

The Image of Croatian School Librarians in the Professional Public

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Abstract

This paper consists of research on the perception of school librarians in the professional public. The paper has shown that the problem of insufficient visibility of the school librarian's field is not of such importance in its professional public, contrary to the opinion of school librarians, and that the image of school librarians is positive, somewhat more positive in the educational public than in the library public. The paper also provides recommendations regarding the development of a communication strategy.

Introduction

The author presents research on the perception of school librarians in the professional public. The school librarian professional public is two-fold – it consists of the educational public and the library public -- consequently, the research was more complex. The research was conducted as part of the final paper for the post-graduate specialist study programme in public relations.

The school librarian is a relatively young profession, which has developed in Croatia intensively from the 1950s, as has the profession of public relations. Previously teachers and other educators, at the end of their working careers, ended up becoming librarians; without the skills required by the librarian profession, they lent books to pupils. From the 1990s to the present, there were increasing numbers of young colleagues who completed additional library science study programmes, organised school library collections according to the rules of the library profession, and initiated direct activities with pupils with the intention of promoting all types of reading, information literacy of pupils, implementation of cultural and public activities of the libraries and the schools that they work in. These new activities of theirs were also accompanied with the partially corresponding provisions, laws and regulations.

The National and University Library (NSK), the home library for all libraries in the library system of the Republic of Croatia collects data on all libraries on an ongoing basis. According to NSK statistical data (2016) on the state of school libraries, in 2015 87%, of the 1179 school librarians had completed an additional study programme in library science, which makes them the most educated part of the educational system, adding an additional profession to their already previously completed pedagogical studies. Another 2% had passed the state exam for librarians, and a further 11% were unqualified.

In spite of all of this, the potential of school librarians has not been noticed to a sufficient extent by the Ministry of Science and Education. In general library circles that belong within the competency of the Ministry of Culture, a shift has occurred in the visibility of librarians. Based on statistical data, it is

evident, however, that there is a higher percentage of graduate librarians in the educational system than in the regular public/city libraries.

The dissatisfaction of school librarians is also reflected in the fact that, at the primary school level, they have an outdated work programme that is based in large part on library literacy and, to a lesser extent, on information literacy, while something of this nature does not even exist at the secondary level. School librarians are also dissatisfied with the lack of continuous funding for the development of the school library collection. They see the development of the profession in the direction of transformation into teacher librarians, specialists for encouraging all types of reading, information, digital and media literacy.

What is, actually, the reputation of school librarians in their professional audience? This research answers this question, presenting the image of school librarians and recommending the elements of a strategy for improving the reputation of the profession and its visibility among the professional public.

Research Problem

For many years already, school librarians have been claiming that they are insufficiently visible among their professional public. For this reason, the profession is facing problems, such as lack of regular funding which would enable planning the development of collections and services for pupils and employees, employment of unqualified individuals to fill school librarian positions, outdated and insufficiently defined work programme for primary schools, no defined work programme for secondary school, and so on.

School librarians consider one of the key reasons for such a situation to be the insufficient visibility of their profession, its unsuitable reputation. Such an assessment, regardless of origin, demands more in-depth contemplation. This research attempts to determine whether the perception of librarians among their professional public is as unsuitable as they believe.

Therefore, the subject of this paper is the image of school librarians in primary and secondary schools in the educational and library publics in the Republic of Croatia, given their working conditions and the manner in which they contribute to the education process.

The purpose of the research is advancing the school librarian profession through possible strengthening of the profession's reputation. The research results will be the foundation for the preparation of a strategy for the development of this reputation. A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) will be used in the preparation of the strategy.

The research goals are to question the professional public of school librarians on the reputation/perception of school librarians and their importance to the education process in the schools of respondents, including their perception of the conditions in which school librarians work, the problems they encounter, and the possibilities they have to contribute to the improvement of the education process. The questions of the survey questionnaire are grouped according to these goals.

The problem being researched and the research goals have determined the five hypotheses which were investigated through the planned research. They are:

- H1. The school librarian is not visible among the professional public.
- H2. The associations that the professional public links to school librarians are mostly negative.
- H3. The professional public is not familiar with the key problems that school librarians encounter in their work.

H4. The professional public recognises the possibilities for school librarians to contribute to the development of the education process and the library profession.

H5. There are differences in the perception of the school librarian among the professional publics encompassed by the research.

Literature Review

Research on the perception of librarians, using a quantitative approach, are rare. Here we specify two studies, both originating within the profession quite a few years ago – one is of foreign origin and the other Croatian.

According to the international research of the Round Table for the Management of Library Associations (RTMLA), Status, Image and Reputation of Librarianship, conducted in 90 countries, 82% of librarians are convinced that their status is low. According to the ranking of librarians according to status, of the eight different types of librarians, school librarians are ranked lowest, with the lowest reputation. The most important problems of librarians are invisibility, librarian education and professional culture (Prins & De Gier, 1992).

In relation to the aforementioned, from the Croatian perspective, the education of librarians, including school librarians, for the most part takes place at the academic level. Professional culture is at a satisfactory level: there is a strong umbrella structure of associations and a code of ethics. There are also two school librarian associations. The most room for improvement lies in the area of visibility. A drawback of this research lies in the fact that separate results for each country are not provided.

Conducted in Croatia was the study entitled Image, Status and Reputation of the Library Profession as a Communication Problem as part of the master's dissertation of Davorka Pšenica (1997). Questioned were 239 librarians in public and university libraries, as well as the National and University Library (NSK). No school librarians were included in this study. According to this research, most librarians in general consider that the status of the librarian profession is low. This is a reflection of the invisibility of the profession in the public.

Pšenica (1997) recommends improving the quality of services for users. This recommendation is followed by the need to create an image and presence in the public through marketing and the use of public relations departments. The author also notes the need for additional funds to finance libraries, for a strong and active professional association, and for a strong communications network within the librarian profession. Today in Croatia, the most important problems for librarians are the lack of funding for libraries and the weak communication among different types of librarians.

One study recent focused on school librarians, the Visibility of the School Librarian Profession/Field, published in the paper "Preserving the Profession/Field in the Time of Rapid Changes Using Public Relations" (Stančić & Posavec, 2017). This study focused on public relations. It showed that school librarians were not satisfied with the visibility of the profession; that they used public relations techniques and tools reactively, i.e. in an unplanned manner; and that they lacked knowledge related to public relations and the possibilities it provides for improving communication with stakeholders. The study also showed that school librarians frequently were responsible for school public relations and website content (Stančić & Posavec, 2017, p. 35).

Methodology

The research was conducted using the quantitative approach, survey method, by means of an online questionnaire for two groups of professional publics for school librarians, educational and library, in the period from 12 February to 24 May 2018. Collected and analysed were 1092 questionnaires, 970 from the

educational public and 122 from the library public. The questionnaires overlapped for the most part, i.e. they had identical questions. However, the questionnaire for the library public was shorter; it had 13 questions and the final question was specifically a question related to library science. The questionnaire for the educational public had more questions, 17 in total, because this public had more data on school librarians, given that they work together with the school librarians.

The questions were mostly of the closed type; 2 questions were completely open and 3 questions were a combination of closed and open type, with variable *Other* (2 for library public). Multiple selection was possible in 7 questions (5 for library public). There were also 7 questions based on the Likert Scale (5 for library public). The contents of the open questions were examined using the content analysis method.

The sample is representative at the national level and according to number of responses for both professional publics. It is of the purposive, convenient type, based on availability simplicity. The respondents from the professional population completed the questionnaire at the recommendation of the school principals and advisors for librarians, and at their own discretion. The following variables were used for sample stratification: gender, county, occupation type, and additionally type of school in which the respondent worked.

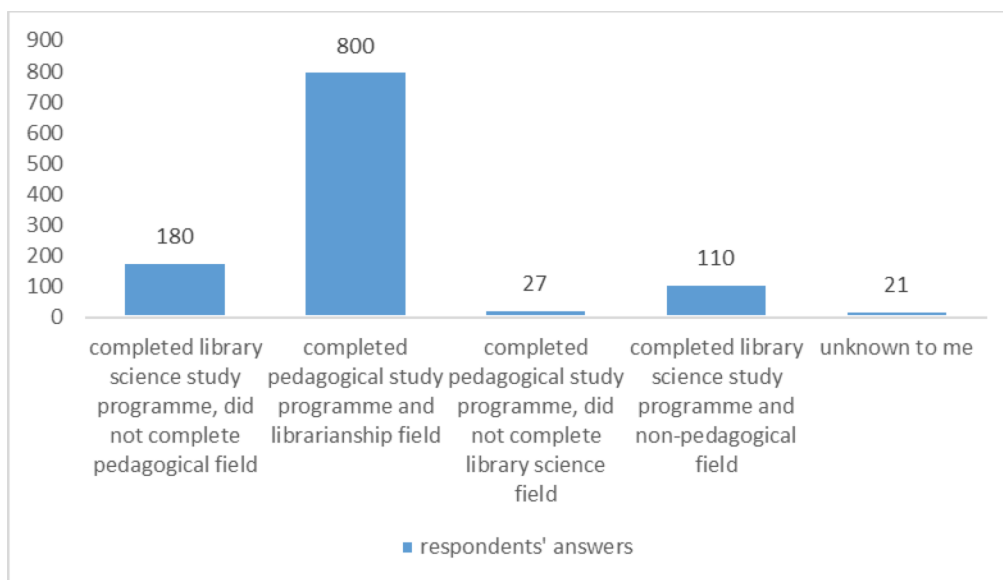
The trial testing was conducted in the school in which the author of the study works (4 respondents), as well as in the city library in the author's place of work (2 respondents). Adjustments were made to the introductory text of the survey for the library public.

During the conducting and analysis of the research, several research limitations were identified: the survey results were based on the personal views of the respondents; some variables were not worded according to the standard/regulation in place; occupation and school location variables did not allow for multiple responses. Also, the design and analysis of the research may have been biased in some way, given that the researcher is a member of the group being researched.

The results of the research were interpreted by using three methods. The quantitative method was dominant in processing the collected data. The qualitative method was used for the part of the data that was collected using the open and combined types of questions. Given that the research was conducted on two professional publics for school librarians, the data were, additionally, interpreted using the comparative method.

Findings and Discussion

The first hypothesis (H1) that *the school librarian is not visible among the professional public* was refuted based on the results to the question on **academic type of education**, with which the professional public was, largely, familiar. Several answers to this question were possible.



Graph 1: Academic type of education of school librarians (N 1092)

Eight hundred respondents (72.86%) selected completed library science study programme and pedagogical field; they were aware of the level of academic education required of school librarians. Comparing the results from Graph 1 with the statistical data of the National and University Library (NSK)¹ (2016) and Croatian Bureau of Statistics (DZS)² (2018) and taking into consideration that the figure is low for those who are unaware of the academic title school librarians possess, it can be concluded that the respondents were well aware of the academic type of education of school librarians, i.e., that school librarians usually have completed study programmes in the fields of pedagogy and library science, and that the professional public is well-informed of this.

The number of competencies important for school librarians that, along with the stated key ones, respondents provided in the open question demonstrated that the professional public truly considers the work of school librarians. The results for all concepts in the question related to the **description of a specific school librarian** (see Table 1) for the educational public are mostly positive (rated 4 and 5). The respondents assessed the specific school librarian taking into consideration traits that contribute to the successful conducting of tasks in the education environment in which he or she has no assigned working hours, but rather relies on cooperation with colleagues in the school.

Table 1: Description of specific school librarian (N 970)

Our School Librarian is	1	2	3	4	5
Creative, led by a desire to make something better, new and different	45	52	133	227	513

¹ NSK – NUL: The National and University Library

² DZS – CBS: Croatian Bureau of Statistics

Open for cooperation	16	42	89	183	640
Proactive	36	71	140	267	456
A person who gladly shares his or her ideas, and accepts those of others	37	61	120	252	500
Communicative	15	48	103	220	584
Assertive	24	51	155	263	477
Versatile	33	61	167	245	464
Flexible	30	61	135	258	486
Reliable, respects agreements	27	30	86	184	643
Successfully performs his or her work	28	37	113	178	614

The highest level of agreement, variable 5, with the stated characteristics was selected by most respondents for all claims. Two of the highest ranked selections were: school librarian is *reliable, respects agreements* (643 respondents or 66.29%) and *open for cooperation* (640 respondents or 65.98%).

Over 50% of selections with the highest degree of agreement also have the following features: *school librarian successfully conducts his or her work* (614 respondents or 63.30%), *is communicative* (584 respondents or 60.20%), *is creative, led by the desire to make something better, new and different* (513 respondents or 52.89%), *he or she is a person who gladly shares his or her ideas and accepts those of others* (500 respondents or 51.55%), *is flexible* (486 respondents or 50.10%).

That the school librarian is *assertive* by means of the highest degree of agreement was stated by 477 respondents (49.18%), that he or she is *versatile*, 464 respondents (47.83%) and that he or she is *proactive* (456 respondents or 47.01%).

Further supporting the refuting of the hypothesis (H1) is the precise assessment of **working conditions** in school libraries by educational publics (see Table 2).

Table 2: Work conditions in school libraries (N 970)

Work Conditions	1	2	3	4	5
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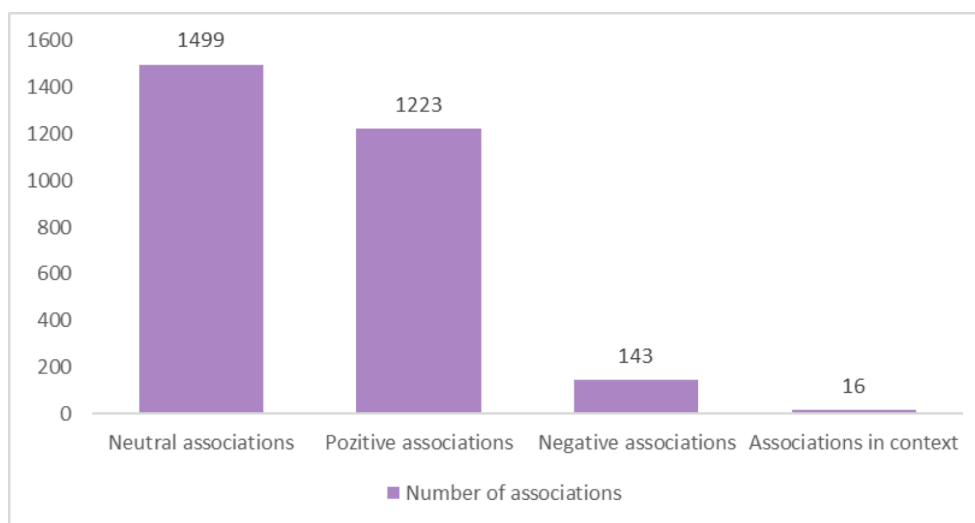
Equipped with traditional sources of information (obligatory reading materials, professional literature, literature from the specific subjects of pupils)	6	55	362	408	139
Equipped with digital sources of information (access to Internet sources, e-books)	43	54	334	290	149
Spatial conditions for housing of library materials	36	155	347	263	169
Spatial conditions for reading and working on sources of individual pupils or smaller groups	49	200	322	254	145
Spatial conditions for teaching to the entire group	106	214	287	230	133
Technologically equipped for teaching to the entire group (computer, projector, smart blackboard)	115	208	286	232	129
Technologically equipped for the librarian's work (lending program, Internet access, multifunctional printer, laminator and so on)	40	120	275	325	210
Technologically equipped for work with users – pupils and teachers (computers, multifunctional printer)	82	195	335	256	102
Dedicated room for professional tasks of school librarian (office separated from the rest of the library)	338	250	186	123	73
Attractive interior decoration of the school library space	38	104	286	307	235

According to number of times selected, the scores were for the most part good, i.e. variable 3 (6 conditions) and very good, i.e. variable 4 (3 conditions). Variable 3 was used most often to assess the following working conditions: *equipped with digital sources of information (access to Internet sources, e-books)*, *spatial conditions for housing of library materials*, *spatial conditions for reading and working*

on sources of individual pupils or smaller groups, spatial conditions for teaching to the entire group, technologically equipped for teaching to the entire group (computer, projector, smart blackboard).

Variable 4 scores were most frequently given to: *equipped with traditional sources of information (obligatory reading materials, professional literature, literature for the specific subjects of pupils), technologically equipped for librarian work (lending program, Internet access, multifunctional printer, laminator etc.) and attractive interior decoration of the school library*, while s variable 1 was most frequently given to *existence of dedicated room for professional tasks of school librarian, i.e. office separated from the rest of the library*. These selections by respondents confirmed that they are aware that lacking most in school libraries are space and technical equipment for work of school librarian.

The second hypothesis (H2) was also refuted. The respondents were asked for three associations related to the concept of school librarian. The professional publics had mostly neutral and positive associations related to school librarians (see Graphs 2 and 3).



Graph 2: Types of associations of school librarians (N 970)



Graph 3: Types of associations of school librarians (N 122)

The third hypothesis (H3) was tested school librarians' belief that their professional public is not aware of the problems in their field. Respondents were asked to confirm which of the existing key problems they were familiar with. Several answers were possible.

Table 3: Familiarity with the key problems of the school librarian profession (N 1092)

Problem of School Librarians	Educational public (N970) - %	Library public (N122) - %
They pass two state exams (with Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Culture).	44.43	73.77
They have an outdated and incompletely defined work programme in primary schools, and do not have a defined work programme in secondary schools.	25.57	42.62
Often employed in the position of school librarian are unqualified individuals.	38.56	53.28
Principals often give them various “other tasks”, which is why their regular tasks suffer.	35.88	66.39
The Ministry of Education and Science, school founders and principals do not respect the standards for equipping school libraries, so equipping of libraries is not transparently ensured from budgets or the level of legal document.	37.42	61.46
There is no regular funding that would ensure planning of development of collections and services for pupil and employee users.	56.39	77.98
They do not have optimal access to the e-dnevnik, programme for entry of held classes/topics of their education work from their work programme and assessment of students related to those classes.	30.21	23.77
I am not aware of any of the problems of school librarians.	11.55	5.74
Other	3.71	5.74

In the library public, there is a high percentage of familiarity with nearly all problems of school librarians – 5 of the stated problems were selected by more than 50%. As for the educational public, only one

problem was recognised by more than 50%. The other librarians were more informed of the problems of school librarians compared to the educational public. It is presumed that the result is such because school librarians for the most part discuss cooperation and mutual problems with other librarians. This assumption should be investigated in future research. With such a result, partially refuted and partially confirmed is the hypothesis that *the professional public is not familiar with the key problems that school librarians encounter in their work* (H3).

Supporting the confirmation of the next hypothesis that *the professional public recognises the possibility that the school librarian contributes to the development of the education process and library profession* (H4) are the results to the questions specifically designed for each of the two fields (see Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: Role of professional associate school librarian in school (educational public - N 970)

School Librarian	1	2	3	4	5
Is an important professional associate in the school	27	43	103	198	599
With his or her ideas related to the teaching process and cooperation contributes to the perception of school as a creative institution	40	59	139	262	470
Enriches the school's teaching process by acquiring literature for teacher training and additional sources for teaching subjects	25	61	157	267	460
Affects how much and how children teach	47	85	237	310	291
Conceives cultural and public events that contribute to the visibility of the school in the local community	58	76	184	279	373
Adapts his or her work programme to the requirements of the school curriculum	33	56	147	299	435
With his or her efforts transforms the library into a pleasant place for teachers and colleagues	31	56	103	219	561

The educational public, when assessing the role of the school librarian in school, for all of the offered concepts and roles, except for one, selected as the most frequent the highest variable, 5.

Table 5: Contribution of school librarians to the quality of the library field (library public - N 122)

Area of Work of School Librarians	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Unimportant	Very Unimportant
Have the opportunity to encourage reading habits in the entire population, given that education is obligatory for all children, thereby ensuring more users for all types of libraries	84	34	4	0	0
By developing information literacy in pupils, they create future users of other libraries, who will express their information inquiries more clearly and accurately	73	40	8	1	0
Pupil-user education on the manner in which libraries and their collections are organised create in users the feeling of sound and confident use of services in all libraries	64	47	10	1	0
Through a wide range of tasks in their specific area of work, education, and thus, communication with pupils, teachers and parents, contribute to the better picture of all librarians	54	57	9	2	0
Thanks to their scientific and professional papers, open new perspectives and supplement views on the field, thereby contributing to its development	46	55	18	3	0

The library public, when assessing the contribution of school librarians to the quality of the library field, for three to five concepts of this contribution, selected variable 5 as the most frequent, and for the remaining two, variable 4.

The fifth hypothesis (H5), that *there are differences in the perception of the school librarian in professional publics* encompassed by this research, is visible and confirmed. When asked about **being familiar with the problems** of school librarians, for instance, the library public was much more aware of the problems than was the educational public. When comparing associations in relation to whether the school librarian **associations are neutral, positive, negative** – in the library public, there is a 13.74% greater amount of negative associations.

Another difference in the perception is visible in **familiarity with the frequency of dealing with specific tasks in school libraries** – the results of the library public include lower variable values compared to the results of the educational public. This is visible in the categories conducting projects to encourage reading, encouraging the development of information literacy led by INA Mladi knjižničari (Young Librarians – extracurricular activity), conducting cultural and public activities of libraries and schools independently or in cooperation with colleagues and pupils, modernising the work of the school library by using ICT when working with users and building and organising collections of library materials interesting to users. This can be determined by comparing the results of the two tables below (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6: Frequency of dealing with specific tasks in school libraries (educational public - N 970)

Types of tasks that the school librarian deals with	Rarely	From time to time	Often	Never	I don't know
Encouraging reading by recommending the lending of books	3.71%	22.27%	65.15%	0.83%	8.04%
Encouraging reading led by reading club	17.01%	31.24%	21.75%	14.12%	15.88%
Encouraging reading by conducting specific activities (quiz about writer, hour of reading fairy tales...)	12.78%	37.42%	35.67%	6.71%	7.42%
Encouraging reading by conducting projects to encourage reading	11.44%	36.29%	37.01%	5.67%	9.59%
Encouraging the development of information literacy skills through guided student research (mentored paper)	20%	30.21%	19.28%	12.89%	17.63%

Encouraging development of information literacy skills guided by INA Mladi knjižničari (Young Librarians – extracurricular activity)	16.29%	22.16%	29.79%	13.20%	18.56%
Holding correlation lessons for groups in cooperation with pupils/teachers/professional associates	12.58%	33.09%	42.78%	5.05%	6.50%
Conducting cultural and public activities of the library and school independently or in cooperation with colleagues and pupils (encounters with writers, experts, exhibitions, debates, cooperation with publishers etc.)	8.04%	29.07%	52.89%	4.02%	5.98%
Modernising the work of the school library with ICT for working with users	12.58%	33.50%	33.20%	6.80%	13.92%
Building and organising the collections of library materials interesting to users	9.48%	30.00%	44.95%	3.92%	11.65%

Table 7: Frequency of dealing with specific school library tasks (library public - N 122)

Types of tasks that the school librarian deals with	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Never	I don't know
Encouraging reading by recommending the lending of books	1.64%	16.39%	63.94%	0.00%	18.03%
Encouraging reading led by reading club	13.93%	42.62%	16.39%	2.46%	24.60%

Encouraging reading by conducting specific activities (quiz about writer, hour of reading fairy tales...)	9.02%	39.34%	31.97%	0.82%	18.85%
Encouraging reading by conducting projects to encourage reading	8.20%	37.70%	33.61%	0.82%	19.67%
Encouraging the development of information literacy skills through guided student research (mentored paper)	23.77%	32.79%	14.75%	1.64%	27.05%
Encouraging development of information literacy skills guided by INA Mladi knjižničari (Young Librarians – extracurricular activity)	11.46%	30.33%	24.60%	2.46%	31.15%
Holding correlation lessons for groups in cooperation with pupils/teachers/professional associates	9.02%	31.14%	31.97%	4.10%	23.77%
Conducting cultural and public activities of the library and school independently or in cooperation with colleagues and pupils (encounters with writers, experts, exhibitions, debates, cooperation with publishers etc.)	9.02%	36.88%	36.07%	0.00%	18.03%
Modernising the work of the school library with ICT for working with users	16.39%	33.61%	13.93%	1.64%	34.43%

Building and organising the collections of library materials interesting to users	7.38%	33.60%	31.97%	0.82%	26.23%
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Implications and Conclusions

This research has shown that the problem of insufficient visibility of the school library profession is not significantly present among the professional public, and that the picture of school librarians is slightly more positive among the educational public in comparison to the librarian public. However, the domination of neutral associations concerning school librarians, as well as the key problems that have been constant for several years already and whose resolution is possible only through positive relations with the parent professional institutions, indicates that school librarians have to continue to invest effort into enhancing their reputation, both in the professional public that was encompassed by this research and in the parent professional public. In some future research, it is necessary to examine the image of school librarians in parent institutions.

Based on the question on associations related to the concept of school librarian, according to frequency of appearance, there were terms by which the image of the school librarian could be defined. According to the results, the school librarian is *a creative person, ready to cooperate and accommodating, communicative, imaginative, fun, accessible, smiling, diligent and cheerful, a promoter of reading, obliging, versatile, hard-working, patient, reliable, sociable person, an educator, resourceful*. Furthermore, librarians are *jacks-of-all-trades; they are errand persons, their catalogue is still on paper, and they wear glasses*.

A fundamental assumption to strengthen the image, to resolve long-term problems, as well as for unhindered development of the profession is a communication strategy that must be adopted in agreement with the advisor for school librarians in the Ministry of Education and Science, NSK and the Education and Teacher Training Agency, prominent librarians (advisors, mentors, heads of country professional committees) as well as members of management committees for school library associations, HUŠK (Croatian Association of School Libraries), HMŠK (Croatian Network of School Librarians) and the Section for school libraries in HKD (Croatian Library Association).

The communication strategy must contain an analysis of the situation (internal environment, external environment), goals (general goal or specific goals), target publics (internal public, professional public, other publics), key messages, communication channels, specific activities that derive from the goal, time period for activities, budget and other intangible resources, expenditures, revenues from partners, support, schedule implementation – team and responsibilities, supervision, assessment and reporting.

Also recommended is the education of school librarians in the field of specific public relations, joint interdisciplinary gatherings with professional publics, as well as the use of positive associations from this research and previous research (Stančić, Posavec, 2017) to strengthen the image and the key messages aimed at the professional public.

This research is conceived as an instrument for investigating the reputation of the field, which could be susceptible to changes; this research will need to be repeated in order to determine any changes in perception or to address some of the limitations of the research.

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Biographical Note

Draženka Stančić holds a master's degree in Librarianship and a master's degree in Croatian language and literature and is a university specialist in public relations. She works as a school librarian at Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski Elementary School, Ivanec, and is also the library manager at Edward Bernays First College of Communication Management. She holds the title of Associate Counselor and is the head of Professional Committee of the Varaždin County School Librarians.

Her fields of interests are methodical and curricular topics, the development of information literacy skills in working with students, encouraging reading, the use of ICT in the teaching process, and the visibility of the school librarian profession. She is the author and head of two national reading promotion projects recommended by the Ministry of Science and Education: Owl(1)etter party and Give a Paws a Voice!. She is a member of professional associations: Croatian Library Association, Croatian Association of School Librarians, Croatian Network of School Librarians, Croatian Reading Society, Croatian Public Relations Association, and vice president for science of PRpetuum – Student and Alumni Club of Postgraduate Specialist Public Relations.