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|   | <p style="text-align: right;">Date : 08/06/2007</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Cooperation for better libraries</b></p> <p><b>Anna Birgitta Eriksson</b><br/> Rinkeby, Stockholm<br/> Sweden</p> |
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**Abstract**

*My message is very simple in theory, less so in practice: cooperation leads to interesting projects, new knowledge and ideas and is necessary for the development of library services.*

*In Sweden, most children come to the library with their parents and/or with their preschool or school classes. The preschool services are well developed. However, school children need a more elaborated service than the public library can give, a service that should be provided by a school library.*

*To be successful the school library needs to cooperate with others, and I give some examples of what such cooperation can consist in.*

*School libraries work in very close contact with its users and get much knowledge about their reading activities, their difficulties and their progress, a knowledge that is interesting also to the public library for the development of its services. The public library has a stock that it is interesting for the school library to have access to. With joint capacity and efforts progress can be made.*

Public libraries are by definition poor, scarce and with a small number of staff compared to schools and other institutions working with children and families. So, in the late seventies as the libraries in Sweden were richer than they have ever been before or after, children’s librarians started to think about how to reach every child in their community with the library’s blessings we soon realized that we needed to

collaborate with those others to be able to do so. Not all children and families came spontaneously to the library and its activities.

Schools and daycare institutions were already on the list. School classes were received for book talk, story telling, and research activities, but not to the extent that all children were involved. Now, we invited the health care institutions to participate in the language development of the children. New parents were given a ticket they could take to the library and exchange it for a book as a gift. At the same time the library services could be presented to the parent. Groups of parents with babies on education were invited to a library visit. Then the librarian could talk about the language development and its connection to reading and recommend books both for the parent and the baby. Brochures were produced containing texts about the importance to talk and read to the child, as well as lists of recommended books. These were given to the parents by the health care institution at the different regular meetings that they have with the child and its parents between and 0 and 6 years of age. These brochures were also produced in the most common immigrant languages.

The result is that more than 90% of the children in Sweden actually come to the library - at least in the preschool ages. This is a statistical breakthrough, but what does it really say about reading and the need for library services? How shall we proceed to develop the services?

### *School libraries*

Service to preschool institutions is mainly a relatively uncomplicated matter of borrowing books that adults read to children. The same kind of service to schools is not sufficient, as now the children are supposed also to read for themselves and start to use the library for learning. Here, there is a need for assistance from somebody who knows a great deal about books and library resources as well as about the children, that is to say the librarian, the teacher and parents.

However, the success of the public libraries made many schools at some point close down their libraries thinking that the public libraries could do the job. But in the 1990s public library budgets in Sweden decreased considerably and many branch

libraries were closed down, which meant that some of the contact with the public and their reading activities was lost. This means that necessary feedback is lost, a feedback that can be provided by the school librarian. So you need both – school library and the public library, and if you have a good relationship it will be rewarding for both of them.

Taking the class to a public library, even if it is on a regular basis, is not the same thing as going to the school library. The stock is different and built up for another purpose than a pedagogic one. Normally, the public library cannot go into a close collaboration with individual teachers and classes except for special projects

One such exceptional project went on in Rinkeby in 1995-1998. A children's librarian in the public library devoted some ten hours a week to one class in one school in a reading and writing project inspired from the New Zealandic "whole language" method. It was a normal Rinkeby class with 100% second language learners. They used children's literature instead of school books, they read lots and lots of books, wrote their own books, they painted, they made theatre, they made lots of study visits in different places etc. The result, when tested afterwards, was that for the first time a Rinkeby class made results that were over the average for the schools in Stockholm. Now these children have finished school, and those who are not in the university have a proper profession and have not gone into unemployment, as many other Rinkeby youngsters do.

This project led to another exceptional thing: the installation of libraries with trained librarians in all schools in Rinkeby. The quality of the school libraries in Sweden is very varied. Normally, school libraries in school for young children are run by teachers or some other person with few hours in the library per week and with no or little training for the job. Such conditions do not encourage the development of library activities and certainly not cooperation with other libraries. So the situation in Rinkeby is quite unique.

*Why cooperate? And how?*

When building up a library it is of course very good to have colleagues to discuss with because all the time there are decisions to make. But a library is seldom self sufficient

and certainly not school libraries. School libraries have a limited public, a public that – at least when it comes to the children – changes considerably from year to year and with them the need for material. Even if the curriculum is the same it has to be adjusted to the pupils. It is neither possible nor desirable to buy talking books corresponding to the needs of just a few pupils or books in languages with few speakers in the school if you can require such material from another library as a loan.

In order to use the media resources of several libraries a mutual computer system is a very good tool, preferably an online system where you can see what is available at the moment and where you can reserve the required item directly, and a sending service. We have a functioning interlibrary lending system in Sweden that has made many projects possible.

Thanks to that a class could do a “musical” out of a classical book that is not available in book shops, *Klas Klättermus och de andra djuren i Hackebackeskogen* (*Klas Climbing Mouse and the other animals in the Hackebacke forest*) by Torbjörn Egner, a Norwegian writer and composer. Books were borrowed from the public library. The children read and worked on the book in different ways and in the end they made a performance with the teacher as the teller of the story and the 8 year old children acted and sang the songs belonging to it. They showed the performance to other classes in the school. I found the performance very charming and asked the public library if they were not interested in having a performance in the library. They were, and when people from other schools had seen it, the class was engaged for more performances in the other schools. The success made the teacher contact another school in a village at some distance from Rinkeby. A journey was made, another performance was made, and the children could get to know children with a very different background than their own – an important experience for them.

It is not easy to sort out what is the role of the library in different projects. The library provides material at different stages, but some of the are more important than others. Here, the library was involved at the start in the decision of starting it. When the books were provided the project went on and performances were made in the school. That would have been the end of it if the librarian hadn't proposed a continuation .

Another project that was taken to the school by the school library was initiated by the Stockholm City library. It concerns the enlargement of the central library, a very prestigious building from 1928 created by our most famous architect, Gunnar Asplund. An architectural competition has been held, and now children in some areas were invited to present their visions of the future library. Some material for model building, an architect and some study visits were offered, and my task here was to find a teacher willing to take on the project. I did, but here I had to act as an intermediary between two cultures, that of teachers and that of librarians. My teacher wanted to skip the project before the start because he found the planning too poor and not structured enough to present to the class. Since I know how librarians and others in the culture business work, I could convince him to stay on. It worked very well, and afterwards there were exhibitions made at several libraries and at the museum of architecture in Stockholm where the children's models were presented together with the six professional proposals from which a winner is going to be chosen.

Here the school library has acted as an intermediary between the public library and the school staff to create contacts and bridge the gap between the different professional cultures.

Museums are often good external partners for projects. In Sweden they have a general commission to devote a proper part of their work to children, which means that they have interesting programs for school classes. The library is a good place to prepare such visits, which sometimes can lead to interesting projects. One such project where school classes in Rinkeby succeed each other is on folk culture. A class visits a permanent exhibition in the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, and from that they compare, discuss and define what is their own folk culture. There is a corner in the museum's exhibition where the result is shown.

It is time saving to use ongoing events, such as the world book day because there are ideas to pick up and sometimes also material available. One such event that takes place in November every year all over Scandinavia is a reading event called *Kura skymning/kura gryning* – which could be translated as *storytelling at dawn/dust*. It is promoted by two cooperating organizations who choose one or two texts – for adults

and for children – that are supposed to be read aloud at the same time all over Scandinavia, for schools in the morning and for libraries etc in the evening. Some years ago there was a text by the Danish writer and storyteller Hans Christian Andersen. The head master agreed that it was a good idea to participate in the event and it was decided that the whole school should do so. We presented the project well in advance, and the whole school did participate. Several classes took the chance to use Andersen as a main project during that semester in reading, writing, painting, playing theatre, puppet theatre etc. That year there was a whole day of plays, film, and exhibitions produced during the project, and some paintings stayed in the school's entrance for a long time.

In this, the library initiated an event promoted by some external organizations for a reading event for the whole school. In projects that are meant to involve the participation of the whole school it is important that the head of the school supports the thing. Otherwise it is likely that some classes will not, and that is very sad for the children that are left out.

Don't expect teachers to be enthusiastic just because you have an interesting project. Some will be but others just will not go beyond their planning. If you really want one of those to be on your project, you have to prove very clearly in advance that this project fits perfectly in their plans. The children, on the other hand, go for everything that they find interesting, so for them you just have to find an opening. You can do things that may seem very difficult that comes out very well. One example of this is a project with 11 year old children on Mevlana Rumi, the sufi poet who was born 800 years ago this year. On the opening of their exhibition after the project at Rinkeby library they sat for almost an hour and listened to Persian songs and music inspired by Mevlana Rumi's poems, and afterwards they had lots of questions.

Making things possible economically or in other ways is another good reason for cooperation. When inviting writers, theater groups, musicians or other artists it will cost less for each partner if more than one performance can be arranged. Or, as when there are authors from other countries visiting Stockholm, we can arrange for more children to meet one speaking and writing in their mother tongue if we can bring children from several schools together. In this the school libraries and the public

library in the area work together to initiate, invite and arrange for children from different classes and schools to come together for the event.

Speaking of authors, I have to mention Gunilla Lundgren because she is such a wonderful person to cooperate with. She is specialized in writing together with children and she works a lot in Rinkeby thanks to a good cooperation climate. Every year, she makes a project with children of 14-15 years of age from two schools in Rinkeby on the Nobel prize winner of the year. He/she is invited to Rinkeby library where the children present their work at a ceremony and give it to him/her. Together with a colleague and a South African school class she has made a very nice and useful book called *In our world*, a book where the South African children draw and tell about themselves, their family, school, playground etc. This book is meant to be completed by others, because there is room left in the book for a new author to write about his/her life starting from the text and the pictures. Using this model, another book, *Who can catch the Ostrich?*, was produced in cooperation with a Rinkeby school and some schools in Grahamstown, South Africa.

Cooperation doesn't have to start in a specific project. It is a good thing sometimes to meet with people who in some way have common interests. At some point we had some troublesome children in my public library. Talking to others who worked with children in the neighborhood we found that all of us had problems with the same ones. Just to know that was comforting, but then we could go further together and when the children realized that they were focused on the problems could be sorted out. However, we had started something together and found that we wanted to do more so we arranged a carnival. This was a success and was to be repeated and grow into a feast for the district that went on for many years, maybe it still does.

### *Cooperation/service*

Library work is very much about giving service to people. As I hope I have shown here, cooperation is something else. Teachers sometimes think they cooperate just because they take their class to the library, but cooperation means that you do something together to achieve something or to make the service become better. It means activity from more than one part.

### *Problems*

Some people are easier to cooperate with than others. For a good result it is fundamental that you can come to an understanding and you don't have to struggle your way through. As a librarian you have to find ways to work with everybody in the school but when it comes to cooperation it is inevitable that you will work more together with certain classes because their teachers are interested in cooperating or simply because you function well together. This should not stop you, because good projects are rewarding for the whole school in that they create a positive climate and in the end are inspiring for all.

In a school it is not at all self evident to include the library when planning activities and you have to keep your eyes and ears open and be prepared to propose material, solutions or whatever when you find there is something that you want to cooperate about. Likewise, you should not be astonished if your contributions are totally forgotten when the thing is over, unless you have been there all the time and that is seldom the case. When the goal is reached, the road that took you there is forgotten. On that road the library has intervened one or several times but is not seen as a part of the job.

Librarians and teachers may have the same goals and work with the same children but the professional cultures and the way of thinking are different.

### *Bonus*

Being a school librarian is a solitary job in the sense that you are often the only one of your profession. Cooperation with other librarians in other schools or libraries means contacts with persons who speak the same professional language. Cooperation with persons with other professions often means getting totally different views on matters. In both cases there is a possibility for development.

One very nice thing about being a school librarian is that you often can see the result of your work. Public libraries rely much on statistics, but in a school library you see results in a very concrete way, as progress in reading capacity, in presentation of

projects etc. There are also very apparent challenges from children not wanting to participate in one way or another. In short, you have close relations to many children, you see much more of their difficulties and struggle to learn, of their culture and their daily life than you do in a public library. This knowledge is interesting and necessary also to the public library in how to use their resources to create a good library. It gives feedback, new knowledge and ideas making new projects and progress possible both for the public library and the school library.