



## World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

### "Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

*Conference Programme:* <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

*June 14, 2005*

**Code Number:**  
**Meeting:**

**130-E**  
**87 SI - Libraries for Children and Young Adults**

### **Eenie, Meenie, Miney, Mo**

#### **Overview of Norwegian public libraries and their services to children and young adults – and some challenges for the future**

#### **Leikny Haga Indergaard**

Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority  
Oslo, Norway

For more than two hundred years Norway has had a public library system open to all. The first reading societies (Leseselskap) were established in the 18th century and were founded on the belief in knowledge and reason fostered by the Age of Enlightenment. Libraries were granted financial support from the government as early as 1851.

During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century separate sections for children and young people were set up by public libraries in the larger towns. Norwegian librarians were initially trained in the USA and consequently brought back certain ideas with regard to library services. The American model from the 1880s placed the emphasis on children's departments as a pedagogic, social and cultural initiative. Literature was presented in an active way through story-telling sessions and exhibitions.

In Oslo the Deichman Library began co-operating with the school system from about 1920, among other measures inviting classes to visit the library. Work carried out at the Deichman Library established a general pattern for the development of library services for children and young people and for co-operation between school libraries and public libraries. It was not until 1985, however, that public libraries were obliged by law to provide for children under a decree that library services should be available to "everybody living in Norway"

Today Norway has a well-developed library system and can point to increased activity in recent years. The Norwegian Library Act requires all municipalities to have a public library with a professionally qualified chief librarian. All public libraries must be part of the Norwegian library network and co-operate in joint activities, such as inter-library lending. Built on the Anglo-American model, Norwegian public libraries are by tradition well developed and well equipped.

Norwegian public libraries are owned and financed by their owners, namely the municipalities and counties. The Norwegian Library Act decrees that libraries are for everybody and that the service to the public shall be free of charge. The Library Act gives children and young adults common rights to equal library services as for adults.

Schools represent an important partner for the Norwegian public library system. The law demands that public and school libraries in each and every municipality shall have in place agreements on co-operation in order to ensure the best possible service for the municipality's children and young people.

Since the 1970s we have witnessed an exciting development and modernisation of the public library sector, the lead in innovation being taken by the children's libraries and their staff. Attention shifted from the books and the improvement of collections to the children themselves, to their development and their need for activity, also in a library. The signs demanding silence, once a feature of any library caricature, disappeared for good in the 1970s and this happened first of all in the children's section. Many of the changes introduced into the library system started in children's libraries, including a freer arrangement of book shelves, large open rooms, stronger colours, more comfortable seats, greater emphasis on exhibitions and presentation of the media, and more activities in general. A lively discussion arose concerning children and culture, not least popular culture and comics. In the 1970's there arose a strong conviction that political action could change things for the better. In a society with obvious social and economic divides and an expanding cultural and media market, the aim was to offer children conditions of equality and leisure centres free of commercial influences.

Norwegian public libraries have a long tradition of developing good services for children and young people and of promoting the rich relationship between reader and text. Libraries are local centres of culture with a special knowledge of new and interesting literature for the young, of presentation and the pleasures of reading. The county libraries offer their professional expertise in these areas, giving advice to the local public libraries and arranging courses for their staff. The government's contribution with regard to library services for children and young people consists of defining aims and strategies on a national level, initiating and supporting projects and nation-wide campaigns to heighten an interest in literature and fostering measures to ensure the survival of Norwegian as a cultural language.

## **Central initiatives and projects**

### **Literature for children and young adults**

Today, Norway appears to have entered a new golden age of literature for children and young adults with a greater number of authors being translated into different languages than ever before. As part of the effort to maintain and develop Norwegian culture and language the government has established a purchasing programme for contemporary

fiction and non-fiction literature in Norway, distributing children's books to libraries throughout Norway. The reading public benefits from the programme by finding complete collections of modern fiction in their local public library, however small it may be. Bringing together a book and its reader in this way is really what the programme is all about.

### **The art of presentation**

"Children are not simply empty vessels and therefore our attitude towards them should be based on cultural exchange between representatives of two different cultures, that of children and that of adults. Ideally therefore the dissemination of culture should be a matter of cultural exchange, where children and adults both give and take." Gunnar Danbolt, professor of art history.

Being able to read is a necessity in our enlightened society, and children's libraries play a vital role. Stimulating children's cultural competence is almost the exact parallel to that of stimulating reading ability. The link between attitudes towards reading and the acquisition of good reading skills is well documented. To encourage children's joyful exploration of books and to maintain this interest throughout an entire course of schooling is a major task for librarians.

### **Make room for reading!**

#### **A strategy to stimulate a love of reading and the acquisition of knowledge**

The Norwegian government has now launched a strategy to encourage school children's interest in reading and thus improve their ability to read. Every school shall have a strategy for reading at all levels and there is a greater emphasis on co-operation with libraries in order to fulfil these aims.

The background to this strategic plan lies in the fact that an international survey carried out by PISA (Programme for International Students Assessment) revealed poor reading skills among Norwegian pupils, thus arousing considerable political concern. The plan will be carried out during the period 2003-2007. School libraries are to be better provided for and greater use by pupils will be encouraged for both project work and leisure reading. Co-operation with the public libraries will be central to the plan and the resources of the cultural sector will play an important role in its implementation. The Ministry of Education sees considerable potential in greater co-operation at local level, enabling better use of common resources within both school and public libraries. One initiative should naturally be that all school classes are invited to visit their public library, so as to introduce pupils to the benefits available.

### **The National Programme for Arts and Culture in Education**

The government has also launched a cultural initiative for children aimed at ensuring that pupils in the primary and lower secondary school are offered a professional arts and culture programme that will provide them with the opportunity of making themselves familiar with and developing a positive approach to art and cultural activities of all kinds. The programme shall "contribute to an overall incorporation of artistic and cultural expression in the realisation of the school's learning objectives". Furthermore, the great majority of cultural institutions and many other organisations are involved in providing art and culture for schools

This programme, familiarly known as “The Cultural Schoolbag”, is a national initiative where the authorities will draw on large resources amounting to some 20 million Euro per year. The Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority (ABM-utvikling) will act as secretariat for this nation-wide initiative..

These two large projects both offer unique possibilities for Norwegian public libraries to develop new methods to promote reading and to establish stronger relations with their local educational system.

### **Recent surveys on young people and their use of literature and libraries.**

In Norway there has been considerable focus on young people, particularly young boys, as literary dropouts. Two recent Norwegian surveys have turned the spotlight on this problem.

#### **Free Choice**

In 2004 seven libraries in Norway carried out a quantitative study of library use and the pattern of borrowing among youngsters between the ages of 11 and 17. They based their findings on library lending statistics and the survey says nothing about what young people actually do in libraries or why they borrow books and other material.

The results of “Free Choice” showed that the image of young people as literary dropouts is misleading and that behind the statistics there are in fact significant variations. The pattern of borrowing reflected a considerable variety of interests covering a wide range of genres, subjects, titles and types of media. Libraries with a broad selection of books and media should therefore find it easier to hold on to young readers. Youngsters pay little attention to the designated age group of the book concerned, borrowing everything from books for very young children to advanced non-fiction and literature for adults. The survey found that music and film media are particularly popular and that children from minority language groups mostly borrow Norwegian literature, although often choosing something easier to read than pupils who have Norwegian as their mother language.

“Free Choice” also discovered that the majority of youngsters between the ages of 11 and 17 do in fact make use of public libraries, suggesting that libraries represent the most important service on offer to young people. About 60% of the girls and 40% of the boys borrowed material to take home. It appears that a large group of users visit libraries without borrowing anything. Large libraries can observe that less than 30% of their daily visitors actually borrow material, the remainder using the library for other purposes.

#### **“I never read, but I’m always reading”**

The Centre for Reading at the University of Stavanger decided to look more closely at the results of “Free Choice”. They carried out a qualitative survey in the same libraries in order to obtain an insight into what boys read, how they regard themselves as readers and to what extent the media facilities and the physical surroundings influence their reading habits and the way they use the library. The conclusion was that boys regard reading as an activity, not in order to establish an identity. Boys read for practical reasons.

Interviews revealed that the boys regarded school as the most significant arena for stimulating the urge to read, more so even than the library or reading at home. They claimed that in addition to borrowing books, their reasons for visiting a library were mainly to use the computers, play games, do their homework, spend time while waiting for a bus, listen to music or be with their friends. The organisers of the survey point out that the myths concerning boys' reading habits are widely known and may well have had the negative effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Both "Free Choice" and "I never read, but I'm always reading" indicate that we need further studies of the preferences of young people themselves in order to reach them with literature. Furthermore, greater knowledge of how boys choose their reading material could open the way to introducing more relevant literature and texts.

### **Network creation and co-operation**

In order to be successful, the promotion of literature to children and young people requires close co-operation between all parties involved. A good dialogue is essential between all those whose work is aimed at getting children to read more, be they librarians, teachers, writers, publishers or bookshops. All are equally important and all have a common objective.

Public libraries are to be found in every municipality. They are staffed by people with literary competence, access to collections and a great interest in promoting literature. Children's librarians share this knowledge with teachers and pupils but often the time required to talk about books is limited. In many municipalities the teachers therefore also become promoters of literature. Public libraries should also aim to develop good networks between themselves in order to maintain and improve the skills of library staff.

### **Some Challenges for the Future**

Public libraries in the Nordic countries today are undergoing a process of renewal which, while preserving basic values, aims to offer services adapted to a modern, multimedia environment. In Norway the debate about the function of libraries and their future role as promoters of culture and knowledge is greater now than for many years.

Norwegian libraries have adapted themselves to meet the needs of their users in our modern, network society. Virtual library services have been developed as a supplement to the physical library, thereby contributing to an increased use of resources and higher quality across the whole range of services.

The question for the libraries of tomorrow is how to design new strategies for Public Paradises for children and young adults. How can we ensure that the library of the future will be important to their identity and cultural expression? Does the interactive library represent the prototype library for the future?

Children and young people have come to occupy a stronger position in society, but they are governed by an education policy they have little opportunity to influence and by social planning which tends to disregard their needs. They are also subjected to a massive bombardment from the media and the fashion and lifestyle industry. Children have become consumers, active and creative. Political emphasis on education leads to a greater focus on libraries as arenas of learning and the possibilities of a closer

integration of learning and leisure. How do we promote reading and how can we make use of parents and teachers in order to reach the children?

The question is whether libraries should choose to be a “quiet and peaceful” alternative to all the other attractions on offer or decide to take up a position in the market-place, accept that the world has changed and develop new strategies.

A future goal for the library sector must be to co-operate with other institutions, organisations and relevant bodies in order to create the solidarity, continuity and direction in children’s lives necessary for them to realise their full creative potential.

Today’s society is characterised by worship at the altar of youth. The present age can be defined by certain key features such as individualism, speed, lack of social engagement and a focus on image and appearance rather than content and message. There is enormous competition to capture the attention of this age group and libraries are just one of many alternatives children and young people can choose from when it comes to spending their leisure time. Books and traditional library services appear dull to youngsters familiar with computer games, reality-TV, chatting, etc.

Reading, play and games are important elements in the development of an individual’s personality. Young people’s strategy in these areas is to look, relate, think and act on the basis of factors characteristic of a game concept. These include variety, choice, the here and now, interactivity, scepticism and no barriers, no friction.

For the youth of today the Internet and mobile phones are the natural framework and norm for accessibility and variety of choice and they demand similar conditions in other aspects of their daily lives. They are critical, sceptical and expect the same of others. Children and young people use many different arenas and many different expressions in creating and presenting their identity. These include music, clothes, choice of friends, places to visit and be seen, virtual meetings on the Internet, addresses listed on their mobiles, chat rooms, SMS, etc.

In the field of research on young people there is much discussion about the basis for creation of identity. Should it be viewed as an expression of innate nature or as a cultural construction? If one regards identity as the expression of a cultural construction, then cultural identity becomes a question of politics and power, where culture becomes the most important arena in a continuous struggle for recognition and attention. The constructed differences create, spread and strengthen the concept of individuality

Aesthetics, style and expressiveness become tools for identity-political strategies. Given this perspective, it is very important to develop a mastery of forms of expression such as language, story-telling and imagery. How do children’s libraries cope with this situation? Can they meet the sophisticated and demanding youngsters of today on equal terms? If children expect libraries to offer arenas and meeting-places for themselves and their friends, then libraries must play along and satisfy these expectations, otherwise they will be without visitors.

*What Skills and Identities do Libraries need to meet the Future? The Interactive Library as a Prototype for the Library of the Future. Strategy and the storytelling tools required for success.*

If libraries are to play a part in the lives of children and young people, we must give them greater access to the forms of expression they already use to shape their identity. This must, however, be done on contemporary terms. A library should be an arena for the development of digital story-telling by means of video, digital camera and editing software. Libraries should also offer writing courses and a writers' workshop.

In a multimedia society it is vital to acquire skills beyond those of reading and writing. Public libraries today are informal centres of knowledge, defined as public meeting places both with regard to physical space and the virtual services available. Members of the public come of their own free will, often in their leisure hours and the democratic principle of free access for everybody must be upheld. In developing new strategies for the library of the future in a knowledge society, these remain the values and image to build upon.

If we are to reach our objective of playing a more significant role in society, particularly in relation to children and young people, the strategies required must include greater focus on the local community and the opportunities for teamwork. There is also a need to clarify the roles and differences between school libraries and public libraries in order to improve co-operation. Carrying out a programme of renewal and a professional reassessment of the way libraries make knowledge and culture available to the public represents a considerable challenge.

We must also work to strengthen the cultural dimension of the public space, be attentive to the needs of children and young people in their use of the media and other forms of expression, also heighten and make visible the role of culture in their lives, including the multicultural dimension.

The library of tomorrow must maintain today's basic values and standards, while at the same time becoming a professional provider of interesting experiences, multimedia and informative entertainment, all efficiently and competitively marketed. Great challenges lie ahead and life will be anything but dull. Just remember that children represent the future.

Finally, I should like to quote a 14-year-old user of the Stavanger Public Library, writing about her local library

**"I would just like to say that this a really cool library and I have loved coming here ever since I was a little girl "**

#### **Sources:**

Håndbok i barnebibliotekarbeid (Manual of children's library work)

Sven Nilsson: Barn, Tweens och Bibliotek.

(Children, Tweens and the Library) Ikoner 2005 No.2

Kirsten Drotner: Library Innovation for the Knowledge Society. SPLQ 2005 No.2