



Lifelong Reading

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108 — Libraries for literacy: linking generations, empowering communities — Literacy and Reading

Abstract:

Citizen's right to library services of quality regardless of domicile or financial standing is strongly emphasized in Finnish library legislation and in national policies. A prerequisite for quality is a competent and skilled staff.

The network of public library services is widely used. In 2011, there was an average of 18 loans per capita, there were 53 million visits in the physical library and 57 million visits on library web sites.

The current Government Platform highlights the importance of public libraries for maintaining and promoting literacy and an interest in reading, as well as the central role of libraries in the knowledge society.

Finns are proud of their literature and their authors. The children's media barometer, published in 2011 by the association for media education shows that the tradition of bedside stories is still strong.

The good PISA results for Finland's part were above all based on the excellent reading skills of the girls. Finnish boys were top readers too, but the difference between girls and boys were remarkable. Northern Lights on PISA, published by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2009, focused on differences between boys and girls.

Book talks, presenting new books in schools, libraries or for instance senior houses, are very popular among librarians. Ideas, useful hints and booklists are exchanged on the web.

There are annual state grants for reading promotion, authors' visits, reading diplomas and much more.

Cultural education is highly valued in Finland, literacy is part of our identity.

Citizen's right to library services of quality regardless of domicile or financial standing is strongly emphasized in Finnish library legislation and library policies. A prerequisite for quality is a competent and skilled staff. The qualification requirements of the Library Decree have recently been tightened by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Finnish library users expect even small, local libraries to offer quality services and collections. Public libraries are widely used. There are 836 libraries and 153 mobile libraries to serve a population of 5,3 million. Lending figures are exceptionally high, an average of 18 loans per capita and year. In 2011, there were 53 million visits in the physical library and 57 million visits on library websites.

About 40 % of the population has a library card, about 80 % use public library services. The most frequent users are the young and the educated. Women are more frequent users than men.

All the library policies of the Ministry of Education and Culture are mentioned in the Government Platforms, negotiated by the political parties after elections every fourth year. The current Government Platform highlights the importance of public libraries for maintaining and promoting literacy and an interest in reading.

There is a national program for media education in schools and libraries.

In addition to state subsidies of about 35 % of total expenditure there are substantial state grants for producing contents and user-friendly services on the web and for promoting literacy and reading.

The Finnish Public Library Policy 2015 emphasizes strengthening of media, information and traditional literacy among children and youth, but also the need for targeted services to seniors, people of working age, special interest groups and students at all levels.

An early start

The maternity packs for the newborns contain books as well as other essentials, books should be part of everyday life from the start. There is a strong tradition of bedtime stories.

Most libraries arrange story-telling hours every week. Stay-at-home mothers or fathers, child care and Kindergartens regularly visit the story-telling hours.

In the evenings whole families visit the library, everybody needs something interesting to read.

The first library card a child gets when starting school, it is something to be very proud of!

A reading nation – so far

With 80 % on the Internet (more than 90 % if we don't count the very young or the very old), with one of three on Facebook and with a multitude of chat lists and blogs, Finland is still a reading nation, very near the top in what comes to books published per capita, at the very top in what comes to library use and lending.

A small country with a small language – actually there are three small languages, Finnish, Swedish and Sámi in the North – we are very proud of our literature and our authors.

Education, as well as library services, should be on a high quality level regardless of domicile or financial standing. Educational and cultural rights are not only guaranteed in the Constitution of Finland, they are deep in people's hearts, too. Just try to shut down a branch library or discuss taking fees!

However, new lifestyles and new media are changing the way people spend their leisure time. Books and reading are still valued, but the number of homes with just a few books in the shelves is increasing. According to the PISA survey, the amount of books – there should be at least 250 – in the bookshelf at home is a very strong indicator. Good readers come from homes with a lot of books.

Some home libraries may be stored at virtual shelves, certainly, but at the moment e-books are only 1% of book sale, this is actually the average for most of Europe, and only 5 of 1000 loans are e-books.

Library visits of the 15 – 24 years old have decreased with 10 % in ten years' time. Especially 15-16 year old boys hold the opinion that reading is just something one is forced to do in school.

The children's media barometer

In 2011, the Association for media education published the Children's media barometer. Looking at the 5-6 year old, 79 % read or browsed books daily, all of them did this at least once a week, 58 % were read aloud to every day, 91 % listened to somebody reading aloud to them at least once a week.

Half of the 5-6 year old boys played digital games at least once a week, they were interested in games with cars, sports and adventures. Of the girls 25 % played weekly, the girls preferred children's games and games classified as educational.

Internet was used at least once a week by 38 % of all children, preferably sites for children's programs and games.

With school age come mobile phones and the ability to read, 94 % of the 8 year old had their own mobile phone. About 65 % read or browsed books every day, all children in this age group did it at least once a week. One third was still read aloud to every day, two thirds listened to somebody reading aloud to them at least once a week.

Digital games were played by 86 % of the boys and 65 % of the girls at least once a week, 70 % of the children in this age group used the Internet at least once a week and looked up games, pets, cars and supermodels (the girls).

Eager and less eager readers

In 2009, the Nordic Council of Ministers published a report, Northern Lights on PISA. The survey looked at Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the Faroe Islands, focusing on the differences between boys and girls. Finnish girls were the most eager readers, Norwegian boys had the most negative attitude towards reading.

According to a national assessment of the Finnish National Board of Education, the social standing of the mother is an important model for the girls. Finnish women are highly educated, they usually work outside home and they are more interested in reading than the men.

Man is culture's "the other", says male library director of Kerava City Library. In his library there are evenings with actors performing "typical" male monologues, there are hockey nights and often surprising performances in the lending department as well as father and son reading sessions.

In Library 10 in Helsinki, with focus on music and ITC, about 60 % of visitors are young men.

For Finland's part, the good PISA result was actually based on the excellent reading skills of the girls. Although Finnish boys were classified as top readers too, the difference between boys and girls was remarkable. When 41 % of young people said that reading was their favorite hobby, this was actually the case for 60 % of the girls and 21 % of the boys.

Finnish young people read a lot of magazines and newspapers, not only books. In Finnish television foreign programs have texts, they are not dubbed. Watching films and other programs on television develops fast readers.

A passion for reading

The Ministry of Education and Culture has recently launched a program for reading promotion. Our Ministry consists of two departments, the Minister of Education and Science is responsible for matters relating to education and research, the Minister of Culture and

Sports is responsible for matters relating to culture, public libraries, sports, youth and copyright. In this project, both departments work closely together. The Finnish name of the project, Lukuinto, indicates a passion for reading. PISA experts have been tied up with the steering group.

The project aims at guiding and inspiring local schools and libraries in their work. The difference in reading skills and reading habits between girls and boys is acknowledged, but deliberately not emphasized.

The broad variety of reading will be strongly highlighted, reading is not only about fiction. On the other hand, there is also new, exciting fiction emerging, like for instance the enriched e-books.

Book talks and media skills

Book talks are widely popular among Finnish librarians. School classes or groups of elderly are invited to the library to hear about new books, or the librarians visit schools and senior houses, or go out with the mobile library to present books. Ideas, useful hints and booklists are exchanged on the web.

The national Children and Media program was launched some years ago. Libraries.fi contributed with www.okariino.fi, a safe children's portal for improving media skills, for reading circles and recommendations of good books, films and computer games and with reliable links on various subjects.

Many local libraries just link to Okariino in order to be able to focus on local activities like authors' visits, reading diplomas and contest.

Cats and dogs as staff members

Kirjatti (from book + cat), the library cat of Tampere, has colleagues all over the world. I have personally met the library cat of the Chitai-gorod library of Novgorod, and from a university library web site (Wesleyan) I have learned that there are 697 cats recorded worldwide as official library cats. I hope they have not forgotten Kirjatti. He is not a film star like Dewey, the American colleague, but like other working cats he is an important staff member and he has been discussing books, libraries and life with children on his own website for many years. Kirjatti says he is multicoloured, and he likes cream, herring and herring waffles. He might lack the academic dignity of some of his colleagues, but children really like to talk to him and find it easy to confide in him.

Dogs can be trained to be good listeners. Also Börje, the library dog of Espoo library, has colleagues around the world, and there are web sites for library dogs as well. Children, and also young people with reading difficulties like to read aloud to Börje, who is always nice to them, always very encouraging and supporting.

Treasure chests and Reading lamps

Hämeenlinna City Library's Häme-wiki, wiki as in Wikipedia, is open to interactivity and involvement. There are many activities for all ages in this regional web service, but the history site is special, with photos from a Hämeenlinna long gone, with especially elderly people writing their own, personal memories, their own history, and reading those of others of similar age.

KirjaSampo, the "book mill", is an extensive and refined search tool for fiction. Various practices used by patrons when searching fiction are used, free associations, intuitive guesses, similarities. The semantic web is used, ontologies make it easy to find connections. KirjaSampo is on Facebook, it is linked to the national ask-a-librarian service and to Sivupiiri, the libraries.fi website for young people. KirjaSampo will eventually be part of the National Digital Library, *Finna*.

Turku City Library has lighted the reading lamps for people of all ages. Last autumn the library arranged a winter darkness festival with authors' visits, book talks about dreams, sleeplessness and related themes, story-telling, rock bands and exhibitions. Part of the libraries were open until midnight. The reading lamps shine on the web too, of course!

Midwinter darkness and midnight sun

Very often, when telling about Finnish reading and lending habits abroad, I am interrupted by somebody saying "no wonder, a country where it is always cold and dark". I use to invite the speaker to Finland in January to see the bright sunshine and the white snow and the winter sports Finns love so much.

I also mention the "nightless nights" of midsummer when the sun sets near midnight and shines fully again in the very early hours – in the North it shines through the whole night.

The answer to why we so highly value cultural education, books and reading, lies in our history.

We were part of Sweden for six hundred years and then part of Russia, the Grand-Duchy of the Russian czar, for nearly one hundred years before the Republic of Finland was born in 1917. Finnish language was suppressed for centuries. Somewhere here, and, not to forget, in a series of right political choices and in the constant demand for equality, lies the answer.

To know more about Finnish libraries:

www.minedu.fi

trilingual web site of the Ministry of Education and Culture, and

<http://www.libraries.fi>

trilingual, home site of Finnish public libraries