

# EDUCATION IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

## THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS OF THE ELDERLY IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL INCLUSION AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT

## ROLA VEREJNÝCH KNIŽNÍC V EDUKAČNOM PROCESE SENIOROV V KONTEXTE DIGITÁLNEJ INKLÚZIE AKO SOCIÁLNEHO DETERMINANTU

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### Abstract

This topic synergistically links the field of andragogy and geragogy with the context of public libraries, emphasizing key social determinants in contemporary educational reality. Digitisation and the related digital inclusion/exclusion constitute significant factors affecting access to education and information, especially for vulnerable groups such as the elderly. Public libraries as dynamic third sector institutions have the potential to act as facilitators and mediators in the process of bridging the digital divide and promoting lifelong learning for the elderly. We will provide concrete examples from public library practice. The result of our work is a partial overview of the current situation in the field of non-formal education in libraries in Slovakia and Czechia with regard to the impact of the influence of digital technologies.

**Keywords:** digital literacy, geragogy, libraries, non-formal education, social determinants

### Abstrakt

Téma synergicky prepája oblasť andragogiky a geragogiky s kontextom verejných knižníc, pričom akcentuje kľúčové sociálne determinanty v súčasnej edukačnej realite. Digitalizácia a s ňou súvisiaca digitálna inklúzia/exklúzia predstavujú významné faktory, ktoré vplývajú na prístup k vzdelávaniu a informáciám, najmä u zraniteľných skupín, akými sú seniori. Verejné

knižnice, ako dynamické inštitúcie tretieho sektora, majú potenciál pôsobiť ako facilitátori a mediátori v procese prekonávania digitálnej priepasti a podporovať celoživotné učenie seniorov. Uvedieme konkrétne príklady z praxe vo verejných knižniciach. Výsledkom práce je podanie čiastočného prehľadu o aktuálnej situácii v oblasti neformálneho vzdelávania v knižniciach na Slovensku a v Čechách so zreteľom na dopady vplyvu digitálnych technológií.

**Kľúčové slová:** digitálna gramotnosť, geragogika, knižnice, neformálne vzdelávanie. sociálne determinanty

### **1. The role of public libraries in community education for the elderly**

Public libraries are increasingly playing a key role in educational processes for the elderly, particularly in the context of digital inclusion as a social determinant. Their role is further emphasized by the growing recognition of digital literacy as a prerequisite for active participation in today's information-rich society. As societal shifts towards digital interfaces continue, the literature points out that public libraries serve as important hubs for promoting digital skills and providing access to technological resources, which is particularly important for the elderly who have not (perhaps) been born in the digital age.

One of the main functions of public libraries is to bridge the digital divide, which affects older adults disproportionately. Their generation often faces challenges related to technological literacy, access to digital resources and overall social connectivity. According to Audunson et al., public libraries help promote a sustainable public environment that supports social justice, including equitable access to digital resources, which is essential for the elderly in order to meaningfully engage with their communities (Audunson et al. (2019)). Furthermore, Wang and Si emphasize the importance of libraries in promoting digital literacy, thereby supporting an inclusive and equitable digital society that supports the educational needs of older adults (Wang and Si, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of public libraries in facilitating digital inclusion of older adults. Libraries served as inclusive community hubs, providing key digital training and support during this challenging period.

Research suggests that the effectiveness of digital inclusion initiatives depends on the specific social security scheme in place, as noted by Alexopoulou et al., who argue that contextual factors significantly influence the way older adults access digital technologies (Alexopoulou et al., 2022). This highlights the need for a policy framework that not only acknowledges the digital divide but actively seeks to bridge it and ensures that public libraries are well

supported in their efforts to effectively serve the elderly in the field of education.

Furthermore, it has been shown that providing technology-related educational programs increases older adults' autonomy and skills in navigating the digital environment. For example, Morueta et al. found that the availability of literacy support directly influences internet access and use among the elderly (Morueta et al., 2021). This access is key to maintaining social interactions and accessing essential services, thereby **reinforcing the role of public libraries as key players in a multifaceted approach aimed at promoting social well-being.**

Public libraries play an important role in the educational process of the elderly through digital inclusion efforts. They provide basic resources, training, and social support that enable older adults to engage with the digital world. This inclusion is not just a matter of access; it involves broader social determinants that affect the quality of life of the elderly. Digital inclusion is an important social determinant in today's society. As libraries continually innovate their approach in supporting this demographic, the implications extend far beyond individual education and contribute to greater community cohesion and overall public health.

## **2. Current situation in the field of non-formal education in libraries in Slovakia and Czechia with regard to the impact of digital technologies**

Despite persisting stereotypes in the general public about the role, status, and functioning of libraries, these are dynamic third sector institutions with the potential to act as facilitators and mediators in bridging the digital divide. It is right to say that present-day modern public libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are capable of supporting lifelong learning for the elderly. Further below, we provide a brief overview of the current situation and practical examples from public libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

At a time when quality public space is shrinking under the pressure of hoaxes, misinformation, and accelerated attention, libraries serve as open, thoughtful community places of focus and value stability. When libraries are led with vision and courage, they can be one of the most innovative places in the society today. They are no longer just institutions, but rather a network of relationships with the community, librarians, society, and technology, as well as a space for encounters between readers and books, people and technology, the public and trust. (Řehák, 2025). Libraries are transforming from book depositories into dynamic centres for lifelong learning and community life, supporting both formal and non-formal education.

Public libraries play a key role in promoting social inclusion and community life, providing safe and accessible spaces for all members of the community, including marginalized or disadvantaged individuals. By providing free access to the internet and digital technologies,

they enable these individuals to participate in the digital economy and society. By using digital technologies such as voice readers and screen magnifiers, libraries increase their inclusiveness for people with disabilities.

### **Digital technologies as an opportunity**

Digital technologies represent both a challenge and an opportunity for the Slovak and Czech libraries. If libraries fail to understand them, they can become a threat, but if they perceive them as assistance, they will bring many positive changes, especially in terms of their social impact on education. Currently, we see libraries making an effort to actively respond to the changing demands of the times by supporting lifelong learning. Aware of the growing digital divide faced by the older population, libraries are providing training in digital literacy. For example, Krajská knižnica v Žiline has for many years been offering a program teaching the elderly the basics of writing in Word. (Krajská knižnica v Žiline, 2025) Digital literacy programs are especially valuable for the elderly whose digital skills are inferior to those of the younger generations, thus helping to reduce the digital divide and ensuring equal opportunities for all members of the community.

### **Innovative approaches and programmes for the elderly**

Librarians have long been helping adults, including the elderly, to search for relevant information and library resources. These serve not only for leisure and entertainment, but also for personal development. In the context of digital transformation, the role of librarians is changing to that of facilitators of education, mentors of digital adaptation, and guides in the complex world of information. In order for librarians to master this new role, or any of its facets, they need to change their internal mindset and undergo further training in the areas of digitization, information and communication technologies (ICT), and service modernization. Current challenges of lifelong learning in the profession of librarian could constitute a separate area of research.

Libraries implement a broad range of innovative approaches and programmes aimed at the elderly. One of the most significant trends is a **shift towards creating inclusive programs designed specifically for older** adults, which can significantly strengthen community engagement and social inclusion. These include initiatives in literacy, technology education, and health-focused workshops.

Libraries organize workshops and training courses aimed at **improving digital skills**, such as computer use basics, internet safety, and the use of software applications. For example, Verejná knižnica Michala Rešetku in Trenčín offers a computer skills course titled “E-mail it to me, granny”. (Verejná knižnica Michala Rešetku (2025)) Verejná knižnica Mikuláša Kováča (2025) in Banská Bystrica runs a long-term, regular, interactive, and experiential prevention

program for the elderly titled “Safe and Healthy” which includes knowledge quizzes and guided discussions. The didactic principles for working with the elderly include clarity, appropriateness, activity, individual approach, systematicity, emotionality, motivation, and regular feedback. As an example of a larger educational event, we can highlight the three-day mini-festival “Academy for the Elderly 2025” in Trnava. The program included theatre performances with discussions, a tour of the State Archives with a workshop on creating family trees, self-defence lessons, memory training organized by Knihovna Juraja Fándlyho, digital mind training using apps and tablets, lectures on crime prevention, and digital skills workshops focusing on mobile apps. (Knihovna Juraja Fándlyho v Trnave (2025)) “Mahen’s Academy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” offered by Knihovna Jiřího Mahena v Brně (2025) holds regular cycles of author readings, lectures, discussions, and practical workshops throughout the year.

Several libraries in Moravia and Bohemia have launched initiatives in the field of **bibliotherapy**. It should be noted that almost all libraries offer group readings with text analysis as a free informal educational activity. However, professional bibliotherapy is a therapeutic intervention led by a qualified professional – a psychologist, psychotherapist or specially trained bibliotherapist. Its main goal is to promote mental health and address specific psychological problems. Bibliotherapy has a strictly defined structure. Clients (readers) are recommended specific books or texts based on their particular needs (e.g., anxiety, sadness, relationship problems). The goal is not just to read the story but to analyse it and to find a connection to one’s own life. This concept has gained popularity with a view to support the mental health and emotional well-being of the elderly through reading and discussion groups that provide intellectual stimulation and foster social bonds. Bibliotherapy is a unique tool in the education of the elderly that can have a profound impact on digital inclusion as a social determinant. Bibliotherapy sessions create a **safe social environment**. The elderly can meet, discuss and share their feelings and experiences (opk.care, 2024). Such interaction reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are social determinants in themselves, and strengthens the sense of belonging (Fialová, 2020). If these groups focus on the topic of digital inclusion, their members can motivate and support each other in learning new digital skills. Tackling problems together is more effective and less stressful. This form of therapy therefore not only affects mental health, but also indirectly influences the ability and motivation of the elderly to integrate into digital society. Many older people feel afraid or uncertain when using modern technologies. This psychological block is often the main barrier to digital inclusion (Vroman, Arthanat & Lysack, 2015, cited in digitalniseniori.gov.sk, n.d.). Bibliotherapy can help alleviate these feelings of anxiety. Reading stories about characters who overcome technological challenges, or discussing the positive impacts of technology on life (such as keeping in touch with family through video calls) can inspire courage and motivation in the elderly. Regular reading and discussion of texts stimulates memory, concentration, and critical thinking (opk.care, 2024). These cognitive skills are key

in order to successfully acquire digital literacy. Stronger cognitive function makes it easier for the elderly to process new information, understand complex user interfaces, and remember procedures, which is essential for an effective use of digital devices. Bibliotherapy helps the elderly to cope with feelings of sadness, depression or apathy. When a person feels mentally and emotionally stronger, they have more energy and motivation to learn new things, which also applies to digital skills. The improvement in mental well-being that bibliotherapy brings is a prerequisite for any successful educational activity, including digital literacy courses (Fialová, 2020). Knihovna Kroměřížska is often commended for pioneering bibliotherapy in the Czech libraries (Knihovna Kroměřížska, 2025). It was awarded the title “Library of the Year 2016” for its information achievement in this field. It offers a special database of bibliotherapeutic literature and has experience working with clients, including in collaboration with a psychiatric hospital. Městská knihovna Frenštát pod Radhoštěm has a special section on its website dedicated to bibliotherapy (Městská knihovna Frenštát pod Radhoštěm, n.d.; Čížková, 2018). It offers books marked with a pictogram of a heart in the palms of the hands, which are intended to help readers in various life situations (e.g., bullying, death, drugs). Librarians regularly update the list of these books. It is important to note that bibliotherapy is not as widespread in libraries in the Czech Republic as it is in some other countries. It is often used more by psychologists and therapists. Nevertheless, there is growing interest and development in this area in libraries, as shown by the above examples (Fialová, 2020). In Slovakia, we have only found two bibliotherapy events organized in libraries: within its music department, Knížnica Juraja Fándlyho in Trnava offers meetings focused on working with texts and aimed at improving people’s mental health. This is a preventive approach that provides psychological support to people in difficult life situations (Knížnica Juraja Fándlyho v Trnave, 2025). Gemerská knižnica Pavla Dobšinského in Rožňava organized an event titled “The Book – My Mirror” which centred on reading and working with text, offering participants the opportunity to reflect on their own values and lives. Although this was a one-off event, it demonstrates libraries’ interest in this topic and their efforts to implement bibliotherapeutic elements in their programmes (Košický samosprávny kraj, 2018).

In addition to on-the-spot services in libraries, there are also projects and organizations in the Czech Republic and Slovakia that focus on bibliotherapy and support it throughout the library system, such as the BiblioHelp project. This is a portal that provides a database of books suitable for bibliotherapy (BiblioHelp portal, n.d.). Although not a library in itself, the portal serves as a useful resource for the general public and for librarians who want to use this method.

Biblioterapia.sk is an online teaching aid created with the support of the Erasmus+ program. It provides teaching materials and information on bibliotherapy, including poetry therapy and paremiological therapy. It is an important resource for professionals who want to broaden their knowledge in this field (NIVAM, n.d.). Several libraries, such as Krajská knižnica

Ľudovíta Štúra vo Zvolene, have in the past organized training courses for librarians focused on bibliotherapy basics. These courses serve to disseminate knowledge and enhance skills so that libraries can offer more such services in the future (Fond na podporu umenia, n.d.).

### **Technological innovation in services**

Libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are actively introducing new technologies. In the Czech Republic, **self-service checkout systems** are already more widespread, while in Slovakia they have only been introduced in regional libraries. They are available to readers during library opening hours. These systems free librarians from the routine work of checking books in and out, giving them more time to dedicate to the more complex aspects of their profession, such as individual assistance, organizing community and educational activities, and digital skills development.

In Slovakia, 50 public libraries have set up **SmartLabs** – modern spaces designed for experiential STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) learning, to enhance creativity, technological and craft skills, and to popularize science. SmartLabs are equipped with technologies such as 3D printers, cutting plotters, heat press machines and pyrography kits.

Many libraries offer **3D technologies**, providing the elderly, too, with an opportunity to learn how to use a 3D pen, 3D scanner or laser engraver. Městská knihovna v Praze (2025), the largest public library in Prague and one of the most important in the Czech Republic, is testing its **Aia chatbot** based on large language models and trained to answer standard questions from the readers. The library also plans to focus on developing the AI's ability to recommend titles for reading.

### **3. Conclusion**

From their beginnings, libraries have been perceived as places of learning and as part of the national education system in both republics under the common Act on Public Municipal Libraries No. 430/1919 Coll., which played a key role in the development of the library sector in Czechoslovakia and beyond. It was a groundbreaking Act on a global scale, as it was the first to introduce a legal obligation to establish a library in every municipality throughout the country. Its adoption was met with great response abroad and it became a model for library laws drafted in other countries around the world. Libraries in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are now considered by experts to be the ideal institutions for enhancing information literacy and encouraging lifelong learning in communities. Public libraries themselves actively and creatively take on the task to enhance information literacy, despite a frequent lack of clearly defined guidelines or manuals.

Public libraries in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are actively adapting to the changing needs of the public and to technological progress, thereby strengthening their position as key institutions for lifelong learning, digital inclusion and a robust community life, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as the elderly. In this paradigm, public libraries are defined not only as information hubs, but also as actors in the area of lifelong learning and in strengthening social cohesion. Projects such as SELCO (Senior Learning Communities) aim to provide a more effective education for older people in order to prepare them for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, develop their skills and strengthen the community. In addition, preventing social isolation and establishing new social contacts are met as secondary goals. Educational activities for the elderly are seen as a way to enhance quality of life in old age, increasing their ability to be active and to contribute to community progress.

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