



Strongest together: One child – two libraries...because less won't do! New forms of cooperation between school library and public library

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Meeting: 108. Libraries for Children and Young Adults with School Libraries and Resource Centers

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 76TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY

10-15 August 2010, Gothenburg, Sweden
<http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla76>

Abstract:

Cooperation - when it makes sense

A nationwide project in Denmark aiming to make a model for how to create a unite effort to give the children in a municipality the very best library services through cooperation between school and public libraries. One model was created in the Municipality of Kolding where two focal points dominated the cooperation project between Kolding Public Library and The School Libraries of Kolding: professionalism (education and other ways of professional upgrade) and back office (administration, purchasing and handling). The strategy was to continue the local diversity between the two types of libraries but to analyze the possibilities for central cooperation, if it could lead to either service improvement or better utilization of the resources. Throughout the project the differences in a school library and a public library appeared even clearer and were described through a photo story. A new formal meeting structure was suggested and is now implemented.



Keynote speech

A nationwide project.

Kirsten Boelt, Deputy City Librarian, Aalborg Public Libraries, Denmark

A nationwide project between 4 public library and school library associations in Denmark has taken place in 2009. The headline for the project was to make a model for how a unite effort can give children in a municipality the very best library services through cooperation between school- and public libraries. The project originated from a report on "Future library services to children". The report was made by a committee under the Ministry of Culture. The report was made because of a dramatic fall in children's use of libraries. The public library continues to be one of the most important cultural resources for children and is used by about 80 % of all children. But children have acquired new media habits and more leisure arenas, and this means that the use of libraries is decreasing. The number of children using the public library at least once a month has fallen from 51 % in 1998 to 39 % today.

This is a significant fall which gives occasion for considering how the existing offer can be revitalized and optimized. Can and will the libraries meet these children and their culture in new ways that make it meaningful for more children to visit the library - and what do we need to make this happen? This is the major, actual challenge facing the library.

In the report the committee passes on a number of recommendations and suggestions for the libraries' services to children, so that they can match children's actual every-day lives, children's media interest and children's various other cultural needs with focus on i.a. the position of play,

social inclusion, cultural formation and good reading skills. One of the recommendations is concerning collaboration between school libraries and public libraries. The recommendation sounds like this:

“Create assets in new forms of cooperation between school and public library

The Committee recommends that libraries and schools work together to ensure the best use of local resources for library service to children. The goal is to provide children the best library services, for example through joint development, which defines individual roles and specifies areas of cooperation. The Committee recommends that a new development platform for cooperation is a shared goal of strengthening children's abilities to create, interpret and exchange all types of content in physical and digital media. This basis includes children's learning and training processes, which transcends and dissolves the public library's traditional cultural education task and school library's learning task”

The project

It was quite obvious that the Danish Library association, Local School Library Association, Librarian Association and the Danish School Library Association grabbed the report "Future Library services to children" and started a project together. Cooperation between 4 organizations is not new. One former project called "The Integrated Library" had founded a solid and inspiring cooperation, which is now continued in relation to the report on future library services to the children. The 4 associations are different, but exactly diversity and different and additional visions and starting points in relation to library services for children are a great strength when new paths to be tested.

We all want to give Danish children and adolescents the best library service. They must have a library service that they want to use in all contexts. Children must meet library services from the outset - in day care, kindergarten, school - alone and together with their parents, in order to exploit the library's services to develop all their skills and enhance their abilities to create, interpret and exchange all types of content in physical and digital media.

To fulfill – or rather – to start to fulfill this aim we started to create a project named: How to establish new models for cooperation between school- and public libraries. To understand the project you must know something about school libraries and public libraries in Denmark. The school libraries belong under the Ministry of Education and the public libraries belong under the Ministry of Culture – that means two different set up of laws. In Denmark there must be a school library in every primary school according to the national laws as there must be a public library with a children's department in every municipality. And in fact it is like that.

In the municipalities there are some cooperation between the two library types, but often it is sporadic and without any formal agreement. And more important the cooperation differs very much from one municipality to another.

Looking at the municipal world, it is obviously important that all resources are used optimally, even when it comes to library services for children. Here is a transversal committed cooperation a grip that can help to ensure both optimum utilization of resources and a coordinated and focused effort at the municipal level in order to give children the best library service.

The project began with a meeting involving a large number of politicians where many input elements in the cooperation between school and public libraries came up. Among other things about the organization of cooperation between the two library types, respect for diversity, shared action plans, goals and methods how to cooperate on joint projects - and more.

Meetings and dialog between politicians from the municipalities and employees in libraries provide an incredibly strong platform for development. Dialogue gives politicians a great understanding of the work in the libraries and an acceptance of development operations in cooperation between the two library types. Politician's involvement and acceptance is a necessary precondition for revitalizing library services in the municipalities - they are the ones who make the decisions and provide funds for the operation of the library service.

After this meeting a concept was crystallized. We sent the concept to all the municipalities in Denmark and everyone had the opportunity to join the project. We ended up with 4 municipalities which made their model for cooperation between school and public libraries. Kolding was one of them.

Cooperation where it makes sense - a project about new ways of cooperation between school and public libraries in Kolding

Bente Bruun, Coordinator of Children's Services, Kolding Public Library

Background

Once upon a time in the middle of Denmark in a city called Kolding something unexpected happened in connection with the passing of the budget for 2009. The City Council asked the Departments of Education and Culture to analyze whether it would be an advantage to make school and public libraries into one organizational unit, although the two types of libraries are administered by each their department. Actually none of the employees in the two library types appreciated this challenge, but then we heard of the nationwide project about new ways of cooperation between school and public libraries. We decided to apply for participation, and luckily we got permission from both committees to concentrate on two focal points in the project: professionalism (education and other ways of professional upgrading) and back office (administration, purchasing and handling).

Libraries in Kolding

At first a little information about the libraries in Kolding. As to the public libraries, we have a newly built and magnificent main library and 3 now partly self serviced branch libraries. The Municipality of Kolding has 86.000 inhabitants and 26 public schools, all of them with school libraries. The Educational Centre is responsible for all the school libraries with regard to purchases, economy, number of hours and further training. This (in Denmark not quite ordinary) degree of centralization means that pupils all over the municipality have access to the same services, search bases and books, regardless of the size of school.

The project

The project group consisted of Camilla Johansen from the Educational Centre representing the school libraries and myself from the public library. Behind us we had a steering committee: the head librarian, the head of the Educational Centre, and (which was crucial) also the two directors from the Departments of Culture and Education.

The strategy was to continue the local diversity between the two types of libraries, but to analyze the possibilities for central cooperation *provided* that it could lead to either service improvement or better use of the resources. Already from the first talk about the project application, we chose the title 'Cooperation – where it makes sense'.

The very first step was to secure the preconditions for a successful project, and the process of defining the project happened fast and in agreement. Both sides represent well-organized and strong organizations with staff with a high level of professional pride. That meant that we didn't have to waste time struggling for power. We didn't start from zero either. Already in 2007 we started gathering school and public librarians to discuss matters of mutual interest. At our first meeting we discussed the popular paperbacks in relation to our responsibility for quality literature and in 2008 the topic was cooperation. Each table should agree on 3 suggestions for concrete cooperation in 2009, write them down on homemade paper ships and as a symbolic gesture enable the ships to sail.

Challenges

All the librarians were well aware of the strength in the dual library system, whereas the local politicians and many citizens found it strange and therefore an obvious subject for cutbacks in times of financial crisis. In order to tell the surroundings about the background and importance of the dual library system, we had to make it crystal clear to ourselves. We had fine new, politically adapted vision papers for each type of library, but the local interfaces between them was not described before. Looking back this was the most important thing, we did. We decided to make a photo story for the politicians, the local ones and those, who attended the national conference, which ended the project. We talked for hours, we discussed with our hinterlands, we visited libraries round the municipality, and we had photos taken along the way. Then we extracted the message again and again until it we had 3 minutes of understandable photo story for busy politicians – and it's no secret that we learned a good deal ourselves during the process. (Photo story)

Project results: back office and professionalism

The photo story with its stress on both the differences and the cooperation possibilities within the current organization was an important factor in the project debriefing, which convinced the local politicians that the development plans of the library services to the children of Kolding no longer included a union of the two library types.

One of our focus areas was analyzing of the opportunities for back office cooperation. But it soon turned out that each of us had made agreements with other libraries of the same type regarding favorable contracts for the purchase of books. Both of us also had made binding contracts with our

suppliers of library systems, and furthermore we are about to develop a common nationwide web based library system, which automatically will open up new ways of local cooperation.

It did turn out though, that we could save some money by coordinating our internet base subscriptions. We now contact one another before subscribing to avoid paying twice for the same product for almost the same children.

Concerning the other focus – the professional upgrading - we made a job swapping experiment, which turned out to be an eye-opener for the involved. Just two hours on the heels of a colleague in the other type of library revealed many differences. At the school library the guidance often takes place in big groups and the pupils are forced to come at a given time with their class and teacher. At the public library the children come voluntarily and whenever and with whom they want to. At the school library the focus point is learning targets and reading development. At the public library we focus on the pleasure of reading, and if learning is involved, it is initiated by the child itself. And at the school library the colleague counselling fills half the day, one of the really big surprises for me. Our successful experiences with the job swapping means that it will be a standing offer in the future.

Another consequence of the project is the new two-levelled meeting structure. Once a year there will be a coordination meeting between the 2 department directors, the head of the public library, the head of the Educational Centre and the two employees with the daily responsibility for the cooperation between the two sectors. The latter two are also the link to a new joint committee, also consisting of two employees from the public library and two school librarians. These six persons meet four times a year, and the committee is responsible for new collaborative efforts, clarification of border issues, training offers and knowledge sharing, and also the group plans the yearly meeting for all school and public librarians. From now on the cooperation between the two library types is no longer dependant on random personal acquaintances, but anchored in a formal meeting structure.

In the project period we developed different kinds of collaborative actions. We started inviting one another to our local training courses and we plan to teach one another as well. Usually fourth grade pupils are invited to our main library for 2 hours of library instruction, now we have extended the offer to the eighth grade pupils as well. The personal acquaintances with the school librarians led to a new type of cooperation, from joining each others events as guests to a partnership right from the planning phase, for instance in nationwide reading events, which clearly means better events for both children, teachers and librarians.

Another good example was the Murder Night at the public library. In preparation the Educational Centre bought boxes of crime fiction to lend out to the schools, and because it was a collaborative event there was a lot of PR in all the schools. More than 80 kids paid to meet a detective-dressed writer of children books on the evening of a Friday the 13th. Divided into groups they met a lot of different persons around the library – maybe witnesses, maybe killers. We were 13 adults at work that night, besides the author also a real policeman and several school and children's librarians. We all played a part in the mystery, for instance a children's librarian with a tiny drinking problem or a canteen lady who gave the children valuable hints for the investigation. A successful event which the children's library could not have done alone ...and the murderer was found.

Cooperation in the future

The project is now over, then what? We continue with new knowledge about each other as well as about ourselves. During the process we have asked each other the forbidden questions. Like when I question the professionalism of the school librarians: 'aren't most of you just tired teachers?' Or when I am asked why children's librarians don't read books anymore or 'why is it that you always sit at the desk with your head into the computer instead of talking to the children?'

We are still friends though, and determined to continue our collaboration in order to give the optimal library services to the children of Kolding. Our eyes remain open to rationalizations and to new collaboration areas in order to support the children's formal and non-formal learning. And to inspire and educate the professional adults around them to make them motivate the children to use the library...no matter which type. . .

And then something new happened in connection with the budget for 2010. The City Council has decided to build or rebuild a school in a smaller town called Christiansfeld. Right now we are in the middle of analyzing the possibilities for an integrated public and school library at the school. Now the time has come where all our fine words of common interest and understanding are really put to the test.