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On the occasion of children's culture
- **to develop the institution and the professions in a public library**

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Abstract:

Today we may talk about a release of the forces that support children's culture, whether it be in the home, in day-care institutions, in schools, cultural institutions, in associations or in business life. Focus moves from the individual institution to the context which many institutions must work together to create in order to support each citizen's active access to a life which has culture as a meaningful factor.

- *In keeping with the conditions of the hypercomplex society, the public libraries have over the past four years concentrated on seeking new knowledge and new methods in the work with children and culture.*

Public enlightenment – life enlightenment

Through the ages the concept 'public enlightenment' has been absolutely central when talking about the public library's role in society and in relation to the individual citizen. The public library was the guarantor as far as the public's access to culture and information was concerned, and mediation was the method to ensure that people really used both the materials and the institution – the public library.

Today the public library has to operate in a knowledge society, where the technological development creates quite different conditions for lifelong learning and where the starting point is the citizen's differentiated needs and possibilities. This is bound to alter the conditions for the public library's informative activity.

Today's enlightenment concept embraces cultivation and education and presupposes the citizen's active exploitation via questions and actions. Across art and science, via culture and information competencies and the application of many different intelligences, the citizen is in pursuit of knowledge and develops his abilities to embrace and influence his own destiny. The public library's mission today might perhaps be called life enlightenment.

”Information /enlightenment no longer equals knowledge, and certainly not power at all. It is therefore not so much a question of giving as much information as possible to as many people as possible. It is a question of having tools from which to select (...) the issue about information has changed from being a case of many people’s access to information to being many people’s access to knowledge and special experiences. Information is not only a question of quantity, but more and more of quality which will develop us as human beings”. (cf. professor Kirsten Drotner in the publication *Flyvende skildpadder*, p. 9).

The very real challenge for the public library is to create learning environments – develop laboratories for the citizens’ search for knowledge and consider differentiated needs.

The librarian profession changes from having focus directed at targeted and efficient mediation to an advisory function which evolves with a view to the citizen’s need for support functions in his own search for knowledge. The advisory function operates in the physical library space, the education sector’s space and in the virtual space.

The public library and the librarians thus have to define and concretise the actual public enlightenment task seen from a citizen’s perspective and pursue this perspective in the application of ICT and in the co-operation with other institutions and professions.

A relevant local institution

The public library is an opinionated institution which continually has to be aware of the essence of its work. In this context, a keen interest in the outside world is the crux of the matter if the public library as an institution is going to have something to offer and seem relevant to its users.

The researcher Finn Thorbjørn Hansen several years ago stressed the need for this awareness and orientation towards the surrounding world if the folk high schools were to avoid being regarded as lazy and rather irrelevant by contemporary society.

”In order to avoid this situation one constantly has to build ’bridgeheads’, to the reality in which we find ourselves. And these ’bridgeheads’ or visions of what one wants with one’s school, and why exactly this vision and these thoughts are relevant in the present development of society must be up to each individual school, principal and group of teachers to determine themselves. As long as it does happen! The ideal must be that all the 100 folk high schools in Denmark regularly voice their opinions as to what constitutes ”the good life” and ”the good society” – in a fumbling, playful, experimental and humorous way.” (cf. *Kunsten at navigere i kaos*, p. 231).

The public library solves the tasks in a local community and although the legislative framework is the same, we are not talking about 275 universal libraries. They are municipal libraries that reveal the framework and also the visions for the public library in a given local context. The local libraries exploit new paths, e.g. via development projects, thereby contributing with new experiences, thoughts and visions about the public libraries’ role in Danish society.

The public library must use its orientation towards the surrounding world to identify possible action lines and potential co-operation partners, because it is through the work on central questions/cases and in the meeting with the others (citizens, politicians, civil servants, other institutions and professional groups) that the individual institution and profession must pursue present and future answers to appropriate roles and methods.

In a hypercomplex society like the Danish one, the challenge lies in being able to manoeuvre, and here the researcher Lars Qvortrup mentions learning as being completely essential. The public library as institution and professional culture must therefore learn in order to handle complexity and be able to develop methods and strategies that are ‘complexity sound’.

Children and culture development concepts – or culture as springboard for new knowledge

In the following I shall discuss the role of the public library and the librarian in the light of the phenomena children and culture.

Since 1931 Danish public libraries have been obliged by law to provide departments for children, and for many years the public library and 'the Folkeskole' (elementary school) were the sound pillars of the local community's work with culture in relation to children. This cultural work was intended to give the child an understanding of the cultural heritage and the experience of culture in its classical manifestations.

In 1977 two cultural sociologists, Jette Forchhammer and Jan Helmer-Petersen, were given the task of charting the cultural life of 9-12 year olds and they described the public library's role in the local community like this:

"As to the traditional cultural offers in the municipalities, the public libraries must be said to play the leading role. They are the only statutory leisure time option, but they are at the same time the best example of a decentralised, standardised and democratised cultural offer." (cf. *Kulturens børn*, p. 356).

Over the years, the public library has had a marked 'children's profile', and the mission was primarily concerned with guaranteeing every child's right to a standardised cultural offer. Public enlightenment focused on promotion/mediation of materials which also had to do with the cultural principles of the time: quality and decentralisation. Focus gradually moves onto life enlightenment and the public library must reflect the actual cultural principle: cultural democracy:

"Cultural democracy is an expression of respect for cultural diversity and the right to be different. And true cultural democracy emphasises recognition and development of the population's abilities as regards creativity, self-expression and active participation in cultural and civic life. True cultural democracy thereby becomes a prerequisite and a means for political democracy which is the foundation of the welfare society." (cf. The Government's report to Parliament on cultural policy, p. 2).

The child's potentials and qualifications for entering into cultural processes is the starting point, and the public library must endeavour to ensure that all children are provided with the best possible 'tools' for seeing culture as a dynamic force in their lives. Professor Kirsten Drotner has characterised the diverse use of culture in a large group of children, which she describes as "culture strong":

"Culture strong children use culture created by others and they create culture themselves. They expand in a cultural sense both in the public and the private space. They use the broad media palette presented by the leisure culture and involve themselves actively in the cultivation culture of the educational system. They know a great variety of aesthetic forms of expression, including genres. They are able to turn their knowledge into action, both on their own or together with the others." (cf. *Mediedannelse – bro eller barriere*).

Appreciation of children's views of the surrounding world and their application of the cultural impressions and expressions is essential if the public library is to create the best possible conditions for children who find personal strengths in culture. This also brings about an understanding of the mission which goes far beyond making materials available.

Today we may talk about a release of the forces that support children's culture, whether it be in the home, in day-care institutions, in schools, cultural institutions, in associations or in business life. Culture tends to be a supplement in the developmental psychology of the child and professor Jan Kampmann characterises the past 10-15 years' tendency as "cultural profit/gain". From a time with just a few institutions with a defined cultural profile, we have moved to a time with many and equal players who combine children and culture in different aspects of children's everyday lives. Focus moves from the individual institution to the context which many institutions must work together to

create in order to support each citizen's active access to a life which has culture as a meaningful factor.

The public library must therefore find its role in an interplay with the many involved parties, and the vision is clearly described in the annotations to the proposed act regarding library services, 2000:

”(...) develop the children's library in close co-operation with parents and other day, culture and leisure institutions (for example day- and 24-hour care centres, 'the Folkeskole' and school libraries, cultural institutions, associations, children's culture centres) in order to create greater continuity in children's lives.”

Development concepts – or children's culture as an occasion for new knowledge

In keeping with the conditions of the hypercomplex society, the public libraries have over the past four years concentrated on seeking new knowledge and new methods in the work with children and culture. The Danish government's focus on children's culture, formulated in the report *Børn og Kultur. Redegørelse til Folketinget om regeringens børnekulturpolitiske indsats* (of 24. June 1999) instigated the Danish National Library Authority's (DNLA) targeted experiments with children's culture, with a view to fulfilling several associated goals:

- To exploit the public library's potentials in the effort to ensure greater continuity and quality in local development work
- To develop the institution 'public library' and the librarian profession in the light of children's cultural 'cases' and in the meeting with co-operation partners.

DNLA announced its intention of being an active participant in the implementation of the visions in the report *Børn og Kultur*, and this at the same time became the occasion for intensifying the children's profile in the library act which was passed in 2000.

DNLA strongly believes that the public library has something to offer in local development work and that it may be necessary to reveal the potentials in new ways. Perhaps the contact ought to a greater extent to be established outside the institutions with the focus on topical 'hot spots' which are keenly observed across sectors. It is not really a questions of moving parts of the library concept into other arenas, rather to analyse the needs, form alliances and in this light redefine, target, further develop and concretise parts of a library concept.

Fully realising that it can be difficult to learn from individual projects, DNLA chose instead to concentrate on learning-orientated concepts, where several simultaneous, local projects were working along the same lines. We wanted to secure the dynamic effect in the meeting between project participants and advisers at national level. And it was also prompted by the desire to develop the advisory role in DNLA to the benefit of the participants and develop support functions such as courses, meetings, conferences, promotion, evaluation – without taking an active role in the projects and without questioning the local ownership.

This resulted in three concepts:

Regional children's cultural co-ordinators

- 8 co-ordinators based in 8 county libraries (government support in 2000 and 2001)
- with several fields of activity
- support local public libraries in their work with children's culture
- support the children's-cultural work in the county (geographical unit)
- develop 'pathfinder' projects (for example children's-culture night, children's-culture trains, thematic work with media and literature)
- the position was primarily taken up by librarians, with nearly all of them on a part-time basis.

Local children's cultural co-ordinators

- a common initiative: Cultural Council for Children and DNLA (2002-2003)

- 71 (out of 275) municipalities applied, 14 were selected
- 13 co-ordinators were employed in the function in 14 municipalities
- each co-ordinator works from a municipally defined platform
- each co-ordinator is based at the public library
- the job is carried out by different professional groups: librarians, teachers, artists, art historians
- the co-ordinators are part-time as a minimum and several work full-time.

På samme hammel

- a common initiative: The National Education Authority and DNLA
- a requirement that public and school libraries work together, but the circle may be extended to other professional groups
- 28 municipalities took part in the project (1999-2003)
- the starting point being centrally defined themes and nodes: The local project were to build the work round one of the following themes:
 - language stimulation and reading
 - IT and the project task
 - IT and aesthetic creation
 - the library as an idea.

Experiences told us that the goals are obtained in a combination of: timing, dynamic co-operation over a period of time, focusing on values and content, concretising – testing projects, defined by community spirit and scientific character.

When one succeeds in creating a project 'environment' that creates space for learning, one counteracts the tendency to delay as well as provides the necessity confidence and energy to wander along new paths both as individuals and together with others. The scientific spirit must, however, also be present as challenger and safety net. This can be in the form of papers at conferences, targeted course programmes for the project participants, scientific publications, research-based evaluations at local and national level.

Through the work on concepts DNLA can be instrumental in securing the public libraries' position as public institutions as well as supporting local development work which results in valid methods and strategies as inspiration to and implementation in the public library system and in the corporate cultures of the co-operation partners.

To know what constitutes good children's culture

The public libraries' identity is closely associated with mediation of art and culture, and the real challenge here is to be able to embrace a much broader cultural concept where the citizen's own activities may be the decisive factor in making the experience a meaningful one.

When trying to develop cultural 'offers', it may be necessary to assess a human being's cultural needs and subsequently take into consideration the differences in age and gender. This will also help to sharpen the focus on cultural potentials. Inspired by Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Dr. Sven Nilsson has described man's cultural needs where spirit of community, experience and the individual's own cultural expression are two sides of the same coin. The seven steps in the hierarchy/pyramid are: to be, to meet, to experience, to learn, to create, to contribute, to made a difference (cf. *Meningen med livet i: Noget at tale om*, p. 38). A public library must support the child's growth and provide the opportunity (possibly in co-operation with other institutions) for the child to move at all levels within the cultural hierarchy of needs.

The librarian must then guarantee the optimal meeting and exchange between art and child. And it must be based on local prerequisites and with respect for the child's social everyday life.

When the public library is based on the principle of cultural democracy and to a much greater extent has to find co-operation partners outside the library institution, it becomes absolutely essential that the

librarian is able to argue in favour of the importance of children's culture. It may be quite simple to quote various scholars' definitions of the phenomenon, but when it comes to inter-disciplinary projects it is imperative that one knows exactly why children's culture is a good thing.

The researcher, Finn Thorbjørn Hansen, has described a new method for the clarification of values: The Socratic dialogue group. A specialised method to qualify the contents discussion and to approach a given subject in a philosophising way. The method can be applied when a smaller group has to reach a common definition of a basic phenomenon in their work foundation. The central element of the method is that the dialogue is based on the participants' own concrete experiences with the phenomenon, and that they together reach a common main statement about the phenomenon. In connection with the project "Regional children's cultural co-ordinators" we asked the eight co-ordinators to spend 24 hours on finding out and defining when children's culture is a good thing. A philosopher took part as facilitator and the resulting common statement was arrived at:

Childhood has an intrinsic value. Good children's culture inspires the child to relate actively to life by playing, creating, thinking and examining.

Good children's culture unites art and the child's play. It creates space for cognition, offers unique experiences and challenges the child to get involved and seek community with others.

In the good children's culture, children and adults meet who are committed and attentive and fulfil their potentials as human beings or what do you think?

Together to search and define the very core in the work is a process, and it is all-important for the institution's and the individual member of staff's conception of values. In the Socratic dialogue group one gets under the surface, and one examines the view of human nature and the basic attitudes to e.g. children and culture which lie underneath. Innovation in the public library's cultural offers to children is not a question of 'doctoring' traditional attitudes and methods. It is basically about moving the plane of consciousness in order to move the concrete plane. The Socratic dialogue group is a method – among many – but one thing is certain: If one wants to counteract the tendency to delay and equip the staff to enter into relations outside the institution, one has to define the overall attitude, and one must make sure that the institution uses this new insight to adjust its profile and its image, so that it appears reliable and relevant – seen from the citizen's perspective.

The librarian as navigator and pathfinder

Across sectors and professions we observe a great focusing on the member of staff as the innovative force who contributes to a strengthening of the corporate culture. The futurologist Rolf Jensen describes the future member of staff and he sums up the competencies in the image of the story teller. The member of staff becomes a player in relation to the institution's values, vision and strategies, and the institution's common set of values becomes the starting point for the individual employee's identity and scope, and thereby the basis for the meeting with the user. The ability to co-operate, motivate, inspire and get things moving becomes the decisive factors.

The employee is the navigator who turns towards the surrounding world and combines professionalism and personality in a development which also has to do with telling new and up-to-date stories about the corporate culture. Knowledge and professionalism is an important resource just as the ability to communicate and think in general terms is absolutely necessary.

I see the librarian as a front post for a cultural institution which is spiritually awake and relevant to the present age. A front post who is able to perceive the needs of the citizens as well as those of the co-operation partners and at the same time is able to adapt "the answers" to these needs. And this in such a way that the identity of the institution and the profession remains intact – although the revelation takes places in other arenas. The librarian thus becomes a pedagogical resource in the meeting with different needs in the children's and their adults' everyday environments.

In the project concerning local children's cultural co-ordinators both librarians and advisers with another professional background were involved and all were based in the local library. Their role is not defined from within the library, but from the municipality, and the public library carries out the task for the municipality.

The children's cultural co-ordinator has to be innovative, a real professional and possess a variety of competencies:

- aptitude for development and change
- curiosity and a liking for experimenting
- ability to focus on possibilities instead of problems
- ability to combine different areas of competency.

The co-ordinator is a municipally defined function who ideally speaking combines the need for change within the children's cultural area with the need for anchoring the best of what has already been achieved. The main object of the function is to make sure that children's culture continues to be placed high on the local political agenda. Municipalities vary and consequently so does the co-ordinator profile, as the co-ordinator is supposed to fit into the municipality's current development project. In one of the municipalities, the co-ordinator's role is a strategic position and here the co-ordinator's possibility of communicating with both citizen and politician is quite imperative.

"The children's cultural co-ordinator acts a 'libero' in the field and as the connecting link between user and the political, administrative and professional level. The co-ordinator must 'navigate' freely and take initiatives in relation to associations, institutions, administrations, political committees." (cf. *Helsingør Kommune*).

The children's cultural co-ordinator could be an example of a new professional role in the public library, as that function in many ways transcends the library's traditional concept of the phenomenon 'children's culture'. The field of work is the entire municipality, across institutions, with the focus on the strategic aspect, i.a. preparation for the development of policies. It is a different role to the one of culture mediator in a dialogue with the user about the book, but there are similarities as well, because the co-ordinator must master communication and mediation in order to be 'heard' and must also have something special to offer in relation to adult co-operation partners.

Cultural fieldwork is nothing new for the librarian, but maybe one will have to interact to a greater extent in the environment which receives the service. If one wants to meet the citizens' expectations and try to eliminate some of the barriers for the child's meeting with artistic experiences, one might have to think in terms of library satellites in the children's everyday environments. We know that the parents of children in day-care institutions want to co-operate with the staff about the child's cultural education, but too much to do and not enough time is often the greatest barrier for getting to the public library. So "the library must come to the children".

"Almost everyone regards the kindergarten libraries as a great advantage: the children get more interested in books, both parents and teachers read to them more often, and the children are better able to choose for themselves which books they want to have read to them (...). At the same time, the kindergarten library gives the librarians the chance to talk to the parents within the familiar frames of the institution." (cf. Lektor Elisabeth Hansen in *Noget at tale om*, p. 11-12).

These satellites presuppose the presence of the librarian and her co-operation with teachers and other professional groups in relation to their common cause: for example to stimulate the child's interest and pleasure in reading.

Co-operation in a totality-orientated strategy

The report *Børn og Kultur* encourages new partnerships, as a cultural policy with focus on the child has to build bridges between the different administrations and institutions where children live their lives.

Partnerships are far more binding than co-ordinating projects where different professions work together on arranging culture days, festivals etc. Entering into partnerships requires an awareness of ones own interests and an eye for possible advantages – a partnership indicates an active and binding co-operation – over a period of time.

Co-operating across professional cultures requires a thorough knowledge of one's own culture and other cultures and mutual respect is essential. The public library advocates mediation and spontaneous acquisition of knowledge, while the school emphasises learning processes and education (cf. Sven Nilsson). When working together both parties have to respect these attitudes, and concentrate on defining the project in such a way that it leaves room for the individual cultures while also creating a "third space", common to all. This means one has to keep an open mind and move together in the same direction.

The motives behind the co-operation might vary, and they may stem from the library, but they may also come from outside. In the project *På samme hammel* we have tried to identify motives that have social connotations and which at the same time represent library professional challenges. When Denmark for example was placed very low down on the list in international and Nordic reading surveys, there was a very strong general incentive to change that situation. The public libraries felt they had the materials, competencies and some of the tools, but knew that also day-care institutions, day-carers, the health authorities etc. were good allies if the message were to get through to all children and their parents. The action line called language stimulation and reading was targeted at the 5-8 year olds, thereby indirectly making sure of an inter-disciplinary co-operation between day-care institution, school, school library, pedagogical psychological advisory service, children and parents. But personal involvement and enthusiasm in the individual person is a must – the cause alone is not sufficient.

Time and learning are central concepts when developing partnerships. There must be time to get to know each other and learn about each other's worlds - to build up the essential common set of values and create an ideological platform. This is the basis for co-operation at a high level and good co-operation between the partners is the greatest driving force in any given project. If the common project is to be break new ground and provide energy for the future work, it must be based on the most recent knowledge and it might require course programmes and other forms of common competence development of the project participants. It is, however, also important that the project is both goaloriented and experimental, and in this context a process co-ordinator can be very valuable.

In his collective evaluation of *På samme hammel*, Dr. Sven Nilsson offers the following recipe for successfully developing a project across borders:

- Choose a common cause that requires inter-disciplinary qualifications which one cannot mobilise on one's own
- Formulate a clear common goal with definite requirements as to results, partial results and success criteria for everyone involved
- Steer your course according to the common goals instead of individual interests and professional/institution traditions
- Make time for many meetings in order to establish a common platform with well-functioning co-operation relations within the project group, and a stable, well-defined and efficient structure for the project's inner life with active project environments, networks and with close communication and visible and concrete results
- Be prepared to create well-functioning co-operation relations across borders by being open, unprejudiced and showing mutual respect

- Be prepared to break traditional professional barriers and make room for dialogue, reflection and change in the meeting with others in a common third space, where one can keep an open mind and with care and respect transcend the traditional borders, taking up new, visible roles and be prepared to reach consensus on new values, demands and expectations.
- Invest time in establishing good relations with the outside world so as to attract attention to the project and its role in a greater context – it creates legitimacy, recognition and consequently better backing from the authorities empowered to make grants, leaders and colleagues as well as an awareness of the relevance of the project and the importance of obtaining the necessary economic means and working hours. And one avoids being 'tripped up' by leaders and colleagues getting irritated about the number of meetings one has to attend etc.
- Allow for a reasonable period of time for getting to know each other, formulate common set of values and vision and altogether 'getting in step'
- Involve all participants in the process as early as possible
- Include theories, experts, project co-ordinators and process evaluators from outside who will inspire and assist in solving problems as they arise
- Communicate the project's idea, results, milestones, success stories and examples to colleagues, leaders, parents, politicians, etc.
- Create project environments and networks with close and frequent communication
- Develop and revise the project along the way – based on the dialogue
- Make sufficient time for the necessary dialogue and the handling of the development of both the project and one's own professional capabilities (on the basis of Dr. Sven Nilsson's evaluation of På samme hammel and the evaluation report *Det gode budskab*)

The co-operation can result in varying degrees of integration: premises, materials, staff. It is likely that in future the different professions can be used across corporate cultures. The citizens' need for support functions in their cultivation and education will for example indicate using the librarian's competencies in connection with school projects, the day-care institutions' language stimulating work and the municipalities' general and specific development work within the area of children's culture.

Knowledge, values, visions, willpower and joy

Preserving the public library as a relevant institution requires broad knowledge about the institution's history and perspectives for the future. It also requires a knowledge of society, the citizens' preferences and conditions of growth, the culture and potential co-operation partners.

The great volume of information must be sifted through and turned into knowledge as to what is the platform for the work of each individual public library and what is needed in the local community. Which policies, cases, relations would the public library want to tackle? Which values must form the basis for its work? It is essential that the librarian ensures that the co-operation projects do not threaten the public library's set of values, but on the contrary tests, enhances and challenges it.

Visions can be defined as an intentional direction, and it is necessary for the public library continually to announce the visions for the direction, content and methods of the work. It can be done in general, but it can also be done in connection with topical societal questions: for example integration, lifelong learning and children's culture. And the strategy contains excellent possibilities for highlighting the potentials of the public library, as well as possibilities for development of new methods and new co-operation relations. There must be a will to work in new ways and this means i.a. competence development and the realisation that the new methods and professional roles optimise the interplay with the citizens and are enriching both professionally and personally – in short makes sense.

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