



Loads of books in the mother tongue make the child a happy one!
Babel Children – a library project on books and services to dual language families.

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Abstract

Experiences and results from the cooperative project between the Multilingual Library and the National Centre for Multicultural Education. The project's task is to implement some of the initiatives in The Government's Strategy Plan, Equal Opportunities in Education in Practice from 2003 (rev. 2006). Babel Children has provided us with the opportunity to monitor projects linked to schools, preschools and libraries concerning reading- and language stimulation, both in Norwegian and in the children's different mothers tongue. The experiences has strengthened our focus on the task and helped us to develop new services to children.

What is the Multilingual Library?

What is the Multilingual Library (ML)?

The Multilingual Library (ML) is affiliated with the Deichmanske bibliotek / Oslo Public Library. The ML is a national centre of expertise for library services to language minorities in Norway. Our main task is to assist and enable local libraries nationwide to provide good library services to their patrons, the general public. We accomplish this by purchasing and cataloguing books spanning a total of 30 languages, which are then offered on loan to libraries across the entire country. We also provide extensive guidance and advisory information services to libraries, schools and other public institutions within our field.

The ML has a large collection of children's books. Large quantities of children's books in Urdu were purchased from India in the 1970's to meet the needs of the increasing number of Pakistani immigrant workers. This formed the basis of the collections that were built up over the course of the next 30 years.

Political winds of change

The ML has been subjected to the consequences of changes in political trends and climate with regard to the educational services minority language groups are offered. Funds were readily

available during the initial period, and just about “everything” on offer was purchased, and in large quantities. Belts were tightened in the 1990’s, and we found ourselves forced to prioritise.

Teaching in mother tongues in the school system has been the subject of debate. The right to education in one’s mother tongue was proposed as a legislative measure on several occasions, but has never been adopted. Until the closing years of the 1980’s, the aim of such teaching was nonetheless that the pupils should acquire functional multilingual skills. Special funding was allocated to schools to provide mother tongue or bilingual teaching, and it was quite usual that this was provided to pupils up to and including the fourth school year. Such funding is however no longer available, and it is now up to the local political establishment to decide if and how this type of education and teaching will be offered. The result of this is that there are many places where it is no longer available. Where it had previously been recognised that learning the mother tongue had a value in itself, bilingual teaching is now considered simply to be a tool used to achieve the goal of learning Norwegian.

This attitude has had a major influence on the use of the Multilingual Library’s collection of children’s books. Norway is a small country with fewer than 4.5 million inhabitants. Of the total number of students in the basic school system, 7 % are bilingual, and in Oslo the figure is 36 %. On the basis of this, we feel strongly that our children’s books are not being used to the children’s best in the school system. Circulation should be greater than it is. Many bilingual children are unable to read books in the family’s mother tongue. Teachers fail to recognise books in a number of different languages as an important and natural part of the education of these pupils, and they do not use such books actively in the classroom. This also applies to bilingual teachers and mother tongue teachers, who fail to use the services of the library to the degree we feel they should. Many minority language parents shrink from reading to their children in their own language, due to the low status minority languages have in the school system and in Norwegian society in general.

Better times ahead?

The situation is, however, undergoing change. The Government’s Strategy Plan, Equal Opportunities in Education in Practice from 2003 (revised in 2006), lists five main objectives and 38 initiatives for achieving improved learning for and greater participation of minority language groups in preschool, primary school, and higher education. Several of the initiatives emphasise the importance of offering books in the pupils’ own languages, and improving cooperation with libraries. In addition to this, we have the national plan called Make Time for Reading (2003-2007), which is designed to stimulate reading and improve reading skills. This plan places special emphasis on providing positive reading experiences for minority language pupils, adapted to their language skills and cultural backgrounds. A new framework plan was published in 2006 describing the syllabus and tasks of the preschool, where the cultural and language multiplicity represented by the children is one of the main focus areas.

In the wake of these state-sponsored plans and documents, we have seen the emergence of small and large projects and events where the Library has a role to play. There is a clear and obvious renewal of interest in and understanding of the fact that children need books in the language they know best, and we in the library are experiencing a definite increase in interest in the books, and in the services we can offer. In addition to this, funding from the government has increased during recent years, and for the first time in many years we are now able to actively, and with defined goals, develop our collections and services, without being forced to operate within strict financial limitations.

Babel Children

The new frameworks within which we are now working have also made possible Babel Children, a cooperative project between the Multilingual Library and the National Centre for Multicultural

Education (NAFO). NAFO'S task is to ensure that the strategic plan can be implemented. Babel Children has provided us with the opportunity to monitor projects linked to schools, preschools and libraries, all linked to one of the 38 initiatives in the plan. These are all small projects, promoted by local interests and based on a previously existing engagement. We have had two objectives in participating in the project, one to clarify what among our services and material is most often in demand and how we can best satisfy this demand, and the other to study cooperative models between libraries and other institutions.

The Library is here!

Our initial experience was that many were not aware of the work carried out by the Library. It transpired that the services and materials offered by the ML were a well-kept secret for many teachers, preschool staff, university employees, and for many at various levels of the public administration. This came as a great surprise to us! During the past year we have expended a great deal of time and effort in travelling around the country to inform a larger audience than we traditionally have had contact with, consisting mainly of other libraries. We have found that the basic act of going out and informing people of our existence is clearly quite necessary. It also provides the desired result; we are now receiving more queries from those we previously had little or no direct contact with, in particular from preschools, and have received invitations to participate in lectures and provide input and articles in a number of connections.

What can be found in the Library?

When individuals and institutions become aware of our existence, they often approach us with great expectations about what we can do for them. They would love to have beautifully produced and bound children's books in the most seldom of African languages, and preferably in an edition that is also sub-texted in Norwegian. Or they would like a songbook with all the well-known and cherished children's songs translated into all languages, complete with a CD so the pupils can listen to the tunes. Anyone who works with books from all over the globe is well aware of the great differences in what can be acquired in the various languages, and that much of that which we would like to have simply doesn't exist.

Those who approach the Library with the expectation that they will find the same range and wealth of books in all languages as that which is available in for example Norwegian, Danish, or English, will without doubt be disappointed. Our second priority was therefore to spread the word about what we could and could not obtain. We travelled throughout the nation with suitcases full of books in Urdu, Arabic, Kurdish, and Somali, and gave people the opportunity to leaf through them. We talked about conditions for children's books in many countries, the framework under which they are written, we talked about religious, political and moral frameworks, about economic conditions and about reading skills and illiteracy. This has provided useful knowledge to many of our clients, and allowed them to adjust their expectations so that they can make use of the Library's materials and services in a more realistic and efficient way.

The various projects in brief

There have been a number of small projects around the country that, although the focus and method had been slightly different, have all concentrated on the use of literature and libraries.

The ML's contribution has been for the most part to offer our usual library services, but with closer contact and follow-up than usual, and often without the local library acting as the middleman.

We have received a great many queries for information and advice on languages, literature and library use. Contact has been by e-mail, in meetings and during visits.

Aside from this, we have worked part of the time in selecting literature for use in the various projects.

Some have worked with so-called "reading friend" schemes, where the older schoolchildren read for preschool children in the mother tongues they have in common. The challenge has been to

choose books that can both capture the imagination of small children, and that the older children are capable of and enjoy reading out loud, or communicating by other means.

Others have had reading-out-loud projects in cooperation with adult education institutions, where mothers read fairytales out loud in their respective mother tongues, while the fairytale is read consecutively in Norwegian. By delving into our collections, we have selected books and stories that are suited to such arrangements.

A number of preschools have chosen to concentrate especially on language and terminology teaching, and have requested illustrated books and picture books in the languages used in the preschool. This can prove to be a problem in cases where there is a requirement for a language that we either cannot obtain or that has no printed literature.

A number of preschools wish to build up their own collections of books in the minority languages, and we have offered purchasing assistance in connection with acquiring bilingual books from, among other sources, the English publishers MantraLingua. Although the publisher does have a good and easy-to-use web site, the majority nevertheless prefer to purchase such books through the Library. The experiences we have gained through the projects have not been revolutionary; though we do feel that we have taken a step closer toward the end users, we have not identified any special needs of which we have not previously been aware. This notwithstanding, the work we have put into the Babel Children Project has been useful to us.

Good local contact is necessary!

It has become quite obvious that good cooperation at the local level is of prime importance. Many preschools, schools and after-school projects are failing to co-operate as well as they could with the local library, and are therefore unaware of the potential the library can offer in connection with working with children who speak minority languages. If the ML is to be able to offer the best possible services, we are totally dependent on the local libraries functioning as links between us and the end users, and that they have good contact with the local environment and the needs and wishes there. We will continue to emphasise the importance of such contact to both the libraries and others.

Borrow books from the library

Several preschools have asked for assistance in purchasing their own books and we have complied with these requests during the project period. Although it may appear to be advantageous to own the books, the advantages of borrowing from the Library are many. The Library will always have a larger, better and more varied assortment of books than a single preschool can build up using its own resources. Through the Library, one has access to an increasing number of new books at no charge. It doesn't get better than that! It is important that the Library is in contact with the trends and needs of the local environment. Children must be familiar with visiting a library from a very early age, and the preschools and schools must inform the Library of their wishes and needs.

For many years, the ML has offered its services in purchasing books in minority languages to local libraries as a supplement to the borrowed books, and we have developed streamlined cooperative routines for this service. Purchases for other types of institutions than libraries demand extra work, and can also contribute to undermining the desired framework of local cooperation.

Development of the collections and purchasing policy

Babel Children has resulted in the ML now having greater focus on our services to children. In the period prior to the project we expended a great deal of effort on developing the collections, scrapping obsolete material and revising our purchasing policy. During the spring and summer of 2006 we weeded out approximately half the books in our collections, (both adults' and children's books), the majority of which were over 15 years old. This gave the collections a much-needed facelift.

The project has provided us with the opportunity to acquire in-depth and detailed knowledge of the content and quality of our children's books in all languages. We have also gained experience of the

type of books desired by our users, and those that are not so attractive. In the immediate future we will work on the development of specific and dedicated purchasing routines and weeding plans for children's books, and we will also develop routines for closely monitoring the use of the collections.

Bilingual books

Bilingual children's books, books texted in the mother tongue and English, are greatly appreciated by both preschools and other institutions, in that such books offer many advantages when working with groups of children with a variety of mother tongues. During recent years we have purchased everything we could find of such books, and they will continue to be an important part of the services offered to minority language children.

There is a great need for bilingual books with Norwegian text. However, the costs involved and the fact that the market is small means that the financial advantages for Norwegian publishers are almost nonexistent. Together with the English publishers MantraLingua, the ML has produced five titles in five major immigrant languages. The books are sold on to libraries and other institutions at cost price, and distributed solely through the ML.

Two of these titles make up the so-called Islamic Package, comprising two picture books that show positive sides of Islamic culture that are not otherwise clearly seen in the public arena. The books have several areas of use, and in addition to language training in both Norwegian and the mother tongue, also present the cultural, linguistic and religious multiplicity children of today experience on a day-to-day basis. Response to the books has been excellent. The Norwegian Government wishes to make 2008 a year of celebration of cultural multiplicity, and has proposed the so-called t "Year of Diversity". Our contribution will be a travelling exhibition based on the books in the Islamic Package. We will also offer the exhibition "The Magic Mantle", which was produced on the initiative of the Swedish Public Library, to libraries nationwide.

Songs and music, rhymes and rules

We have recently commenced building up a collection of music and songs from all over the globe. We have found that there is also an urgent need for books with nursery rhymes, and we will concentrate especially on this in the future. We are also looking at the idea of constructing an Internet-based database of children's songs and rhymes in many languages, where libraries, preschools and others can log in and download material in a number of languages in both text and sound.

Multimedia

Pedagogic CD's for children is a service offered by the library that has proved to be very popular, and we have started to purchase programmes that are specially adapted for bilingual children. Together with the Children's and Youth Department at the Oslo Public Library and Basta Illustrasjon & Design, the ML has translated and digitalised the well-known Norwegian author Tor Åge Bringsværd's illustrated book "When two are angry with each other". The book is available on the Internet in Norwegian and Somali, Urdu and Kurdish versions with text and speech.

Brochure for parents

The attitudes and participation of parents is one of the most important factors in children's learning, and it is vital to reach parents with this message. Cooperation between the preschool, school and home in Norway is close, and much of the child's social and educational development is based on this contact.

Many adults with minority backgrounds have an experience from a school system that does not involve the family. Many have minimum education, and many do not have a tradition of reading together with their children. We have therefore begun to develop a brochure aimed at parents on

reading, language stimulation and making use of libraries. The brochure will be available on our website in the major immigrant languages in Norway.

Increased personnel resources

As a consequence of the increased focus on services to children, the ML now has a new position with special responsibility for the children's collections.

Babel Children on the Internet

The most important product that has resulted from the project is the Internet site Babel Children. It is here that we gather our resources and knowledge of children's literature in all languages, and it is our hope that the site will become a forum for the exchange of ideas, wishes and practical experience for libraries and other interested parties.