

Towards library services for children in the knowledge society

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Public libraries are very strong institutions in the lives of Danish (and presumably all other European) children. However, recent surveys reveal that slowly but steadily the use of children's libraries is diminishing. Compared to many other countries we still have a very favourable position with 83% of all children as regular library users. At the same time all schoolchildren are regular school library users, and the school library has improved a lot in recent years, so should we be worried at all?

The most obvious change is that the very frequent users of children's library services (once a week or more) have halved their visits in the last seven years, and the curve continues to drop. And when the children come, they tend to stay in the library for a shorter time than previously, and the number of mere 'drive in' users, who request their titles on the library web and just pass the library to pick up their material, increases.

Statistics show that children spend more time on the Internet and computer games and less on TV, libraries and reading.¹

There are basically two answers to this situation. One is to accept that obviously children do not need the library to the same extent as earlier. The Internet, Google, cheaper books and media combined with greater affluence naturally leads to this new situation. The present change, you may argue, is in no way dramatic, so we should simply accept a somewhat lower number of users. On the other hand, I see the change as what I tend to describe as the glacier-syndrome. Remember that Greenland is a part of Denmark, and that we now have a huge collection of photographs documenting how the ice withdraws compared to the situation ten, twenty, thirty years ago. A change that even if you don't notice it on a daily level, is dramatic in the long run and will result in a complete change over years. Likewise with the library. We will experience a similar process in terms of users leaving. If we do not accept this situation, we must change the library offer in a more radical way than we have done until

now. We must get to the very core and redefine the roles of the library and we must face - however dreadfully difficult this may be - a need for a different staff profile from the classical collection-oriented librarian.

The Danish minister of culture is a great defender of reading, books and libraries. Thus - confronted with the glacier-syndrome - he decided to set up a working party with a number of tasks: to examine how the library can continue to support children's reading, how the library can contribute to developing children's information literacy, media knowledge, discuss strategies for the digital library services, new concepts for design and layout of the library and last, but not least, how the library can stimulate the entire formation and development process of children.

The work has been done in three steps: an analysis of the present situation of children's culture and everyday life, a discussion of the role of the library for children, and recommendations. I intend in the following to present the first two steps in very brief terms and to concentrate on the recommendations. The following remarks are based on the discussions of the working party and the first draft for the report.²

Children's culture and the role of the library

Contemporary children's culture can be characterized by two main trends: Medialising and differentiation. Children's cultural networks are increasingly established by the means of media. Children meet to use media, play computer games, watch films, and listen to music. Chat rooms and other activities based on social technologies are extremely popular on the web. At the same time children also increasingly conquer new arenas, internet cafés, clubs, the private media centres etc., which tend to compete with traditional offers such as libraries, theatres, cinemas that are losing young customers in Denmark right now, while sports activities, art centres and art museums tend to attract more participants.

From a social point of view there is a clear trend that children's daily lives have become much more structured and scheduled until they are ten, and from ten on they are very much dependent on their own ability to select and combine cultural and other leisure activities. You may actually say that children have to create their own identity, in a balance between what is common to all and what is specific to each individual, a process that is very dependent on what children consume in the media.

A typical observation in Danish children's libraries from recent years is that the number of children dropping by and using the library as a pleasant spot to spend a couple of hours is significantly diminishing, while the number of children visiting the library accompanied by their parents is growing.

The role of the library can be discussed on the premisses of the needs of the knowledge society and on the premisses of the library's national tradition (and legislation). In practice these two points of view are merging, as is a number of theories on the development of children and the nature and role of culture, into what is basically a humanistic theory of the necessity to stimulate the development of each child, not only by learning but also by playing and a variety of experiences. Knowledge societies need people to develop multimodal competencies, which means competencies that enable them to create, interpret, exchange complex patterns and structures of signals that increasingly are media-based i.e. are mediated via books, TV, Internet and cell phones.³

We tend to develop these competencies based on an idea of what is necessary for our society, but also based on theories about what is good for the personal development of children.

In order to support children in such areas as are relevant in their daily lives and their future, libraries have to combine the three overall objectives of the library act which concern enlightenment, experience and education. In order to do this one has to expand the traditional perceptions of these objectives.

Enlightenment is something other and more than giving the individual access to a superabundance of information. Children must be supported in the appropriate areas e.g. via search engines and special

portals so that work and education can happen in a more efficient and rational way. Enlightenment is also application with insight, and it is the library's task to help develop children's application of information so that they can transform it into insights relevant to their lives.

Experiences are something other and more than mediating fiction in book form and creating frames for isolated cultural activities in the children's library. Experiences cover all cultural expressions – visual, auditive, multimedial – and it is the library's task to contribute to developing children's quality consciousness in relation to all forms of expression and to fortify their zest for tackling the cockeyed, the surprising and provoking content in all kinds of material.

Education is something other and more than that which takes place in the formal class rooms at school and can be measured. Education also happens in semi-formal spaces like societies, sports clubs and museums. Education in both formal and informal spaces presupposes that someone can and wants to learn something. Add to this the learning that takes place in informal rooms, where the objective is not learning – like when children at home in their own room are working on improving their use of a graphics program; not to mention the learning that takes place indirectly, when one does not expect to be learning anything – when small children for example learn the rules of a game by participating.⁴

A broader understanding of education therefore includes both formal, semi-formal and informal spaces; and a broader understanding of learning includes both rational problem-handling, emotional expression and social dialogue and action. It is the library's task to contribute to creating these frames for leaning so that children together can nourish the multi-modal resources relevant to their every-day lives and their future.

Experience and knowledge are elements already prioritized by children when they use media in their spare time⁵. However, there is yet another important element which children find important, namely communication. This element is not included in the Library Act's statement of aims. But it can be defined as the libraries' overall approach when attempting to fulfil the three main aims of the law. First of all this is due to the fact that some of the most relevant and popular activities for children in the library are closely associated with communication (games, using social net pages, being together with parents and friends).

Secondly, a vision of comprehensive and dialogic practice in relation to the users does presuppose that the library puts the emphasis on communication, both interpersonally in relation to the physical library and mediated in the virtual library.

Each of these prioritizations focuses on one of the library's three aims: Experience. Here one can distinguish between three main prioritizations, namely that libraries are a place for children to be, a place to learn or a place for doing something together.

¹ Bille, Trine mfl. (2005) Danskernes kultur- og fritidsaktiviteter 2004: med udviklingslinjer tilbage til 1964 København: Amternes og kommunernes Forskningscenters Forlag.

² The report is heavily inspired by professor, dr.phil. Kirsten Drotner, University of Southern Denmark, and this article based on many of her findings.

³ Jewitt, Carey & Gunther Kress (red.) (2003) Multimodal Literacy New York: Peter Lang.

⁴ Sefton-Green, Julian (2004) Literature Review in Informal Learning with Technology Outside School Futurelab series nr. 7. Bristol: Futurelab.

⁵ Drotner, Kirsten (2001) Medier for fremtiden: børn, unge og det nye medielandskab København: Høst & Søn.

That the library is a place to be for children is reflected by the library being designed as a 'free space' for children.

As far as the youngest patrons are concerned the library often it is design focuses on sensory experiences stimulated by the materials or activities in the room. Thus theatre performances are the most popular activity with the very young next after reading books⁶. These library rooms function as important meeting places, e.g. pedagogues with day-care or kindergarten children who become familiar with the library through regular visits.

When it comes to the older children, the library's prioritization as a place to be means that the children's social activities to a great extent are accepted with minimum professional interference.

Several virtual library services for children are also designed as places to be with the emphasis on experiences and that which appeal to the senses. An inquiry service like Ask Olivia combines e.g. Olivia's room as a free space for the users to explore, with Olivia's/net librarian's user-oriented and personal voice.

Behind the prioritization of children's library rooms as places to be lies an understanding of children's development being nourished by imagination and physical exertion, and that children often lack the space for such exertions.

For the younger children the emphasis on the "good" experience is rooted in a perception of culture that includes a firm sense of what quality means – possibly as a contrast to a perceived tendency in the experience society to distinguish between rational absorption and emotional seduction.

Elsewhere the library is designed as a place for learning where children can seek information; where teachers or librarians assist with homework, or where a host of computers offer access to search facilities on the Internet.

Such library functions attract particularly older children and young adults, and more school libraries than public libraries have this function.

In the public libraries places for learning are often to be found in the local libraries with many users of an ethnic background other than Danish. Behind these prioritizations lies typically the view that children are independent players, who in a rational way can participate in the great diversity of information offered by the information society – in the case of some of them with a friendly nudge by adult professionals.

The libraries are also in some instances turned into a place for doing, where children share certain activities, from time to time with adults joining in. Particularly older children use these library rooms to play computer games or to use social net pages, where both kinds of activities place the media-borne communication and interaction at the centre. In 2004 fewer used the library for computer games than six

years ago, when the previous nationwide cultural habit study was carried out. This decrease is undoubtedly due to the fact that most families with young children today have at least one computer as well as Internet access.

On the other hand, the computer users spend the longest time in the library: "Just under 10% of the group spend more than two hours with the computer. The majority of this group is children."⁷

Via the computer older children use several digital forms of expression, and they are doing something together – both with the friend they find online and in the physical space. The librarians' communication with the users is mostly confined to supervising and offering technical assistance, while they rarely concern themselves systematically with the content of the activities.⁸

Also younger children use the library as a space for certain activities, and this often happens together with their parents. Well-educated parents especially have little time at home with their (few) children. This means that they feel it particularly important to "do something" with their children – for example going to the library. Next to borrowing books, visits with their children is the most frequent reason for adults going to the library⁹; and it is also often the adults who ask the librarian questions on behalf of their children.¹⁰

Designing the library as a place where children do something together with the help of the libraries' materials is often based on a perception of the users as independent people who will develop in social contexts, and who are able to exploit the knowledge society's diversity of cultural forms of expression – both information- as well as more experience-based expressions. The assistance from adults is not considered a decisive factor in this process, probably because the prioritization is combined with a descriptive cultural perception that hampers an appraisal of cultural quality.

Recommendations

The task of the committee was to recommend various avenues for development in relation to future library service to children. The recommendations are to a large extent based on the many experimental and developmental projects conducted in Denmark as well as abroad over the past few years. But we try to concretize and gather together the experiences into a picture of "the new library". In brief we imagine a library service where:

- The physical library is still a crucially tangible expression of the library, but the library space ought not to be as dominated by systematically arranged materials as is the case in the traditional library. The space must exude creativity in such a way as to challenge children to play and learn. It

must contain possibilities for discovery and entice children to explore. Maybe the space is designed as a particular fairytale universe – in constant change. A good Danish example in the children's library in Vejle. There is also a number of fine examples in USA.

- The library on the net is developed. It must continue to give access to inquiry services, contain possibilities for games and play, support children's need for reading and learning. The library on the net must interact offensively and in a mutually stimulating way with the physical library – and they must both be able to function independently. The use of dialogue-based interactive and social technologies must be intensified.
- A librarian profile is established that focuses more on active mediation, facilitation of various activities and communication with children. Throw out the desks – both in a concrete and figurative sense. Competence development and use of new staff groups must be on the agenda.
- The library transcends borders and must be where children actually are. Not only on the net, but also in kindergartens and day-care institutions, in schools and associations. Collaboration with other parties with special offers for children must be developed and systematized.
- The libraries develop new services. A special area is play and games. There is an increasing need for getting advice on both games and toys. It seems obvious for the children's library to develop an expertise within this area and at the same time make a more determined effort to turn the library into a nice place to play. There is also basis for systematizing the work related to learning, particularly regarding computer clubs etc. that aims to develop media and information competence as well as creative workshops.
- The library participates in national campaigns, for example 'Joy of reading' campaigns like the Orla

Prize. And the library develops specific offers with a view to integration, where this is needed, like for example the girl's clubs in Vollsrose.

The library collaborates more closely with the school library than has been the case until now. Common plans for library service to children are prepared, the children's librarian may be on duty in the school library from time to time and also does book talks, they collaborate on homework cafés and make their prioritizations together.

Ten bids – recommendations and suggestions for realisation

Staff: New core competences and facilitator profile

The committee recommends that library staff focus on active mediation and facilitation of activities for children, and that personal service and dialogue with the children be given pride of place. To a greater degree than at present, the staff must look to what the children need to experience, know and learn. It requires a thorough knowledge of all relevant media and genres and ability to mediate the content offensively via work shops, online service, games, literature mediations etc.

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that personal mediation and broad media competence be the central pivotal points in the library's new mediation profile. Further competence development can be arranged via continuing and further education, for example via credit giving modules in mediation at diploma or master level. Within the framework of the cooperation agreement with the Royal School of Library and Information Science, the Danish Library Agency can agree on further education programmes. The libraries can consider employing staff who work at other frequencies than the librarian-professional ones, and who are specialists within specific areas of children's culture.

The space: New design and new competences

The committee recommends that libraries try out new concepts for the design of the physical space. The objective is to make the library attractive for children to learn, be and play in. The design must prioritize special functions, e.g.: play, storytelling, creative development, multimedia and installations that invite children to use their senses and expose themselves, as well as science, art and learning activities. There should be programmed activities with both learning and play as headline. In order to emphasize the connection between the physical and the virtual library, one might think in terms of "universes" which can create a different and innovative mediation profile.

⁶ Bille, Trine mfl. (2005) Danskernes kultur- og fritidsaktiviteter 2004: med udviklingslinjer tilbage til 1964 København: Amternes og kommunernes Forskningscenters Forlag

⁷ Mikkelsen, Helle Kolind (2004) Brugernes adfærd på folkebibliotekerne: KL's trafiktaelling 2004. Tilgængelig på: www.kl.dk/trafiktaelling

⁸ Drotner, Kirsten (2000) Folkebiblioteker og medier : fire bud til en kulturpolitisk strategi for børn og unge : notat til Kulturministeriet og Biblioteksstyrelsen. København: Biblioteksstyrelsen

⁹ Bille, Trine mfl. (2005) Danskernes kultur- og fritidsaktiviteter 2004: med udviklingslinjer tilbage til 1964 København: Amternes og kommunernes Forskningscenters Forlag.

¹⁰ Nyboe, Lotte & Kirsten Drotner (2006) Når børn stiller spørgsmål: en analyse af kommunikationen i det fysiske børnebibliotek og på Spørg Olivia – en spørgetjeneste for børn på nettet Gentofte: Gentofte

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that coordinated activities be started up, where a number of libraries together develop and finance larger installations like for example The Round Room in Frederikshavn.

The Danish Library Agency can support the redesigning of the physical room. Among other things by systematically to:

- harvest experiences in relation to design concepts inside and outside the library sector
- mediate results and inspiration in a simple and easy-to-grasp way
- launch central projects with monitoring research.

The results can be collected in a national toolbox on the Internet, where the libraries can get inspiration and ideas for new designs as well as finding resource persons and firms who can produce solutions.

Children's play culture and the library "at play"

The committee recommends that the libraries think of play as a valuable activity and makes play culture a central part of the content and mediation in relation to children and their parents. Playing should be regarded as an independent activity with its own goals and methods. The library can underpin children's play culture by taking a look at various media's positive contribution to creating play between children and children and between adults and children and by making available toys and games and mediating actively.

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that the Royal School of Library and Information Science incorporate and prioritize play and children's play culture in its further education programmes.

Furthermore, the committee recommends that the library make available a broad selection of toys that includes both electronic and low-technological toys, pedagogical and language-stimulating toys as well as main stream toys. The library can also organize activities where the staff is the driving force in creating games and social gathering.

The committee also recommends that staff develop and market advisory service to parents and children about computer games, toys and other children's cultural products.

The library on the net: unlimited possibilities

The committee recommends that the libraries' virtual offers to children be further developed. There must continue to be opportunities for games and playing as well as support for children's learning and interest in reading. It is recommended to intensify the use of dialogue-based elements and social technologies.

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that the libraries exploit the Internet as social medium by for example using the staff as administrators and resources in virtual networks for children. Public players within the area of children's media can locally, regionally and nationally collect and coordinate their efforts. Online service to children should be integrated systematically in the further education of children's librarians.

Learning in the library: Media and information competence

The committee recommends that the library support formal and informal learning. The library must be instrumental in children developing competences that enable them to create, interpret and exchange all forms of content mediated via physical and digital media like books, TV, Internet and mobile. The committee further recommends that librarians take initiatives to strengthen children's information competence and support day-care institutions' pedagogical learning plans.

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that the library offer children a digital education that includes information, experience and communication as well as rational and emotional learning components.

The library can i.a. include children actively in information searches in all media and offer workshops as well as long-cycle learning sequences, where children have the opportunity to work across media and genres.

One may also establish learning processes built on certain themes, for example narrative workshops with professionals who teach children how to create a thriller in various media.

Closer collaboration between public and school library

The committee recommends that libraries and schools work closely together to ensure the best possible exploitation of municipal resources for library service to children. This can happen via joint development plans that define individual roles and specify areas for collaboration.

How to accomplish this:

In the development plans one can i.a. make agreements as to division of labour and cooperation in order to supplement each others' resources. One might for example agree that the public library's main priority should be pre-school children, while help with homework, joy-of-reading initiatives and summer holiday activities are obvious areas for collaboration or are for the most part handled by one of the parties.

The library is, where children are

The committee recommends that the library endeavour to provide an offer right where children move in their

everyday lives. This means that the library must define itself in relation to and create an interplay with other parties that have special offers for children, e.g. kindergartens, day-care centres, schools and associations.

How to accomplish this:

The committee therefore recommends that the library endeavour to establish systematic and binding cooperation agreements with local institutions, associations and municipal authorities. At national level it could be relevant to cooperate with i.a. Network for Children and Culture.

Joy of reading: support children's reading experiences and reading capabilities

The committee recommends that the libraries prioritize the task of supporting children's joy of reading. The library has specific opportunities for supporting children's reading experiences as well as reading capabilities through active mediation of all media and genres.

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that daily tasks be supplemented with specific activities, ranging from language stimulation for smaller children to reading and writing activities that appeal to the young. The most successful elements of the Joy-of-reading campaign (2003-2007) can be continued and turned into a programme with government support, e.g. national campaigns and the Orla Prize.

Users with special needs: social inclusion and integration

The committee recommends that the library of the future assume a role in relation to disadvantaged children and young people. The library can give them an informal framework for the development of professional, cultural and social resources, but also pick up and activate the children's own resources.

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that local needs be gauged – possibly in collaboration with external partners – and offers established like for example the book-start programmes, language stimulation, joy-of-reading projects and homework assistance, but also offers of a social and creative character. The libraries may also consider whether there is a basis – together with local partners – for establishing a more comprehensive and inter-disciplinary offer for children – and adults – in the form of an advising and learning centre on shared premises.

Management puts focus on children

The committee recommends that library management prioritize library service to children on a par with the offers to adults and generally include children in their aspirations concerning the library's activities.

How to accomplish this:

The committee recommends that library management set aside resources – staff, money and time – to rethink, innovate and locally adapt the library's offers to children based on the needs and suggestions which the committee has outlined.