- the model of close conceptual cooperation, which presupposes joint strategic planning and long-term cooperation;
- the network cooperation model, where the partners work together on short projects and events, but there is no long-term cooperation.

By offering education, public libraries follow two principles, presented in the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (CEC, 2000): offering education for all ages – the lifelong nature of education, and offering education in a variety of subject areas, for a variety of individual roles – the all-embracing nature of education. Libraries support the different forms of formal and non-formal education of their users and provide opportunities for informal learning. Especially when concerning adult learners, it is necessary to admit that they represent a specific and diverse user population in need of specific attention (Lozano, 2007).

2. Research goals and methodology

2.1 Research goals and research questions

The results of the 2022 PISA international survey on reading literacy among 15-year-olds and the results of the PIAAC 2016 suggest that the results of the forthcoming 2024 survey on adult reading habits in Slovenia could paint a bleak picture of the family's role in shaping reading culture. Therefore, of the various possible themes that arise from these connections, we are interested in the relation between strengthening adults' reading skills and the role of public libraries in the social space.

To achieve this, we wanted to obtain an insight into the attitudes and approaches of the library field towards these issues. This topic has not yet been systematically addressed. We analysed whether any works were published in the field of librarianship that addressed the issue of lower adult literacy in relation to the opportunities offered by public libraries between 2017 and 2023, as a response to the published results of the 2016 international survey on adult reading competencies (PIAAC). We were interested in the works that would address the results of the 2016 international survey on adult reading literacy in relation to the characteristics

and tasks of the library public service and highlight the possibilities for action by public libraries, their knowledge of the area of adult literacy, or at least their attitude towards the perceived problem in adult literacy. The aim was to find out whether, as a response to the results of the international survey on adult reading literacy, works have been produced that would reflect the attention of the public libraries towards these areas, by, for example:

- linking the issue of adult reading literacy to Slovenian public libraries, or
- presenting their work in this field, knowledge of this field, or
- talking about the impact or role of public libraries in promoting reading and strengthening reading abilities of adults and providing reading incentives in adulthood.

We therefore focused our literature review on two thematic strands. The first deals with the characteristics of reading incentives in adulthood and the societal importance of adult reading abilities, while the second observes the role of Slovenian public libraries in creating a safe environment for such incentives and their implementation. In this way, we link the personal intimate space of reading (the reading situation at a certain point in an individual's life) and the institutional public space of reading (the public library as a democratic safe public space), while simultaneously following one of the fundamental findings that Schüller-Zwierlein et al., (2022, 2024a: 44) identify as a starting point for research and advocacy of reading at a higher level: "Despite the demands that our highly developed world places on reading, the reality is that many people today struggle to acquire even basic reading skills, and reading skills and habits at higher levels are deteriorating." In our analyses we also do not follow the division often perceived in the social sphere, i.e., the division of reading culture and reading literacy into two completely separate segments, which may be due to the long-standing formal division of political areas covering the respective areas, i.e., reading literacy in the field of education and reading culture in the field of culture³. The *National Strategy for the Development of Reading Literacy 2019-2030* (Nacionalna, 2019), with

³ In Slovenia, public libraries are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, while education, especially formal education, is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

its definition of reading literacy⁴, has linked reading culture and reading literacy into a single and integrated field.⁵

Our research questions were:

- 1. What are the characteristics of the adult reading incentives and the societal importance of adult reading abilities?** Due to the obvious fact that this topic cannot be addressed without addressing the area of adult literacy per se, we aimed to identify basic theoretical knowledge about the state of adult reading competencies, their social impact, and ways and possibilities to strengthen them, especially outside formal education. These are the issues that need to be well known to anyone working in this field, thus providing the theoretical foundations, content, and at the same time the possibilities for public library work (to distinguish them from the programmes for young users).
- 2. How do Slovenian public libraries perceive their role in enhancing the reading abilities of adults and how do they approach this role?** Here we aimed to examine the current attention and responsiveness of Slovenian public libraries to developments in this field and to highlight their awareness of their own role in strengthening adult reading competencies.

2.2 Methodology and sampling

The literature was analysed using the content analysis method. The search and analysis of the documents was done in August and September 2024, and was performed manually by one researcher and did not use automatic coding tools. As evident from the research questions, the investigation focused on two content areas and analysed whether the documents contained or addressed one or more of the following topics:

⁴ “Literacy is the continuously developing ability of individuals to comprehend, critically evaluate and use written information. This ability includes developed reading skills, (critical) comprehension of what is read and reading culture (conception of reading as a value and motivation to read). It is therefore the foundation of all other literacies and is crucial for the development of individual’s abilities and their successful participation in society. Such as mathematical, scientific or digital literacy, which refers to the ability/competence of an individual to understand and solve problems in written information in a specific field (mathematics, science, e-materials); functional literacy, which emphasises that reading is not a goal of its own, but is intended for the effective functioning of the individual in the environment in which he/she lives; information and media literacy, in which the ability to acquire and (critically) process information is important.” (Nacionalna, 2023: 10).

⁵ Also in 2017, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted a document with a national strategy to promote reading (Nacionalna, 2017).

1. *Reading incentives in adulthood and the societal importance of adult reading abilities.*
2. *The perceived role and activities of Slovenian public libraries in enhancing the reading abilities of adults.*

The content analysis method was applied to two segments of the literature, obtained by searching in the Slovenian union catalogue database COBIB⁶:

1. Professional and scientific publications, mainly but not exclusively in the Slovenian context or by Slovenian authors, regardless of their year of publication, which are available in Slovenia. Here we used the following search terms (keywords): reading, adults, reading literacy, reading culture, reading habits, reading ability/ability, deficits, level, influence, attitude, role model, incentive, society, learning, formal/informal education, etc., scientific paper, professional paper etc. The set of terms was expanded during the literature review. 114 potentially relevant works were identified and reviewed, and further examination revealed that these topics were identified in 11 of them, which were then analysed in detail.
2. Recent publications, published after the 2016 PIAAC results, (2016-23) in the journals *Knjižnica* (Library) and *Organizacija znanja* (Organisation of Knowledge), which are the only Slovenian scientific and professional journals in the field of librarianship and related fields. Here we used the same search terms (keywords): reading, adults, reading literacy, reading culture, reading habits, reading ability/ability, deficits, level, influence, attitude, role model, incentive, society, learning, formal/informal education, etc., scientific paper, professional paper etc. and limited the search to the aforementioned two journals, as well public libraries, mission, network, librarians, professionals, informants, services, advice, users/non-users, readers, members, etc. This set of terms was also refined and expanded during the search process. We found that from the 219 documents in total published in this timespan in these two journals, 51 were potentially relevant, but the topics of our interest were addressed by only 11 papers.

In total, 333 publications were obtained and reviewed, of which only a small number (22) were found to directly address the topics of interest. We need to note that it was not possible to strictly divide the documents as being relevant to only one of the above two content areas, and for this reason in the results and discussion section some documents appear in both sections.

⁶ This database (<https://www.cobiss.si/>) contains records for all the materials in all Slovenian libraries.

3. Findings and discussion

In this section we present the findings and discuss them from various aspects. We should note that we did not quantify the findings; instead, we present them in a summarized form, i.e., as literature survey, thus focusing on the content of the various topics that have emerged. It is because it is a largely underresearched area that has not been addressed before, especially in Slovenia, and we therefore judged this to be a better approach – more useful for the researchers and practitioners, policy-makers etc. The first two subsections follow the research questions and are divided into subsections. In the final subsection of this section, we interpret the findings and offer recommendations for further research.

3.1 Adult reading incentives and social significance of adult reading abilities

3.1.1 Characteristics of adult reading and its influences

In the field of adult education, the definition of basic communication competence is slightly different from that applied to young people and children. In the context of adult learning, communication competence is the broadest category or competence, encompassing a range of knowledge, skills, and behaviours at various levels, as this fundamental competence can be acquired and extended from birth to late adulthood. Reading is one of its four key components (Vedlin Bedjanič et al., 2016). The fundamental ability to communicate is closely linked to the development of an individual's cognitive abilities, understanding of the world and connectedness with other people. It is not only about an individual's mastery of vocabulary and grammar, the use of different functions of language, and types of verbal interaction (different types and ways of exchanging messages in the mother tongue). It is not only about knowing but also about effectively using and knowing one's way between types of literary and non-literary texts, about perceiving different styles and genres of language and the variability of the language used (OECD, 2016).

Adults are not like children who are just entering the world of reading and have not yet had negative experiences, but at the same time their journey into reading is completely tied to the adults beside them. Reading encouragement in adulthood needs to take into account the fact that these are adults with multiple life experiences. Some of them are fatally linked to reading and self-esteem. It is fundamental to consider whether an adult can feel comfortable at all in the role of a learner, or one who might only learn to read well as an adult. Theory (Javrh, 2011) and practice suggest that some adults will easily slip into the role of a learner, i.e., someone who could, in adulthood, learn to read well, without special encouragement. Due to good childhood and adolescence experiences, they will not experience any par-

ticular resistance and will quickly find their way in new circumstances when they become learners once again. If, for example, they experience validation from a tutor or others in the group after critical reading, this role as a learner will strongly reinforce their self-image. Even in adulthood, reading remains crucial for identity development, attitude formation, and emotions (Potočnik, 2024). Reading affects how individuals perceive themselves and how society sees and perceives them. According to the findings (Javrh, 2011), this means that the identity of an adult will gradually be perceived significantly more positively precisely through the role of a successful learner who has learned in-depth reading skills or has become a quality reader.

3.1.2 Adults as learners

Grosman (2012) already points to the specific situation of reading stimuli in adulthood and the adult as a learner by referring to the impact of prior reading experience as the fundament of their reading interests, motives, and levels of comprehension, such as interest in particular people and their characteristics (either due to similar or interesting mental processes and behaviour, or because of intriguing problems), attractive tension of the literary narrative, allowing exploration of unfamiliar forms of human experience and possibility. She therefore argues that adult readers always use their prior knowledge and experience in their interaction with texts.

Grosman (2012) also highlights the different role, in fact advantages, of the teacher in non-formal adult education. Because teachers working in non-formal adult education are not limited by the school curriculum, their work can avoid discussion about the texts they read that alienate young people from literature in school, such as the various categorisations of “external” and “internal” forms of a text, and analytical and synthetic forms, which do not lead to a better understanding of the text. Instead, they can focus on discussing how the individuals in the reading group have understood the text, thus providing the best basis for comparison and for the realisation that each text can be read and understood differently, depending on the reader’s unavoidable contribution. For the purposes of our research, the role of the teacher, defined in this way, can be compared to that of the librarian⁷ in a public library. The public librarian is not constrained by the school curriculum; instead, they can facilitate engaging and informative discussions about what is being read. Through their expertise in the reference interview, they empower adult readers to share their thoughts on the material in a way that feels positive and affirming. These conversations can focus on personal preferences, such as liking, enjoying, or rejecting the selected reading material.

⁷ In this paper we use the term professional librarian, which in the Slovenian library environment means an individual who has attained a prescribed level of education and passed a professional exam.

Studies using the basis of experiential tests (Javrh and Kuran, 2012) argue that the method of reflection on a selected fiction text, in which adult education practitioners ask learners about their personal opinions and motives, is an effective method of familiarising themselves with more complex forms of reading in adult education⁸. This is the basis for the systematic and planned development of critical reading in adulthood, irrespective of the learner's level of education. Comparisons of comprehension between learners enable reflection on whose comprehension is closer to the textual foundation or retains the most information, features, and peculiarities from the text, as well as the quality of fiction reading and comprehension.

Those adults who have not had enough positive experiences as learners in the educational environment during childhood and youth, and who may not have had enough support for reading activities in the family, will have a different perspective on the role of learner and will behave differently. This is particularly true of the act of reading aloud, which is one of the basic activities of public speaking. Grosman (2012: 178) advises that those mentors and teachers who work with vulnerable adults use the method of reflection, which involves expressing one's opinions about the content. Such encouragement to express a basic attitude towards the text is a starting point for the development of critical literacy, leading to deeper understanding of why the text is interesting and which features have attracted the most attention. Depending on the interest of the readers, more attention can be paid to such features by discussing them individually through the communication between the narrative persons, as well as address the details of the narrative layer, the descriptions of the circumstances and the environment, the order of events, the linear sequence, and the consequent causality.

Before adults with serious deficits in reading abilities can be involved in any educational activity – or, in the case of our theoretical exploration, in forms of informal library activity – certain barriers need to be overcome, as several authors have pointed out (cf. Pirjevec, 1940; Javrh, 2021; Javrh and Možina, 2020; Grosman, 2012; Javrh, 2011; Illeris 2007). Sooner or later, life circumstances will force every adult to take on the role of a reader who reads something aloud or makes a public reading appearance, even if only in front of close family members. This usually results in a very unpleasant experience which will reinforce the adult's

⁸ The method of reflection, with knowledge and awareness of its importance, can also be a crucial part of the reference conversation between the library informant and the adult reader. It can be even more important between the librarian and the non-reader or non-user when they meet in a specific safe environment. Librarians may not be sufficiently aware of the importance of their public image, which all too often is raised quite high by non-readers, who are seen by the general public as experts who read a lot, have read a large number of books and are generally trusted to give advice. In building a trusting relationship, the reflective method strengthens the non-reader's self-image and, in doing so, strengthens the trusting relationship which is crucial for the non-reader's progress.

conviction that he is not a reader and can never become one. At this point, a very important process of negative adult motivation to learn reading skills or to acquire higher reading skills begins. Instead of setting out to improve their reading skills in the face of their inability in a reading challenge, adults with low reading skills will generally act inconsistently with their needs (Javrh, 2011). In circumstances where learning new skills would seem to be the most logical choice, new resistances will spontaneously deepen within the adult.

Similarly to what the Slovenian andragogical profession has found in its analyses of work with vulnerable groups (Javrh and Možina, 2020; Možina, 2024), the consequence of these resistances is likely to be that the adult will not want to re-enter the role that once brought him painful and unpleasant experiences as a failed reader in front of his peers in his childhood or even in his late adolescence. At that time, he or she felt exposure, perhaps deep shame, humiliation, even a loss of self-esteem. Often, this attitude is shown through a strong belief that the person never wants to be a learner again. They may feel that public speaking or reading aloud, even if it could be enjoyable, is something they cannot do competently – unlike others (Javrh, 2011). By resisting the urge to assert himself as an adult and firmly declining to read despite the appropriate encouragement from his surroundings, he finds himself slipping into a vulnerable grey area (Javrh, 2021). It is particularly important to highlight the fact that adults are always learning, as life circumstances continually push all individuals to learn, regardless of their age. They also learn from the circumstances described, but it is usually this “learning” or experience that reinforces the belief that they are unsuccessful readers and will continue to be so. Because of these internal resistances and barriers, they are reluctant to learn the very thing that would help them to solve their specific problem, i.e., failure in reading. Grosman (2012) also reflected on this a decade ago, by arguing that the debate about mother tongue and adult communicative competence must first address the question of how deficits arise in the first place, since literacy – the development of reading and writing skills as fundamental components of communicative competence – has been a core task of primary education systems since the establishment of public schooling. According to Grosman, the adults who suffer exclusion, as a consequence of an unsatisfactory communicative ability in their mother tongue, clearly are those individuals who have not developed this ability during compulsory schooling and have grown up without the necessary linguistic capacities.

As another interesting point, Illeris (2006, 2007) points out the need for careful use of language: any insensitivity in the use of language to address adults who lack sufficiently developed competencies, including reading skills, can be a decisive additional burden that will prevent the visible effects of educational programmes or other incentives. Particularly in groups with low basic competencies, individuals have a deeply subjective ambivalence towards education, which in

our case means that they are both willing and unwilling to participate in learning. In the case where they have low competencies because they did not have a positive learning experience in a school environment – which in effect means eight or nine years of feeling that they are not good enough, that they are not relevant and that they are marginalised – they are dominated by the desire to leave school as soon as possible. Few want to return, risking a repetition of the unpleasant experience. At the same time, it is their only way out of the situation. According to Illeris (2006), they need specific initiatives and relevant opportunities that are meaningfully linked, signal some new circumstances, reduce social, practical and financial barriers, deliberately avoid arrangements, actions, wording or references that could in any way be perceived as demeaning, disrespectful, disempowering or similar, as this is not only offensive, but could provide a very welcome excuse (either to oneself or to others) for an individual not to attend.

3.2 The perceived mission of Slovenian public libraries in strengthening of adult reading abilities

In this context, public libraries, and in particular library professionals, have also played a special role for many years. Novljan (2004: 109) notes that the importance, role, and contribution of public libraries are presented in papers, discussed in theses and, importantly, outside the library profession, most often in the field of andragogy. However, we found that in the various theses since 2004, and in the assignments for the librarian exam that have appeared in the Slovenian professional space since the change of legislation in 2017⁹, the topic of the public library is extremely rarely linked to the educational needs of adults. More common are links between the public library and the concept of leisure (Erhovinc, 2012; Komel, 2011; Malec and Vilar, 2020; Šikonja and Petek, 2015), special population groups (e.g. the homeless (Anžlovar, 2014), elderly (Rebolj and Kolarek, 2021), or cataloguing (Pogorelec et al., 2004). Topics related to library buildings, library funding, and library materials are regularly present. Much fewer examples of scientific or professional papers, doctoral dissertations, final theses at different levels of study or even assignments for the library exam deal with the public library in relation to adult reading culture, with the focus not on the general reading-motivating nature of the public library, but rather on the establishment of reading abilities and a reading culture in adults. There are fewer examples of applied examples of public libraries' activities in strengthening adults' reading competencies, and even fewer examples of public libraries' approach to adults with lower levels of reading

⁹ Passing the library professional exam is a prerequisite for the work of a professional librarian in a library or other organisation working in the field of library activities. Since 1 January 2017, professional librarians have been taking the librarianship examination in accordance with the Rules on the Librarianship Examination (Pravilnik o bibliotekarskem izpitu, 2016).

competencies. Our analysis found that there are no such publications. We thus found a considerable void of scientific and professional papers on adult education and public libraries, with the exception of articles by Novljan and Šinko; in total this means 5 scientific and 6 professional articles.

3.2.1 Role, mission, and activities of the public libraries in adult education

Novljan (1992) defined libraries as organisations that, more than any other, are able to offer a variety of opportunities for motivated learning for individuals, and simultaneously can adapt these opportunities appropriately to the individual when offering services in the following areas:

- identifying educational needs;
- motivating people to learn;
- providing information on educational opportunities;
- training in the use of libraries, information resources and materials;
- provision of study materials and learning facilities;
- organising education in various forms.

As early as 1940, Pirjevec (1940) addresses the role of the librarian, arguing that the competent librarian should lead the reader to better literature without intrusive teaching, cajoling, and theorising. This general advice on the development of the reader, given to library practitioners by one of the earliest Slovenian theorists in the field of librarianship, can also be applied to the activities of library practitioners' in strengthening the reading abilities of adults who only reach lower levels. Two decades ago, Novljan (2004) highlighted the importance of public libraries in meeting the educational needs of users and reviewed how public libraries can meet the lifelong learning needs of users through their acquisitions policies and events. She drew attention to the importance of the educational function of the public library, highlighting that public libraries should be recognised as indispensable collaborators of individuals and groups in the learning process. Novljan (2002, 2004) focused on the information literacy needs imposed on public libraries by the sectoral law, pointing out that in these tasks they must take into account the literacy levels of their population, meaning that a key role here is that they should be aware of international and national surveys which provide the necessary data for the implementation of the prescribed tasks. She points out that in the field of education, libraries must provide opportunities to think, to learn and to talk to others, firstly by using their library collection that represents a virtually unlimited store of knowledge. Library work could be considered successful and effective when they are able to use this knowledge as a potential for the growth of ideas and knowledge in the environment and as a stimulus for the practical application of this knowledge (Novljan, 2004).

Almost a decade later, Šinko (2012; 2014) builds on the widely recognised justification of the public library as a “knowledge hub” (p. 53) to justify the mission of adult education in public libraries, drawing, like Novljan (2004), on sector-specific legislation which in 2001 identified¹⁰ lifelong learning as one of the core statutory tasks, thus making user education a statutory task. Šinko (2012; 2014) highlights that in pursuing this mission, a library can cooperate with educational organizations in several ways (for example by following one or more of the four models by Stang and Irschlinger, 2005). She notes that public libraries are important stakeholders in realizing the lifelong and all-embracing nature of education, by offering education also to adults and in a variety of subject areas, for a variety of individual roles. Libraries support the different forms of formal and non-formal education of their users and provide opportunities for informal learning. She further notes that libraries carry out activities covered by the annual adult education programme in Slovenia: independent-learning centres, knowledge exchanges, lifelong learning points, study groups, reading groups; some libraries also host programmes of the Slovenian University for the Third Age, as well as information and career-counselling centres.

3.2.2 Users and non-users of the public libraries

The situation described by Šinko (2012; 2014) dates back a decade, yet an overview of public libraries’ activities in 2023 (Statistični podatki..., n.d.) indicates that similar forms of adult education are still being offered. These programmes primarily target users of public libraries, but they reach far fewer non-users. In our analysis of available data on library activity at national level, we found that we do not have data on the latter, i.e., non-users. Šinko (2012; 2014) limited her research on interest in educational content offered by libraries to library users. Here library users and library services users are individuals who are not members, i.e., they do not enrol in a public library, which would give them certain rights and responsibilities and, above all, greater access to library services. Users of the library and library services are individuals who use those library services without administrative traceability (e.g. attending library events, visiting the library, reading books in the library premises). The analysis suggests a significant difference in the functioning of public libraries two or three decades ago compared to 2023 (Statistični podatki..., n.d.). The difference is reflected in the process of applying the requirements and needs of the inhabitants of the environment to the planning of the library programme. In the past, libraries primarily designed their programmes based on the needs of users within their local environments. However, over the last decade, recent international research on reading literacy among both young people and adults has highlighted a challenging target group for libraries: non-users. This group is more difficult for libraries to engage with and understand,

¹⁰ Despite changes in sectoral legislation, this task remains relevant and statutory in 2024.

making it challenging to develop programmes that address their needs. Non-users are defined as residents who are not library members, who do not attend library events, and who do not use library facilities, programmes and services, including those that do not require membership. Namely, becoming a member requires the filing-in of an enrolling document, which demonstrates a certain level of literacy. The current national professional recommendations for public libraries (Strokovna, 2018) build on this difference in the planning, organisation, management, and evaluation of library programmes through which the library public service is delivered (Vilar et al., 2017). They focus on the analysis of the local community aiming to identify the needs of non-users of library services in the broadest definition.

3.2.3 Librarians and their responsibilities towards the users and non-users

Our analysis highlights that a key element for the link between adult literacy programmes and the public library is the personal approach that only a competent library professional can provide. Novljan (2018) highlights this by claiming that being a librarian is a privileged profession and a responsible job and that every user presents an opportunity to act, a challenge to raise their level of literacy and reading culture by choosing how to act and thus seize this opportunity for the user and for himself, for the library. It is also the personal approach that guides scholarly and professional publishing, while at the same time responding to the identified demands and needs of the local environment.

Novljan (2018: 10) highlights the role of the information librarian, who provides a link between the user and the library collection, the library catalogue and other reference sources through a personal touch, especially when the user is unable or unwilling to solve his or her information problem by independently selecting sources. From the literature it is possible to conclude that that central attention should be given to the personal address as an indispensable element of interpersonal communication. Personal address starts with non-verbal communication and can be decisive for adults with low competencies to overcome the feeling of not being good enough to visit the library and to access library materials, and at the same time to overcome the possible prior negative experience of visiting the library. The personal address of a library professional or a library expert is the link between the knowledge gathered in the library collection and the adult individual who wants or needs to access this knowledge to enhance his/her own functionality in his/her personal and social life. The librarian's ability to empathise with the needs of users (Novljan, 2018) is crucial. In highlighting the role of the public library in enhancing the reading capacities of adults, it is crucial to shift focus from the ability to empathise with the needs of users to the ability to empathise with the needs of the non-users or non-readers. In this context, it is essential to realise that in the relationship between the librarian and a non-reader, the centre of gravity is on the librarian's side, as the non-reader and/or non-user is not familiar with li-

brary services. Thus Novljan's (2018) mentioning of the user expectations leads to thinking about the expectations of non-users and non-readers, who are unfamiliar with the library and the librarian, and do not know exactly what they can demand or expect from them. Such users often draw on past experiences of visiting the library, if they have any. The librarian, on the other hand, knows exactly what they can offer to such a user, but needs relevant information about their needs/requirements. They cannot find this out without a conversation. In the case of adults with lower reading abilities, even if they were to come to the library, it can be assumed that this conversation may also be hindered, thus placing even more responsibility on the librarians.

3.3 Implications of the findings and recommendations

3.3.1 Work of Slovenian public libraries with the adult population

According to the Association of Slovenian Public Libraries, there are 58 public libraries in Slovenia, which operate a network of 283 local libraries, 98 mobile collections, 13 bibliobuses that visit 818 stops in 669 places.¹¹ Official statistics collected by the National Library indicates that in 2022, 982.88 professional librarians were employed full-time in public libraries to carry out library tasks¹². Slovenian public libraries had as many potential users in 2022 as there are in the population of Slovenia, i.e., 2 116 972; 19.64% of the population of Slovenia is registered as members of public libraries, of these, 13.72% were recorded in the adult membership category. We have demonstrated that the membership category is not an appropriate measure for this paper due to the specific needs of adults with reading challenges. The category of public library members includes all those individuals who enrol or are enrolled by others¹³ in a public library. This can be called an administrative issue, as it is linked to the completion of the documents for joining the library. Any individual can enrol in a Slovenian public library by themselves after the age of 15. However, besides an identity document, a filled-in

¹¹ See more in: <https://www.knjiznice.si>

¹² "...are those library workers who perform professional work fundamental to the delivery of the library public service. Included are librarian (knjižničar), senior librarian (višji knjižničar), assistant expert librarian (bibliotekar pomočnik) and expert librarian (bibliotekar). They must have a qualification as defined in the Law on Librarianship (Zakon o knjižničarstvu, 2001) and have passed the librarian exam. A person may be employed as a professional library worker without having passed the librarian exam but must pass it no later than one year from the date of entry into service or after transfer to a work-post for which the librarian exam is a condition." (see more in: <https://bibsist.si/Definicije.html?crka=S>)

¹³ The latter is the case when children are enrolled, since minors' information is guaranteed by their parents or guardians. Until the age of 18, membership of Slovenian public libraries is free of charge, as required by the legislation.

enrolment document is required, which can be a barrier for adults who do not have highly developed reading abilities.

The 2016 International Adult Literacy Survey brings a range of issues to the library public space that should be given full attention. Although Novljan (2018: 16) highlights the positive positioning of public libraries in the Slovenian public space, the results on the reading abilities of adults raise the question of what proportion of the population is covered by this statement and what results does the library work have (this is backed also by the results of a user survey (Javnomnenska, 2011)). Novljan asserts that libraries have become an essential part of people's educational and work environments, catering to their needs for information, education, research, culture, social interaction, and relaxation. However, he also notes that while librarians are skilled at listening to readers – which positively affects user satisfaction scores – results from surveys like PIAAC raise concerns about whether services meet professional standards adequately. Moreover, despite the wide range of motivational reading initiatives available, many potential users still remain unreached. The latter observation implies that closer look would be needed at the programmes of Slovenian public libraries, where the main source at the moment are the statistics on the activities of public libraries at national level.

Promoting adult reading skills is a technically challenging step in the field of non-formal adult education, given the characteristics of adult reading incentives described above. It can also be carried out in the context of public service programmes provided by public libraries. In their key professional document¹⁴ for the professional functioning and development of library activities in public libraries, Slovenian public libraries have included the *promotion of adult reading culture and reading literacy* among the eleven core library roles. A library role is defined as “a focused area of library activity that describes what a library does or provides in order to meet an identified need in the local community” (Strokovna, 2018, p. 7). They are the foundation for the library's response to the external environment and provide guidance for strategic planning for libraries and as such provide a framework for shaping the library's appropriate response to the needs of the local community and for determining the library's performance (Strokovna poročila, 2018). In other words, a library role denotes a perspective that directs all aspects of a certain area of public library activity towards a specific goal, in this case higher levels of adult literacy, at the same time defining the purpose of these activities – achieving a defined benefit for a defined target group. As such, it enables the

¹⁴ Professional standards and recommendations are defined by law (Article 11 of the Law on Librarianship – Zakon o knjižničarstvu, 2001) as the basic development document of the professional field: “The development of libraries is guided by standards and professional recommendations relating to the organisation and functioning of the library public service and adopted by the National Council for Library Activity.”

library to address an identified need in the local community (Strokovna poročila, 2018). This document sets out a set of library roles that has been developed based on an analysis of international and national documents, and this set represents the ideal library public service programme of a Slovenian public library. However, Strokovna poročila (2018) also points out that the full implementation of the full range of library roles would be an impossibly challenging task for any single public library, and therefore direct the management of public libraries to consider which library roles are priority for each library. Such a decision should be based on an analysis of the needs of the local community (Strokovna poročila, 2018), as the priorities chosen should support the development and quality of life of the local community.

As is the case for various other non-formal adult education programmes, this is also typical of the programming or design of the library role of *adult reading culture and reading literacy*. In planning, organising, implementing, and evaluating the library role of *adult reading literacy and reading culture*, it is not easy to follow or transfer lessons from the fields of *children's reading literacy and reading culture* or *young people's reading literacy and reading culture* (two other library roles in this document). In the field of adult reading culture and, in particular, adult reading literacy, andragogs point out that we cannot simply follow the lessons of child and youth education (Javrh, 2024). Even less appropriately, they emphasise, is a reduction of this highly sensitive process to the acquisition of reading skills by adults. They stress very strongly that all the key specifics brought to this process by the adults, who are willing to find themselves again in the role of learner, should be taken into account. These specifics are related to autonomy in the decision to engage in non-formal learning, multiple life experiences and adult motivation, which is often also guided by hidden personal beliefs (Javrh, 2024).

3.3.2 *Lack of attention of the public libraries towards adult literacy*

We were interested in whether the literature review could confirm that adult reading skills are part of the public libraries' mission and that literacy and reading culture is not only for young people. Considering the unified cultural and educational aspects, it is appropriate that this field has become a subject of holistic interest for education professionals (children, adolescents and adults) as well as culture professionals (e.g. Vilar et al., 2017). Our review of the scientific and professional literature indicates that adult learning in the public library is not a topic that would emerge in theory only after the results of the PIAAC international survey (Raziskovalno, 2017) were revealed in 2016. Adult education has been linked to the mission and tasks of the public library in a number of professional and scientific articles long before the aforementioned survey on adult reading skills. However, we also found that even though Slovenian public libraries have had a long tradition of promoting, strengthening, building, and establishing reading cul-

ture in children and adolescents (see for example Bevk, 2024; Papež, 2023; Fras Popović, 2021; Novljan, 1996; Lajkovič, 2015, Krajnik, 2015), professional and scientific publications in the two selected journals rarely address the role of the public library in the field of adult literacy. In fact, and regretfully, our research did not find any recent articles that would address the link between adult reading skills and the mission of the public library, or that brought the librarianship's response to the findings on adult reading skills.

3.3.3 Some recommendations in the context of Slovenian public libraries

3.3.3.1. Libraries should focus more on the specificity of working with adults

This paper draws attention to the role of public libraries in strengthening the reading skills of adults, with a focus on a specific target group of adults who, according to the results of an international survey, do not reach a higher level of literacy. However, according to the authors of the Ljubljana Manifesto (Schüller-Zwilerlein et al., 2023, 2024b), in order to cope with the complexity of the information society, the skills of reading at a higher level are more important today than ever before. We call for libraries to pay more attention to the need to take into account the multiple life experiences of adults, thus highlighting the specificity of reading incentives for adults and the need to reconsider the planning and design of future library programmes. Unlike children and young people, some of the life experiences of adults have long been fatally negatively linked to reading and the self-image of the reader. There is a need to consider when these adults might feel comfortable in the role of a learner who could learn to read well in adulthood. In particular, what role can public libraries as institutions and public librarians as individuals and professionals with diverse skills play in transforming the self-image of these adults, based on the assumption of a professional profile that Novljan (2018) has called "information librarian – empathic connector".

3.3.3.2. Libraries should start paying more attention to the non-users, especially those with lower reading skills.

We have shown that adults with lower reading abilities do not easily decide to become library members. The category of public library members most likely represents adults who have a good or very good reading ability or affinity for reading and a positive attitude towards reading culture. The data on the number of members of Slovenian public libraries can be interpreted in the direction of a reserved or not too exaggerated interest, tradition or culture in the use of the services provided by public libraries for their members. We also assume that the programmes of events, activities, educational content offered by libraries have a similar influence on the decision to become a member of a public library. These library programmes, we hypothesise, according to the theoretical background on the characteristics of the reading experience in adulthood, are more likely to lead

to library membership among those adults who have a longer reading tradition, are already part of a reading community, and pass on positive experiences to their immediate family and wider personal circle of acquaintances.

The actual options available to the practitioner when working with adults in the area of promoting reading abilities or reading culture should be considered with particular sensitivity: “It is also advisable for the teachers (...) to ensure that their feedback is encouraging and does not discourage or even offend any of the readers in the group. Only by listening very carefully and involving the whole reading group in the conversation can the teacher or tutor convince all the readers that he or she is genuinely interested in the reading responses of the individual readers in the group” (Grosman 2012: 178).

The importance of reading goes well beyond the ability to decode a text or spend quality leisure time. As Schüller-Zwierlein et al., (2023, 2024b) point out, reading shapes the social public sphere much more than we dare to admit, since one’s reading skills determine how one will live one’s life. Not only in the spiritual sense, but also in the materialistic-survival sense. Reading habits and reading skills have an impact on personal well-being, but they also spiral through the individual’s action in society to economic development, social and political participation, critical thinking and, therefore, democracy as a fundamental value of modern social order. Today’s complex society is not only the result of reading, but its survival and future resilience depend on reading (Schüller-Zwierlein et al., 2023). There is no society without the individual, and especially not without the adult individual, who is the bearer of society’s executive and administrative functions. It is therefore crucial to consolidate an understanding of reading, defined, for example, by Potočnik (2024): “Reading is not just decoding written symbols, but a complex process that enables access to knowledge, broadening of cognitive horizons and participation in social life. For adults, reading is key to lifelong learning, personal development and social inclusion.”

Novljan (2018: 13) also points to the link between reading and libraries: “The development of libraries is inextricably linked to the development of literacy; libraries develop it, preserve it and influence its spread and use, with an emphasis on good command of language in written and spoken use. At the beginning of their development, libraries catered for a literate few, who read what was available to them. The development of the printing press increased the concern for the selection of resources for them, with a defined purchasing policy for library materials and careful cataloguing. The librarian took the greatest step in the development of his role when he supplemented the task of guardian, the protection of library materials, with the task of promoting and disseminating their democratic use.” She (2018, p. 12) describes the importance of the information librarian and libraries of all kinds in today’s individual life: “Making the right choices is an integral part of

our lives. We face it every day as consumers, parents, learners, researchers, community members, workers, etc.

Everyone is faced with choices about what is true, what is right, what is good for us and for others. The benefits of good literacy, information assistance and information literacy are becoming appreciated and indispensable. In the vast network of lending libraries of all kinds, librarian-informants can contribute to the dissemination and development of the ability to cope with the overabundance of (unnecessary) information, including false information, and to develop the skills and abilities to critically evaluate sources, to select and use them appropriately.” At this point, one of the key questions for strengthening adult reading competencies is how to bring these indispensable factors, such as libraries and librarians, closer to adults who do not have them in their lives, for one reason or another.

3.3.3.3. Libraries should take into consideration their environment and available data when planning their work

The planning of any library role as a public library programme is – or should be – based on the analysis of the local environment (Novljan, 2004; Vilar et al., 2017; Stokovna poročila, 2018). The public library is bound to a specific local environment, which is geographically limited. Intertwined with the network of school libraries and other types of libraries, it forms one of the strongest public services in the field of culture in Slovenia, because it is the public library, as “the carrier of the public service programme, that influences the quality of life of the individual and the local community through library materials and services. It contributes to the development of knowledge and culture, to the spread of democratic decision-making, to the promotion of library use and literacy, and to social tolerance. It contributes to the realisation of societal development objectives at both local and national level, taking into account the needs and challenges of the local community” (Stokovna poročila, 2018: 3).

Public libraries should also use the results of international and national surveys to obtain data on the characteristics of the local community, as these are usually very reliable and comprehensive and as such constitute a strong professional support and argument. A prerequisite for the meaningful use of the results of international and national surveys in the field of adult reading competencies is the awareness of the role of the public library in strengthening the reading competencies of those adults who do not reach the minimum level. The awareness of a particular library is, of course, strongly influenced (or should be influenced) by the general awareness of the issue in the professional public (which is often also a consequence of the awareness or exposure of the issue in the general public). As Potočnik (2024, p. 24) points out: “Libraries and educational programmes that focus on promoting reading among adults can play an important role in providing access to quality materials and in building communities that support lifelong learning.”

4. Conclusions

At the turn of the 17th to the 18th century, public libraries gained a place in institutional society because of the increasing importance of literacy and because of the intensive increase in the proportion of the population that had acquired the skill of reading and wished to use and develop it. Their existence and the basic guiding principle of their conduct was to ensure that the population was literate.

The data from international surveys on reading, both among adults and young people, raises the question of the future of public libraries. It is not so much a question of what libraries should be like in the future, what tasks they should perform, what content they should highlight, and how they should define themselves in relation to digitisation and digital materials – these topics have been the subject of professional and scientific debate for the last three decades, it is a question of the initial task of the public library. If the question of the literacy of the population is so pressing that it threatens the individual's ability to function at the level of the basic life tasks, the question of the so-called upgrading of library services is only a narrow focus on the ever-decreasing proportion of the population that has developed reading skills to a higher level.

Survey data from five (reading and shopping habits) or eight years ago (adult reading skills) offer some more thought-provoking clues, as they also show a significant proportion of those who read, buy books, and have developed reading skills at a higher level. However, research on young people's reading literacy, including on young people's creative thinking, points us in the direction of managing libraries to cater for the basic literacy of the population, i.e., reading.

We are very concerned that our analysis shows that scientific and professional literature published between 2017 and 2023 in the two journals with the strongest professional and scientific reach in the Slovenian library space does not address the problem of lower reading skills of adults and linking them to the mission of public libraries. The latter raises the question of how public libraries respond to the needs of the local community, whether they are even aware of them, and to what extent public libraries pursue their social role that ensures equal opportunities to use library services for all citizens.

Based on our review of the relationship between public libraries and the development of adult reading competencies, we conclude that we would need a specific study that would provide insights into the so-called tipping point – a particular life experience or circumstance in an adult's life that changes him/her from a non-user to a user of a public library. In this context, there is a need for insight into the situation of the so-called passive users, who use library services through an intermediary, most often the closest family member. At the very least, we need an analysis at the national level to answer whether theoretical considerations are

being put into practice, or whether library programmes are increasingly being used and targeted at a group of adults who regularly visit the library, are well aware of the importance and role of reading, and are scoring at higher levels in reading literacy tests. Therefore, one of our recommendations is that libraries take a proactive approach to analysing their local contexts and designing programmes and services that target the populations most in need of these services for change and personal advancement. This is, of course, also in line with the goals and mission of any public library.

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