Schooling at the library in Italy for the social inclusion. The "Biblioscuole" Project.

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"Biblioteche nelle Scuole" (in brief, "Biblioscuole", i.e. Libraries at Schools), a three year school library pilot project, has been carrying out since 2004 in Italy to improve school librarians competencies and school library services in order to provide an easy access to information for teachers, pupils and their families, and to promote social inclusion. The Project and some reflections - based on learners' interaction - about the first part of the education and training course, are presented here.

Introduction

The "information society" is rapidly changing into a knowledge/learning based society. Over the past decade there have been a very high diffusion of ICT and, consequently, a severe information explosion. The risk of new forms of social exclusion is growing fast and the gap between "techno-rich" and "techno-poor" is also changing into a gap between "info-rich" and "info-poor", so that

> *"Literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life, and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century"* (United Nations Resolution on Literacy Decade 56/116).

As this quote underlines, the acquisition of learning, information and critical thinking skills is urgently needed to avoid the digital divide and new forms of social exclusion: school education has actually a crucial role to play in it.

Many countries have promoted inclusive policies and specific actions to prevent the social exclusion in these last years. One of those actions is *e*Europe 2005 which core objective is to connect everyone and everything online - governments, schools, hospitals and businesses so that Europe becomes a better and more efficient place to live and do business.[2]

ICT, Inclusion and Education: some Italian projects from the Ministry of Education

Social inclusion, social exclusion, human rights, social quality are some important issues in the European society. The EU enlargement, an increasing number of migrants, both from EU

[2] <http://www.eeurope2005.org/intro.html>.

countries and from abroad, the search for better life chances etc. are some of the factors that contribute to a new social, cultural and economical texture in western European countries, specially in urban areas.

The concept of social exclusion has changed from early 90s and is now more dynamic, not strictly related to poverty as in the past. Within the major framework of EU policies, the concept of social quality is getting more attention: efforts are made by countries in order to build an inclusive society and an active citizenship. Policies at a European/national level and initiatives at a community level underline the role of education, for each individual, in getting life skills.

Italy, as other European Union countries, has started a more inclusive policy to enhance citizenship and the social, cultural and civil participation, and has endorsed the Lisbon Strategy to make citizens acquire better information skills in order to take part more actively in the social and economic life.

The educational field is, of course, a very strategic one to build a more inclusive society. In order to fulfil the objectives required by the inclusion policies, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Innovation signed an agreement,[3] on March 18th 2003, for specific actions and services to be set up, such as schooling at home and hospital (HSH@net project); school libraries networking ("Biblioteche nelle Scuole" project); providing discounted portable personal computers for teachers; establishing in distance universities. It's to be said that many other ICT based projects are in progress now ("Kidsmart", "e-inclusion", "punto edu" are just a few of them).

ICT can be very helpful to deliver instruction to ill children who can't attend regular courses, and to avoid their isolation: the "HSH@net" (Hospital-School-Home network) project is about schooling at a hospital or at home for health reason,[4] by the means of a broad band network. This project is a pilot one, and involves 139 schools and 120 hospitals.

Libraries are recognized to have an important educational role, especially if they are school libraries, as IFLA/UNESCO affirm in their documents.[5] These are fundamental both in the education field and in the library one, because they can contribute in an innovative and effective way to supporting the professional development of school staff – teachers above all – and to educating pupils and their related adults (such as parents, grandparents, carers etc.) to become information literate.

Pupils and students, their parents and teachers can have an easier access to information by the means of improved school library services. ICT can connect schools and their libraries with the local context and the library world; provide innovative and useful services, such as interlibrary loan and document delivery; grant access to quality information.

School library projects in Italy: a glance to the recent past

The need for better school library services has increased more and more in the last ten years. The digital revolution has affected also school education; the number of migrant students who come from African or Eastern countries is also increasing as well as the need for resources that may help to know and understand the different cultures; the need for a better co-operation between the school and the external environment, the local context and its agencies (e.g., the public library); a

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[3] <http://www.istruzione.it/prehome/comunicati/2003/convenzione_moratti_stanca.shtml>.
[4] A project presentation and related documents are available here:
<http://www.istruzione.it/innovazione/progetti/hsh.shtml>. The project portal: <http://scuolainospedale.istruzione.it/>.
[5] See especially: The *IFLA/UNESCO School library guidelines*, 2002, available at: http://www.ifla.org/VII/s11/pubs/sguide02.pdf; an the *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto*, http://www.ifla.org/VII/s11/pubs/manifest.htm)

more learner-centred education: these are some of the factors that have claimed for a new school library role.

In March 1995, a meaningful letter (C.M.n.°105/1995[6]) about the importance of reading promotion was addressed to school managers, teachers and school librarians by the Minister of Education, claiming for attention to reading activities and a more proactive role of Italian school library in it.. Italian schools and their libraries started to promote book exhibitions, reading sessions, etc., more actively and in collaboration with public libraries, bookshops, publishers, associations etc.

Three months later, in June 1995, an agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Cultural heritage was signed to promote a joint project "A scuola di biblioteca"[7] (i.e., "Learning the Library"). It was focused on school librarianship and the three main areas of school librarians' competencies underlined by IFLA – librarianship, management and education -. A selected group of 40 school librarians (about two from the 20 Italian regions) was trained from 1997 to 1999 to become a trainer and consequently deliver library education and training in their areas.

A further and wider national plan, the *PSBS – il programma di Promozione e Sviluppo delle Biblioteche Scolastiche*[8] (i.e., the School libraries Promotion and Development Programme), was promoted and funded by the Ministry of Education at the end of 1999, about seven years ago.
It aimed to establish in the first year of the plan at least 142 new school libraries ("B1")[9], where schools have appropriate space and staff, or improve 48 existing ones ("B2").[10] This plan, based on IFLA school libraries guidelines, was launched in Oct.1999 and run for three years. 500 schools where chosen and financed on the base of their specific projects: e.g., some of them improved more the stock collection while others the furniture. The University of Padua, in 2000, then that University and the University of Tuscia (Viterbo) in 2001 and finally those two and the University of Bari delivered courses to the school library managers (teacher/teacher-librarian/librarian) of North, Central and Southern Italy, to enhance their skills. Unfortunately this plan ended and some of its objectives – e.g., the connection between schools and the National Library Service – weren't fulfil, even though it represented an important event in the Italian school library panorama, both for the attention paid (and funding given) to this sector and for the diffusion of a new concept of the school library.

In October 2000 a new agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Cultural heritage was signed,[11] even if it had no relevant application.

In those years (from 2000 to 2004), «Biblioteche Scolastiche»,[12] a yearly journal (partially funded by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage), was published by Editrice Bibliografica as a useful professional tool for school library professionals for sharing theory and practice in school librarianship, projects, helpful information, best practices etc.

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[6] The text is available here: <http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/circolari/cm105_95.html>.

[7] Rossella Caffo, *Riflessioni sulla professione in vista del XLI Congresso*, "Bollettino AIB", 1995, n. 3, p. 301-303, available at: <http://www.aib.it/aib/boll/1995/95-3-301.htm>.

[8] Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, *C.M. N. 228, 5 ottobre 1999. Programma per la promozione e lo sviluppo delle biblioteche scolastiche – Legge N. 440/97 e Dir. Min. N. 180/99. Procedure di attuazione.*

[9] Lit. 116,000,000 max. for each project.

[10] Lit. 52,000,000 max for each project.

[11] *Protocollo d'intesa tra Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione e Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali*, 23 ottobre 2000, <http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/biblioteche/mpi-mbac.pdf>.

[12] <http://www.bibliografica.it/catalogo/riviste.htm#biblio_scol>.

The "Biblioscuole" Project

The reflection about the school library educational role, its importance to media and information literacy, the former "PSBS" project, and the opportunity given by eEurope Action Plan, created the condition to start a new project so that the "Biblioteche nelle Scuole" ("BNS" or, better, "Biblioscuole", i.e., Libraries at Schools) was funded[13], supported and finally launched in 2004 by the MIUR-DGSI - *Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca, Direzione Generale Sistemi Informativi, MIUR-DGSI* (Ministry of Education, University and Research - General Directorate for Information Systems)[14] and the Department for Technology and Innovation (DIT), in collaboration with the *ICCU - Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico delle biblioteche italiane e le informazioni bibliografiche* (National Centre for the Union Catalogue)[15] of the *MiBAC - Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali -* (Ministry of Cultural Heritage). [16]

The main aims of the project are: providing a better and wider access to information; enhancing information literacy, and promoting reading. The overall goal is to contribute to lifelong learning, on which a continuous cultural development and a better social inclusion are based. The "Biblioscuole" project aims to fulfil those important goals by the means of co-operation and services of the Italian National Library Service. This national three-year (2004-2007) pilot project comes from *e*Europe 2005 Action Plan and the above mentioned 2003 agreement between the two Italian Ministers.

Objectives

The *Biblioscuole* project objectives can be summarized as listed below:
- Connecting schools to the National Library Service (SBN, www.iccu.sbn.it/Ehomepag.htm) for its services: interlibrary loan, document delivery, shared cataloguing.
- Educating and training school librarians in a blended learning context, by the means of a dedicated software, accessible through the project portal: <http://www.biblioscuole.it>.
- Implementing several services, such as educational thematic paths, and access to relevant historical and cultural interest (digital) documentation held by the school libraries.
- Setting up the portal "biblioscuole.it", in order to provide information about the project and access to its on-line services: e-learning platform, forum, FAQ, community, VRD, repository, collective OPAC, school libraries registry etc.

Partners

The three Italian interuniversity supercomputing Consortia - CASPUR, CILEA e CINECA - signed a contract[17] with MIUR on 2003. They are now offering their technological and library skills and supporting the Ministry of Education in order to fulfil the project requirements. Their involvement is as follows:

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[13] €8 millions.

[14] MIUR-DGSI website: <http://www.istruzione.it/innovazione/index.shtml>.

[15] <http://www.iccu.sbn.it/genera.jsp?l=en>.

[16] <http://www.internetculturale.it>.

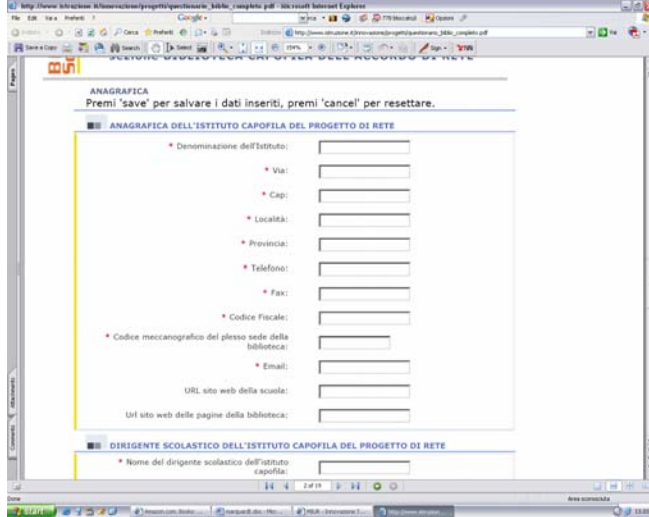[17] The texts of the three contracts are available here:

<http://www.istruzione.it/innovazione/progetti/allegati/convenzione_caspur.pdf>;

<http://www.istruzione.it/innovazione/progetti/allegati/convenzione_cilea.pdf>;

<http://www.istruzione.it/innovazione/progetti/allegati/convenzione_cineca.pdf>.

- Caspur (www.caspur.it), based in Rome, promotes the project; implements and maintains the National Library Service main node for school libraries in Central and Southern Italy; implements and updates the collective school opac; designs and implements the monitoring system for the project assessment;

- Cilea (www.cilea.it), based in Milan, deals with school librarians' and teachers' education and training; implements and maintains the National Library Service main node for school libraries in Northern Italy; maintains the Trouble Ticketing Service and virtual reference desk (VRD) systems; designs and manages the school metaOPAC and the digital objects repository;

- Cineca (www.cineca.it), based in Bologna, provides and manages the web based learning platform; maintains the school libraries registry; implements, manages and updates the portal.

Selection of participants

In Oct. 2004 a round letter (prot.3352)[18] was addressed by the MIUR-DGSI to principals/school managers: local school networks with (at least) a school library of that system with IFLA standard requirements – space, staff, collection – and, of course, a convenient ICT, were invited to apply for the Project, for a maximum number of 500 schools joint in 100 networks (max.).

About applicants, they were asked to have good qualifications in library field (as a postgraduate master course or specific graduate course) and in ICT; furthermore their school library was asked to be a part of a local network (a network only of schools or, better, a mixed one, e.g., with different schools, public libraries, associations). An online questionnaire to collect information (general data about the school and its network; specific data about staff, provision, libraries etc. of the system) was filled in by 188 networked schools and processed automatically. 121 local networks (for more than 800 schools) resulted to have the requirements.
There is to be said that this way of data submission sounded quite new for the Italian school context.
The little number of applicants is mainly due to this innovative way of communication chosen (instead the traditional paper letter) and revealed some lack of electronic skills among the school staff; IFLA standards also still seem hard to be reached by a school library. Anyway the amount of affiliated schools represents about the 10% of the school institutions in Italy. The evaluation Commission decided to admit all schools with the necessary requirements, so that the total number of school networks raised from the 100 ones (for 500 schools) formerly fixed.
More than 2,500 school librarians and teachers (with some public librarians) have been enrolled in the educational and training program, with about 850 schools at different levels (from pre-school to high-school), organized in 121 local school networks.

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[18] <http://www.istruzione.it/innovazione/progetti/allegati/prot3352_all.pdf>.

The "Biblioscuole" Education and Training Programme

Librarians' education and training are fundamental resources for a new concept of the school library as a vital learning environment and to teach information literacy in an effective way. The focus of this contribution is just about "Biblioscuole" Project's impact on teachers' and school librarians' education and professional skills to avoid social exclusion.

Contents and Methodology

The educational programme, designed by Cilea, with the collaboration of Antonella De Robbio (University of Padua), under the supervision of ICCU, includes meetings and two online courses, whose SCORM compliant learning objects can be accessed via the portal "biblioscuole.it".

The methodology chosen is the blended learning strategy, an approach which integrates distance learning with face-to-face meetings and lessons to better reinforce the learners. This approach was chosen taking into account the learners' average age and their technological skills (in some cases not very good); the length of the education and training (two years), and related commitments; in brief, the necessity to foster the learners in an adequate way.

First of all, the 121 school networks co-ordinators (divided into three groups) took part in a three day intensive meeting in three different towns (Abano, for the Northern Italy group; Fiuggi, for the Central and Southern Italy group; Rome, for the remaining group from Lazio region). The scope of these meetings was presenting the Project to the participants; explaining the whole educational programme; clarifying the co-ordinators' / trainers' role; introducing the e-learning platform. The network co-ordinators / trainers where also provided with the Italian edition of IFLA/UNESCO school libraries guidelines (*Linee guida IFLA/UNESCO per le biblioteche scolastiche*, Roma AIB, 2004); a book about the research process (*Inciampare nel problema*, Padova, Imprimitur, 2004), and a book about the reading promotion in Italy (*Passaparola*, Bari, Presidi del libro, 2005).

The first phase of the educational programme, "*Percorso A: La biblioteca scolastica multimediale e digitale: centro di informazione e documentazione della/per la scuola*" (i.e., "Path A: The multimedia and digital school library: the information and documentation centre of/for the school") took place from April 2005 to January 2006.

The 4 modules (5 units each) deal with the school library services and their management. They are related to the following topics: the media and digital school library as an information, documentation, learning centre; the research process; online resources; metadata; documentation; school library management; school library services assessment and evaluation etc.

The second phase has started in March 2006. The "Percorso B: Formazione SBN e servizi-obiettivo del progetto MIUR (Repository, Virtual Reference Desk, Trouble ticketing, MetaOPAC)". The "Path B" is mainly

focused on cataloguing in the National Library Service network; implementing and using the repository; accessing other services implemented within the Project, such as the trouble ticketing service; the virtual reference desk; the school library portal etc.

The Project Portal and the E-learning Platform

Everybody interested (or involved) in the Project as well anyone who has a personal or professional interest in school libraries can access the Project portal at www.biblioscuole.it. Visitors can find information and documents in different sections: "Aree tematiche" (i.e., "Thematic Areas"), "Vetrina" (i.e., "Showcase"), "VRD" and "MetaOpac", except for some restricted areas, like the "Help Desk", or "Formazione", i.e. Education, which are dedicated to the "Biblioscuole" learners. A communication section has been implemented since late 2005: it gives information about events and press releases related to the Project.

The "Biblioscuole" Portal is the way to access the e-learning platform, Sinfodia® an interactive distance training system implemented by Cineca.[19]

This system allows both asynchronous and synchronous activities; it provides different communication tools (e.g., forum).

Sinfodia has four areas (presentation; content; logic; control): each of them can be easily modified, even though a course has already been set up.

The learning objects and other educational and training materials are available 24/7 and can be attended every time and/or everywhere a learner wants to (or can) do it.

Sinfodia technical architecture is based on three application layers: 1) IANUS technology which controls and manages the services delivered via the Internet; 2) BS (Back Stage) Director, the content management tool; IDT specific applications (the "School" where students and tutors have their own desk and specific tools).

There are four peoples' profiles in Sinfodia platform: the course director who is the administrator who enables a user to access courses; the tutor (one or more), who prepares lessons and materials, and enters their contents by a format in an appropriate standard; the didactic assistant, who tutors and supports the students; the student who can attend the courses. Of course, the system provides two different paths: one for the tutor and the other one for the student.

The tutor can: access the register, which contains the participants list and data about the platform usage; check the student assessment; prepare the self-assessment and/or the tutor-assessed tests; access the track records (see image below).

(The tutor's desk)

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[19] Info: <http://www.cineca.com/gai/files/Sinfodiaen.pdf>.

The student can access the course/courses he/she has enrolled in and the related tools;
he/she may check his/her personal course reports, and send messages to tutors, students etc. and/or
use the chat, forum, e-mail etc. tools ("Biblioscuole" students are allowed to use the forum tools to
interact with their tutors, colleagues etc., and the e-mail format for the help-desk).

Once registered, the student can easily access the learning resources, using every kind of browser.

(A learning object)

He/she can use the learning objects or download related documents, or may contact the technical
support (the help-desk) simply filling in a form (see below) and sending the message via e-mail.
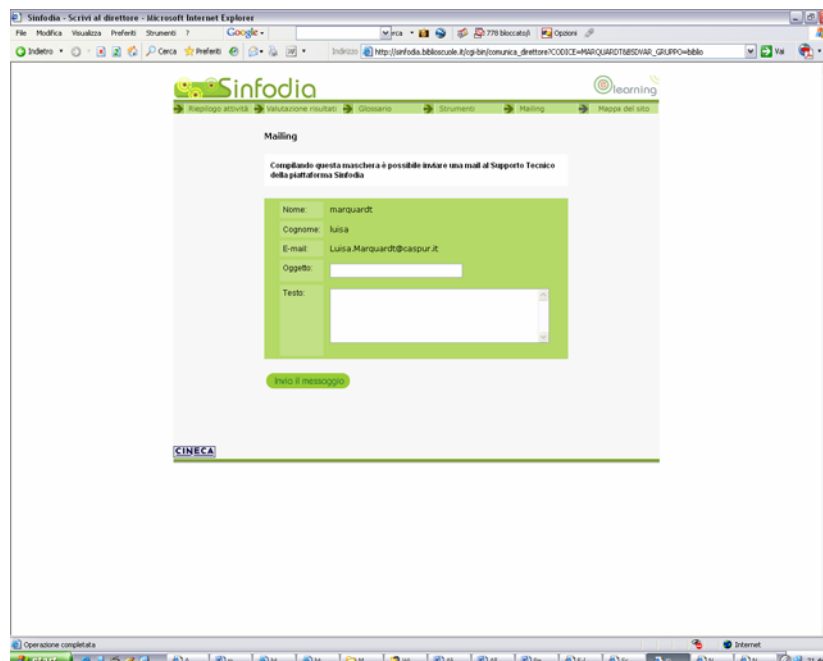
The people involved in "Biblioscuole" educational process and platform are administrators and
supervisor of the Ministry of Education and the three supercomputing Consortia. Three tutors

monitor, interact and foster, in a specific forum, the 120 network co-ordinators (who are trainees and trainers in the meanwhile). Each of them – the "trainer" – has the responsibility of a virtual class with a maximum of 25 students (teacher / teacher-librarian / librarian). Each class has its own forums.

"Biblioscuole" Learners' Interaction: some reflections

The observation of learners' interaction in the forum area, that is interesting and helpful for the second part of the educational programme, has showed an increasing evolution since the beginning. In fact, after the intensive "kick start" meeting, the first messages posted in the forum area were rather generic, such as greetings, appreciation or doubts ("It was great to meet you all", "When will we meet again?", "When will we start using the platform?" etc.). It was necessary to make the learners be aware of netiquette rules to avoid unhelpful threads, off-topics etc. Most of them were at their first time using an e-learning platform: "Biblioscuole" has represented for them an innovative and challenging learning experience.

Some of the 120 co-ordinators / trainers needed to be fostered in a special way on the technical side, even though they had declared good computer skills when they applied to be admitted to the Project. The project staff (tutors, administrators etc.) gave them information and support non only in the forum or FAQ area, or by e-mail, but by phone, too, and if necessary, guiding the learner step by step.

At the beginning of the "Path A", a lot of threads were created so that the 120 trainers' forum area resulted rather "anarchical" and the administrator had to reduce the number of threads and delete empty messages, posted in the forum area by mistake.

Learners' also helped each other:

> 29/12/2005-16:07 […] The first part of the meeting of 19 was dedicated to the library web page construction. The work done in small groups in the media lab was possible thanks to the collaboration of colleagues who are more skilled in the information field and co-ordinated the different working groups. […]

The more the platform was experienced, the learning objects, the forum tools etc. were used in a proper way, the more advanced had been trainers' reflections, questions, opinion exchange in the forum area. Many of them have actively taken part in the discussions, e.g., giving advice to their colleagues; providing original materials they processed and stored in the documental area; sharing not only problems, but solutions, too!, as a trainer says:

> 18/01/2006-10:19 "[…] I've already put a draft of the works done with my "Biblioscuole" class in our library webspace. Of course, there is still so much to be corrected, many things have to be put in, others need to be checked, but I would like to know your opinion. If you like, you can open the links […]"

The general enhancement of trainers' competencies affected each own class in a positive way, as it's possible to read in the final report each trainer had to write at the "Path A" end (January 2006), as it's possible to understand from the following quotes:

> 19/01/2006-16:56 "the class […] has also finished the meetings and I'm feeling as I lifted a mountain! […] the "survivors" are 15 but they look satisfied and willing, even if they are a little confused about

the further commitments. […] Let's now enjoy our first goal, professionally enriched and with new friends, thanks everybody and let's start again!"

It's more surprisingly if we consider that the same trainer, only a few moths before, said that:

27/09/2005-13:39 "many technical problems still continue: I can nor read my students mail messages neither answer them […] It's all complicated".

The blended learning approach and the network co-ordinators / trainers played an important role in the interaction with their virtual class, as a student says about her experience:

"The *blended* learning approach (with face-to-face meetings and on line interactions) was the methodological winning strategy. I think that the human factor (the trainer) was the cornerstone of the whole system, therefore his/her selection was a decisive factor for each individual course [delivered by the trainers] to be successful. Ours, V.C., has been a trainer aware of her delicate role; tenacious in fulfilling the hard task of managing a virtual and real class; constantly present but tactful in every phase of the course, an efficient organizer of activities and an effective mediator between learners and contents, between learners and ICT."

Curiosity and expectations about the further course also emerged:

20/01/2006-18:36 "[…] As I've already observed, I can say I'm satisfied above all for the positive and interested attitude of those colleagues [i.e., her students] who started rather puzzled and with a scarce enthusiasm. Now they all are curios to know the "Path B" contents and they seem to wish to put it into practice. In the last meetings we focused the most important issues of each module, thanks also to the supplementary meetings that make all students complete the course […]"

(A message posted in the forum)

The technological infrastructure was appreciated, as a student (L.C.) writes in her notes, because it was

> "reliable and always functioning, the technical help-desk of "Biblioscuole.it" has always ensured and available. Sinfodia platform has been accessible and its interface rather easy (the user manual was available since the very begininnig of the course)."

Concerns
Library Software

One concern that emerged in the forum area and during the face-to-face meetings was about the library software and the transition from the one (WinIride) formerly used in the school library development plan (PSBS). The learners felt as if their work they already did had no more sense or as if they only wasted time learning and using that (or another) software: hundreds or thousands of bibliographic records in the "trash"! That was the general feeling.

In consideration of the cataloguing work already done (in some cases, a huge one) and in order to make the transition easier from the former software to the new ones "SBN" compliant, Caspur has developed the RABIS programme (which stands for: "Recupero Archivi Bibliografici In Sbn"). It's a kind of "Biblioscuole" subproject, which enables a data recovery into the National Library Service network from bibliographic data bases created by different library software; it also exploits the work many school librarians have already done.
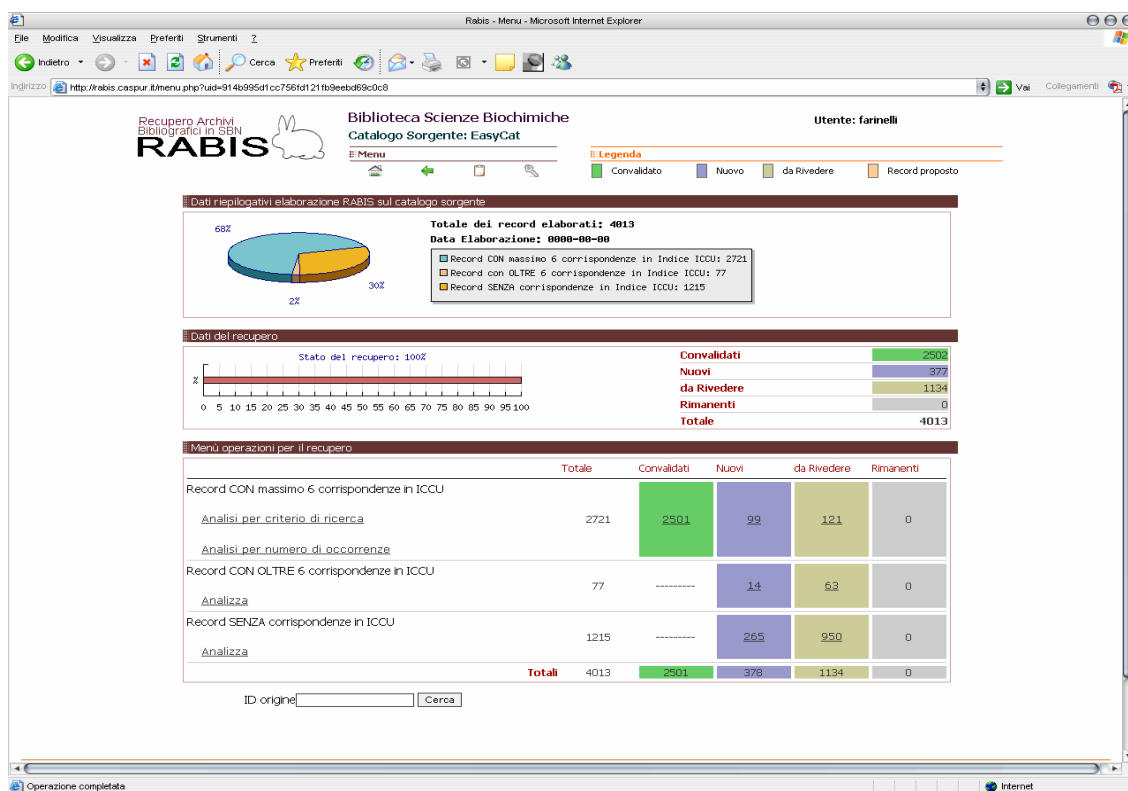
(RABIS web interface)

The testing phase on six catalogues, with at least 5,000 bibliographic records each and created by WinIride software, is now finished with very good results (about 90% data were recovered) and some school libraries are recovering bibliographic data from the old data base into the new one.

Profession recognition

Another (and great) concern is about the lack of profession recognition at different levels.
As above mentioned, in "Biblioscuole", most learners are in charge of the school/Ministry of Education, while a little part is in charge of a public library or working as a free lance consultant. In the first group we have three kind of profiles - subject teachers, teacher-librarians, and school-librarians -, with different job profiles, competencies, time availability for the library work, role in the school system, and, of course, expectations from the Project.

The learners are expected to attend the education and training programme and related activities for three years: this requires commitment, a lot of time to attend the lessons and take part in meetings etc. (it means, at least, 40 hours in presence and 100 hours in distance activities for each of the two educational paths).

Subject teachers with no or little time for the library work, who are more interested to integrate their didactic, their methodology with a learner-centred approach via the library and information resources, ask for a school classes reduction, to save enough time to attend their "Biblioscuole" lessons and activities. It has to be said that some of them decided not to go on with the "Path B", because they're not interested to become a librarian or a cataloguer. They also found very useful the knowledge gained during the "Path A".

The "teacher-librarian" in Italy is the teacher who can't teach any more for physical or mental health problems and works full-time in the school secretary office or in the school library. There are about 6,000 ill teachers. Some of them are not affected by severe pathologies; they often have very good library and communication skills, and a good educational expertise as well; they are able to manage a library. Furthermore, those involved in "Biblioscuole" already attended the library education during the PSBS plan or have voluntarily attended post graduate master courses in Librarianship. Furthermore, the 2003 Finance Law, art.35, aimed to reduce governmental expenses, makes them risk to lose their job. So, the Italian teacher-librarians have established a national co-ordination to be recognized as the library / documentation professionals in the school: it's the CONBS (http://conbs.altervista.org) which is strongly committed in the profession recognition as information specialists and in getting the possibility to continue to work in a library.

The school librarian is a professional librarian who full-time manages a school library. It's not very common to find this kind of worker. Formerly in charge of some county authorities (e.g., Province of Rome, Florence, Milan etc.) from mid70s to 2000, the law n.° 124/1999 forced the chartered librarians to pass in charge of the Ministry of Education in 2000. This change of administration modified their professional status (and job profile) into an administrative one, at a poor qualification/level. This loss of professional recognition caused the utilization of most the former librarians in school secretarial tasks, making their high library competencies about useless in the new working context. Just a few of professionals still work in a school library thanks to a broad-minded principal/school manager.

This situation is in a contradiction with the results that come from several studies and guidelines, both from the international context (IFLA, IASL etc.) and from the Italian one itself (as the MPI-BPI survey underlined in 1997), where good school library quality is related to qualified and recognized staff. Anyway, "Biblioscuole" learners hope to get, at end of the Project, at least a certificate - and not a simply declaration – which may be useful in the future, both to continue to work in the library and for an (hypothetical and hopeful) official recognition of the professional.

A first balance from the learners' point of view

Nevertheless that important problem, "Biblioscuole" learners' commitment, enthusiasm and satisfaction resulted to be high, as many of them declared at the end of the "Path A":

27/12/2005-13:12 With the meeting of Dec. 21st, the class [...] of the school library network in the county of [...] finished the face-to-face meetings of the "Path A". As learners competencies were very different at the beginning and so many the work and personal commitments, the need for self-instruction for the group, the trainer's limited ability, the doubts about leaving the WinIride software, I can affirm that the balance is surely positive.... We reached the end of "Path A" in 22 and we'll go on in 15, among these there are also some colleagues who are not part in the network, but very interested and committed.

15/01/2006-00:50 "Also my group (Class …) has completed the face-to-face meetings on 21/12/05. 6/20 left the course, but the "survivors" worked with interest, they have appreciated the course, the materials and the e-learning platform. About this, I put in the documental area the very detailed reflections of one of my students, which praise all the working staff. I want to thank our "supertutors" who are so close to us, the help-desk staff always so efficient and all who we haven't known but worked and have still been working in the backstage making the e-learning platform available."

30/12/2005-01:26 The Class [...] has finished the "Path A". We started in 25 and arrived 17, whose 7 will go surely on; some of them won't - it has already been foreseen -, others are still thinking about what to do. The abandon of "Path A" arrived just after Summer holidays, after the first meeting [...] The course units seemed to be a little too synthetic, even challenging about the tasks, but I'm satisfied enough, because all produced good results.

During the "Path A" learners have become more and more aware of their own responsibility to establish a quality library programme:

29/12/2005-16:07 "[…] In the second part of the morning the contents of the fourth module were examined. The debate started in a controversial way, even if not out of place, but it soon became constructive also in an optimistic perspective for our libraries. After all, it depends on ourselves, too, and not in a marginal way, to make library services vital and trustworthy, also for the didactic-educational input that the school library can offer."

It's fundamental for an effective school library (as for any library) to know users' needs very well and assess their satisfaction in a regular and standardized way (as the same trainer underlines):

29/12/2005-16:07 "[…] Also in yesterday's meeting we spoke about how we can organize library services and activities which meet users' needs and expectations. My proposal to meet again before we start the "Path B" was accepted, so that we can read all documents […] In fact the training will focus on the services and collection development policy, questionnaire to better know users' needs and habits and measure their satisfaction."

Another positive aspect of "Biblioscuole" interaction between the schools is about co-operation. Many schools have taken the opportunity to design, organize and share projects and activities for the first time on a large scale, e.g. in the reading promotion field. For instance, the *Liceo Scientifico "Leonardo da Vinci"*, Florence, organized a joint meeting with the affiliated schools during night hours.[20] The Province of Cagliari, in collaboration with "Biblioscuole" organized a successful regional seminar[21] addressed not only to the schools involved in the project, but also to teachers, librarians, school managers, politicians etc. The Primary School of Bella, a little town near Potenza

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[20] <http://www.biblioscuole.it/public/notizia-4901.htm>.
[21] <http://www.biblioscuole.it/public/notizia-4462.htm>.

(South Italy), has organized the ninth edition of a recognized reading prize: for the first time all schools of other towns of the county were involved and actively took part in the initiative for a whole reading week.[22] The just above mentioned initiatives are only some little samples of the positive impact of the Project. Building a positive cooperation between the different agencies is a fundamental aspect to build an integrated informational, educational and cultural network to make the access to information and culture easier and more effective than ever before.

Conclusions

It is possible to draw only a partial balance at the present time, because more data from the on line questionnaires about the first part are being processed; furthermore, the second part of the Project education and training has recently started and is still in progress. Anyway, it is possible to say that "Biblioscuole" made trainers and trainees learn to use ICT tools and co-operate in a more competent way, e.g., sharing information, documents etc.; they also improved their communication, library and co-operation skills. The most relevant evidence is that a school library community (even not yet a professional one!) was born during the first phase of the Project. That is very important because it represents the necessary, basic foundation to implement any further action toward a more inclusive school for a more inclusive society. More the personnel competencies grow, more the school library services can educate their users in a better way.

One of the challenging objectives, of course, remains the national OPAC implementation and the exploitation of school documental resources. However, the most ambitious and challenging objective is to educate in an effective way those who have the responsibility of a school library. Thanks to the new concept of school library as a learning, research and cultural environment, that learners have acquired using the platform and the communication tools, the co-operation between subject teachers, school librarians and public librarians has been improving and affecting in a positive way the access to information; the enhancement in information literacy and reading promotion. The "Biblioscuole" Project should "set up a digital learning community where both children and adults can access courses and communicate directly with tutors. Access is via broadband from home, at work or from points in public libraries, local primary schools and other buildings that can be easily reached by people across the county" (as Jim Fitzpatrick said speaking about a similar English project at the "e-Innovations Convention", at the Mermaid Conference Centre in London, on July 2005). In this way the "Biblioscuole" Project will contribute to lifelong learning, for a continuous cultural development,

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[22] <http://www.biblioscuole.it/public/notizia-4441.htm>.
[23] Last view of the websites: 2006 May 3rd.

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