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Danish Strategies in Public Library Services to ethnic minorities

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Abstract

A growing number of immigrants and refugees is a relatively new experience in Denmark. The handling of integration of ethnic minorities has in general not been very successful, but the library service has. Today the challenge is to develop services within the context of the hybrid library.

The development of these services is described. Beginning with the establishment of an Immigrant's Library giving access to books in the immigrant's own languages as well as to other library materials and continuing on to the present day where the library tries to be more proactive in its support to the process of integration.

A major step was taken in organising special information on the web in the mid nineteen-nineties for ethnic minorities in Denmark, which today has developed into a portal that gives local, national and global information in the eleven most frequently met languages in Denmark. Its purpose is to support integration of the minorities into the Danish Society.

Recently it was decided – based on the good result from some front-running libraries - to set up a project with four advisors that should help libraries develop lifelong learning activities and more direct advisory support to immigrants.

People differ and it is precisely the differences that represent the most powerful driving force in our lives. Man-woman, black-white, Muslim-Christian, pro or con ..whatever. The diversity is inspiring, stimulating and calls for further examination. But as we all know, differences may also invite conflicts. Ethnic differences are a classic source for stories and jokes. But sadly also for fear, scepticism and hostility. Ethnic differences are possibly the most frequent cause of wars in the history of the world, it is not only a question of outer territories, but also of inner territories. About codes of honour, codes of conduct which businessmen pay exorbitant prices to be instructed in as they are about to open new markets. Because even small false steps may be fatal. Even seen in this wider perspective, the minute corner of community life which is library service to ethnic minorities, is important. Like all library service it is, of course, also important to the individual person.

Ethnic origin is therefore a sensitive and serious matter which officially is handled with a maximum of political correctness if you belong to an ethnic majority – which I do.

My subject is Danish libraries' service to ethnic minorities and in particular the change of model which is happening right now.

The Danish Example

Denmark is a small country – one of the best niches in the world. Could there be anything in our handling of the professional task of giving library service to fellow citizens of other than Danish extraction which might be of general interest? I hope so. But from the point of view that we are newcomers in the field. We have not as the US a long and strong tradition for handling multi-cultural populations in any way. But that seems to be the case for most countries. At least in Europe you see more failures than success-stories in integrating ethnic minorities. And Denmark is a country of extreme homogeneity. The country has had a monarchy for more than 1000 years with a parliamentary democracy since 1849. Apart from an area 40 miles connected with the European continent, Denmark is surrounded by the sea which has brought inspiration, but has also been a protection against being invaded by hostile neighbours. Immigration has been insignificant till recently. A systematic major import of ethnic minorities has only taken place the past forty years. Some of the problems with this import are quite clearly reflected in the semantic dilemma: what are we going to call them when we talk about them? How do we perceive them? In the beginning, which was in the 1960s, we talked about 'guest workers', and this was meant quite sincerely. We imported labour for a brief space of time, because a 'boom' meant that we were unable to produce as much and as fast as we could sell by only employing people of Danish origin. But the guest workers stayed on – even though some found it very difficult to adapt and only managed to keep going by family reunification, that is to say import of wife and children and in the next generation via marriage to someone from the homeland. And now we began to talk about 'immigrants'. They kept coming and so did an increasing number of 'refugees' due to a growing global turbulence. The immigrants also got married and had children, they grew up and it is now a third generation of immigrants that contributes to the survival of mankind in Denmark, so now we talk about 'new Danes' or 'ethnic minorities'.

What is the problem? The issue about ethnic minorities is in a way quite simple and succinctly expressed by the Danish minister for integration: all is not well with the integration of ethnic

minorities in Denmark. For that matter, the situation is the same in most of the countries with which we tend to compare ourselves. So the Danish story may be interesting to many other countries. Perhaps the only country in the world with an effective model for 'integration' of ethnic minorities is America – and to a certain extent Canada and Australia. Where immigrants very quickly became ethnic majorities and 'cultural diversity' the rule rather than the exception. And where it was therefore not necessary to think in terms of 'integration programmes'.

Let us take a look at some figures. 7,7% of the Danish population were in 2002 of another ethnic origin than Danish. 47% of them have jobs. Only 53% of the 16-66 year olds in the group have a job. By way of comparison - employment frequency for ethnic Danes is 76%. To these rather alarming figures we might add others which reflect major social problems for ethnic minorities in Denmark. Like tendencies towards negative ghetto formations, a considerably higher frequency of offences against property and also sexual abuse. OECD's (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, an international organisation) investigations show that there is no progress from 2. to 3. generation immigrants in relation to these basic figures for integration into Danish society, which underlines the fact that unless we change course, we have a permanent problem. A Danish sociologist maintains that bad integration is the greatest threat against the Danish welfare society. Because in a welfare society we have to support those who are unable to support themselves – and their number keeps increasing – especially the number of fellow citizens of other than Danish origin. The more apparent the economic problems become, the greater the social tension.

The development of services

There is one consolation, though. Ethnic minorities are frequent visitors to the library, and Danish public libraries have a strong tradition of servicing ethnic minorities. The 'Guest worker collection' was established as early as the beginning of the 60s, as a cultured Denmark's offer to the kind people who had come here to work. In the classical library tradition, we wanted to offer them our library service and began to acquire books in particularly Turkish and Yugoslavic languages. Typically for the Danish tradition, the initiative came from a highly developed and well-equipped municipal public library – but it quickly developed into a government institution, The Public Libraries' Immigrant Library which today is integrated in the State and University Library in Aarhus. For a small country like Denmark with no traditions of cultural diversity, it proved no easy task to build up an immigrant library. During the 70s, 80s and 90s the number of refugees from all over the world increased and the immigrant library issue was dealt with in a professional way. As far as possible the selection of books was made according to the Danish criteria which include quality, topicality and diversity – and later other media followed, particularly music from more than 30 countries. A network was established as well as an expertise on many languages and cultures and at some point it also became necessary to register the collection in a library system that was able to handle many different alphabets. An extremely complicated task. The Immigrant Library was, and still is, a superstructure collection which lends requested works and depository libraries to Danish public libraries – often adapted to rather small groups and in recent years also for other kinds of institutions such as asylums.

For many years the concept remained the same as for the first 'guest worker collection': these people must have some – preferably good – library books in their own language. The idea was - and still is - to support and encourage people's personal development, education and identity on the basis of the culture they have been born into. In a way 'integration' was not a key concept for

the service during its first decades. But as the number of ethnic minorities increases, the demand for integration has become more urgent. Has this got anything to do with the library. Yes, it most certainly has.

The latest survey of ethnic minorities' use of the library: *Frirum til integration* (2001) (A space for integration) shows that in the larger Danish towns, ethnic minorities use the library more frequently than ethnic Danes do. And this is quite something, considering that the Danes are among the world's absolute top scorers when it comes to using the library.

One of the reasons for this keen usage is that the library really has something to offer and fulfils some real needs. A giant step in a new direction was taken in the mid-nineties by Århus City Library which at that time introduced a new service: access to Internet services to citizens – also of other ethnic origin than Danish. Initially the librarians constructed simple subject gateways where users via links could easily access for example newspapers and other news sources in their own language. At the time very few immigrants had access to Internet from their homes. The service was well marketed and quickly became a success.

The next step was to organise basic information on the Danish community and in particular on social and educational services that might be helpful to new citizens. And from that point it expanded into a well organised portal.

Today the portal FINFO (an acronym for Information for refugees) is organised in such a way as to provide both general information on the Danish society and local guides and explanations under headlines like New in Denmark, Education, Social security, Society, Work, Organisations, Culture so that all areas in Denmark are covered, 131 municipalities offering local information and support in the immigrants own language. The site now has a global links index with directories to various countries and continents. The information is available in the eleven most common immigrant languages in Denmark. Compared to a New York borough this is of course nothing to talk of. In Queens you may meet more than a hundred different languages, but in our national context it works well. Establishing local FINFO systems has meant local ownership of service to ethnic minorities, and the web site has a positive effect on other library services to the groups in question. The 'culture meeting' is a classic event staged by the library.

Danish integration policy is high on the present government's agenda. The government's policy has attracted attention at least in Europe, because it advocates a reduction in immigration to Denmark and this is done by tightening the rules for i.a. obtaining residency and family reunification considerably. It is also a clear policy that the task of integrating ethnic minorities be distributed between all local authorities. There is an obvious tendency to encourage civic society to work seriously for improved integration. And in practice there is a clear distinction between the German philosopher Habermas' concepts 'demos' and 'ethnos'. 'Demos' defines the people as a political concept, whereas ethnos defines the people as a cultural (religious) and linguistic concept. To put it quite simply one could say that the aim is a complete integration in relation to demos for all ethnic groups as far as social rights and obligations are concerned, and an acceptance of 'cultural diversity', to use a central EU concept, in relation to ethnos.

Seen in a Danish library perspective, it is obvious that public enlightenment – which is one of the library' domains – is meant to develop the general public and create empowered citizens. The public enlightenment which is needed in relation to ethnic minorities is the one that encourages

integration in relation to demos and respects ethnos. In other words: Yes to integration, no to assimilation. The objective is an integrated society with a rich 'cultural diversity' and not a situation which could be termed 'multicultural'. It is in this light that the latest initiatives in library service to the minorities should be seen.

The Danish National Library Authority has launched a project where four ethnic library co-ordinators/advisers operating in different areas in the country are going to work together with the libraries in their region on developing new services. The challenge is simple: can the libraries' good relations with ethnic minorities be used as a springboard for a more forceful role in the work for integration? Or to put it differently: Can 'lifelong learning' inspire a method for development? Questions arise like: Can we advance the creation of networks? Can we help identify areas which have to be dealt with in order to further integration? Can the library's resources be exploited more fully to provide the kind of learning which extends a person's competencies? Can the library assist with writing job applications, run computer-literacy programmes and support self-help in relation to competence-development? Can the library be a guiding force for immigrants attempting to find their way through the Danish jungle? Of course it can. It already acts in this way in several libraries that have been aware of their users' needs, and the results are encouraging. What we try to do by running this project is to turn all libraries to deal with these user-groups more proactively in introducing new services interfering more directly in the lives of their users.

The "Objectives" section of the Danish library act points us in the right direction: to further information, education and cultural activity. We are in fact trying to meet the needs of an increasing number of different groups and have clearly been inspired by the very positive experiences we have drawn from the work done by the children's cultural co-ordinators. Here too the point of reference is the life conditions of the target group and not the library as an institution. One could maintain that this is something we learned in the very childhood of the information society, but sometimes one has to be grown-up in order to apply this knowledge: Awareness of the importance of the target group concept is of the utmost importance when talking about mediation.

The perspective

The perspective is quite simple too. The project on ethnic minorities is just one among many readjustments that change the library from being an institution which could more or less be characterised as a book centre, into an information and resource centre with at least three important characteristics: by focusing on the needs of the target group, it goes beyond the classic library task of passively making materials available. It becomes out-reaching, confronting and forcefully insistent. Secondly it exploits the networking possibilities by creating an interplay between services on the Internet and personal services from the library. Thirdly it integrates the library's service more in every-day life, as it endeavours to make a difference in relation to a great variety of ordinary every-day problems where concrete knowledge is all-important.

A new library concept

This is in fact the point. The vision for this concept is the hybrid library where help is always just a click away and where net-transmitted information can be followed up by personal guidance,

learning and instruction. The hybrid library will reach another level in relation to the user. It will be integrated in your working life and your daily life because in principle it is always at hand – all round the clock. The hybrid library will encourage information, education and cultural activity through competence development in a lifelong process, it will cultivate active citizenship – note that citizenship is a keyword in relation to several European Union-programmes - it will support personal development in a much more versatile way than the traditional library could, and it will develop the 'culture meeting' as a source of inspiration. It will mean a change of model in library service which can be summed up in the librarian's change of role into more of an advisory capacity, one who takes an active stand and advises on the basis of a personal individual profile. The library becomes more focused on the user than on itself as an institution. The cross-sectorial network co-operation becomes a means to greater efficiency in the services to the citizens. The library will then be moving in another space of action where the emphasis is on developing services and regular programmes. If we look specifically at the ethnic minorities, we can certainly imagine programmes and services which are directed firstly at general social and cultural information and secondly at competence development. Generally in relation to the Danish language and specifically as regards personal professional competencies. And thirdly – active help with integration and advice, for example help with job applications, language training goals and actual meetings with Danish culture. Fourthly, support for personal development, for example with materials that improve the knowledge of one's own ethnic background and the relationship to other cultures.

A brand-new service opened as a web based support and reference-service run by the State- and University Library's Immigrant-division, offering special support to female ethnic minorities that often face cultural conflicts related to the various expectations to their behaviour from various cultures.

What do we want? It is very easy to compile a list of wishes

As regards the target group ethnic minorities we want to obtain: higher employment as a result of increased competence development. We want better integration – leading to fewer social problems. We want to see a more enthusiastic involvement in Danish community life by the ethnic minorities, we want a constructive cultural dialogue and a better quality of life for ethnic minorities in Denmark.

As regards the local authorities we want a more conscious effort to improve the interplay between the relevant parties in the integration process: the library as bridge-builder and integrator in relation to educational institutions, social authorities, police, employment service – all with a view to maximum exploitation of resources.

As regards the libraries we would like greater target fulfilment: this means a more proactive strategy in relation to various target groups, stronger networking with related institutions and associations, and a staff competence development which enables them to transcend the institutional barriers and which might become the decisive success factor.

If we glance at these targets for the national library strategy, the enterprise outlined is perfectly suited for the development of the hybrid library: It is a question of creating an interplay between virtual and real services, creating at national level a library.dk portal with constant development

of relevant net services, for example FINFO, and subsequent new services. It is a question of web-based learning in an interplay between library and other parties – and it is a question of a constant differentiation of the services. One could imagine the excellent reference service 'Net librarian' getting a special FINFO department, run by librarians with special qualifications for handling integration questions – preferably librarians of other ethnic origin than Danish.

The goal is simple: The library must deliver services which are rewarding and enriching, whether they be virtual or real. The library must become more flexible as a centre for information, learning and culture. There must be plenty of space for the 'culture meeting' and the dialogue, bringing about a more harmonious integration as well as a personal development which can be accommodated in the Danish community.