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**Reading skills are more important than ever: Reading initiatives in Danish libraries**

All over the world good reading and writing skills have become a social survival condition because all education and production are based on writing. In all subjects at school, learning is depending on pupils' reading skills, and seen from Denmark's point of view it is therefore disheartening to read the latest PISA-study from 2006 (Egelund, 2006). 57 countries have participated in the study which shows that the proportion of pupils without functional reading skills in Denmark is 16%. In comparison the figure is 5% in Finland, 15% in Sweden, 22% in Norway and 20% in Iceland.

Denmark thus has an unacceptably large group of young people who cannot read when they leave school. This has major consequences for both the individual and society.

The Danish results concerning functional reading skills do not differ significantly from the PISA-results in 2000 and 2003 and from the OECD-average. The proportion of very proficient readers is however lower in Denmark than in the other Nordic countries and the average for the OECD countries. As in previous PISA-rounds, girls are markedly better at reading than boys. (Egelund, 2006, p. 11-12)

**Children with Danish as their second language**

Together with Danish PISA-researchers and the Business College in Aarhus the Rockwool Foundation has examined reading skills for pupils in Denmark with Danish as their second language. A rather sombre picture emerged. 47% of these pupils are without functional reading skills when they leave elementary school. Of pupils with non-western background and with Danish as their second language 53% are without functional reading skills (Egelund, and Tranæs, 2005). About half of the young pupils with Danish as their second language are thus not sufficiently skilled in reading to accomplish an education after elementary school. Also vocational training requires good reading skills.

**How to develop good reading skills – according to reading-enthused children**

The children themselves also have a number of ideas of how to become good and avid readers. This appears from a study conducted by Centre for Children's Literature (*Hvad skaber en lystlæser?*, 2007). The purpose of the study was to examine the reading habits of confident readers and find out why the children themselves feel that they have become eager readers.

It is characteristic for the reading-enthused children that they see the book as *one* of several media for primarily indoor use, and they perceive themselves as readers in an extrovert and social context. Like other children and young people they seek the fellowship and the

unique event. The children maintain that they have become great readers because they have enjoyed exchanging book tips with their friends. According to the children, other important motivation factors are parents who enjoy reading, who recommend books, approachable staff in the library who treat the children with respect, and teachers who introduce various reading initiatives or let the class take part in a reading campaign.

It is vital that the adult mediators of books understand how to engage the children in a dialogue about reading experiences, so that the child feels that it shares a common interest with the adult - on equal terms. Professional mediators such as pre-school teachers, teachers and librarians must therefore have read the books they seek to mediate, and they should include their own personal views in the dialogue with the children.

Dialogue with users, the feeling of sharing combined with reading and reading initiatives across libraries and local institutions are therefore important elements in turning children and young people into proficient readers.

### **National strategies for reading**

The Danish government is very aware of the serious social problem which functional illiteracy represents and has launched a national action plan for reading. It is particularly targeted at the educational area, but also includes support for e.g.. stimulation of leisure-time reading that helps to turn children into good readers. (*Rapport fra Udvalget til forberedelse af en national handlingsplan for læsning*, 2005).

A recent report concerning future Danish library services to children (*Fremtidens Biblioteksbetjening af børn*, 2008) stresses the library's special possibilities for supporting children's reading experiences as well as reading skills. The library's initiatives and influence in this area are more necessary than ever before.

### **The libraries' initiatives in creating good readers**

Libraries have always made an effort to support children's joy of reading. This is first of all based on the wish to give children literary experiences, but also on the knowledge that children who read a lot, become more confident readers. The library's role is therefore multi-stringed: The library must stimulate the joy of reading by offering children a multitude of media and a mediation that inspires the children to read. At the same time the library must support the work of turning children into proficient readers – e.g. by cooperating with day-care institutions in offering language-stimulating activities and by initiating activities that underpin the school's teaching in reading. (*Fremtidens Biblioteksbetjening af børn*, 2008, p. 57)

### **National library reading programmes**

Support of children's reading desire and reading skills is an ongoing process that constantly must be adjusted to evoke interest among the target group. The lifestyle of

children is changing as society develops and living conditions change. One of the challenges is to stimulate children's language and love of reading from they are babies and onwards. Another challenge is to utilise the new media in a conscious way to support children's reading skills. As a third issue we would like to stress the importance of the availability of the library. The library must be where the users spend their day or go for their daily routines.

The Danish Agency for Libraries and Media presently has programmes reaching children from the age of 0 and above. One of the first was the 'Joy of Reading programme'.

### **Joy of Reading for Children and Young People – from campaign to local ownership and implementation**

The national campaign, 'Joy of Reading' was launched by the Ministry of Culture in 2003. Later, both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Welfare joined the campaign to stress the importance of encouraging children's joy of reading all through childhood and across many sectors. The campaign ran until the end of 2007 and is now being followed by a three-year programme

The campaign had various focus points, e.g. the good experience, the good book and the good reader. During the campaign's final year focus was concentrated on knowledge-sharing, research and dissemination as well as ownership and implementation of the good experiences, so that municipalities and libraries were motivated constantly and inspired in the work with literature, learning and culture.

A qualitative evaluation of 'Joy of Reading' shows that the campaign's effort to inspire children and young people to read has been successful, because it has appealed to children's desire to read in a voluntary context. A cultural economical analysis (Damgaard and Sørensen, 2008) shows that the strategy of creating new collaborations across schools, day-care offers, libraries etc. has been extremely productive.

Altogether the campaign has been a good example of how publicly financed projects do not necessarily need to be buried in administration and bureaucracy. The financial support for projects was primarily allocated directly to a number of different activities (small projects) the purpose of which was to encourage children and young people's joy of reading. (Damgaard and Sørensen, 2008, p. 18-20)

The campaign continues during the period 2008-2010 as a programme with an annual pool earmarked for various activities. The pool allocates grants to:

- Kindergarten libraries nationwide
- National reading campaigns for school children
- Literary activities for the young.

The Joy of Reading programme has provided fuel for new forms of collaboration and joint projects between the public libraries and public players and institutions. In the following a number of current examples for different age groups are given of how the Danish public libraries cooperate with kindergartens, schools, municipalities and voluntary organisations

to encourage and strengthen children's reading, language and learning. Some of the projects originate from the Joy of Reading programme.

### **Case 1: Bookstart**

In March 2009 the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media launched a programme with book gifts for children when they are 6, 12, 18 and 36 months old. The book gifts are followed by other offers and initiatives to encourage language stimulation. The programme runs initially for four years and for this period includes children from disadvantaged residential areas, as the programme is funded by government means earmarked for vulnerable citizens. In the longer term the aim is to extend the concept to reach all children in Denmark.

The aim of the programme is to improve children's language and turn them into good readers. The programme includes visits by librarians in people's private homes and thus widens the perspectives of the library's role in the local community. In disadvantaged residential areas the library can make a difference on a par with health visitors, job counselling and 'friend visitors'.

The results from a number of projects in Denmark indicate that the library is a good frame when being introduced into the community, and by starting already when the children are only 6 months old the chances are that this will have a great effect on the child's access to knowledge and books.

The inspiration for Bookstart comes primarily from England, but also the Swedish Markaryd model has been a source of inspiration, as indeed has the Danish pilot project 'Language Portal' carried out by Copenhagen Libraries in areas with many residents of a different ethnic background.

There are many obvious advantages in launching a Bookstart programme. Basically Bookstart is about mediation of children's literature, but at the same time it suggests that literature can be used actively as an instrument for early learning and social change. The project has many 'side effects' which each can be scaled down or emphasized according to the overall objectives. These might be concerned with breaking negative social heritage, supporting parents in taking responsibility for the children's learning, giving children early literacy competences to 'read' and decode text and pictures and understand a narrative sequence. It might also be a question of wanting to provide the child with rich literary and aesthetical experiences right from birth.

The message of Bookstart is that one does not need any special knowledge to motivate and stimulate small children to read books. The most important message the libraries can pass on is that when parents read with their children they must exude enthusiasm. The crucial thing is that the children are willing and ready to experience the books, touch them, chew them and examine them. It is the being together and having a good time that gives infant literature its strength and opens up an opportunity to use the language, to describe in words and to make noises.

Another important point is that it does not matter significantly which language you are speaking. Language stimulation is not about learning to speak *one* language only, but

rather of using one's language, whether it be nonsense language, Danish, Arabic or Chinese.

When the it finishes in 2012 about 20,000 children will have benefitted from the programme. Bookstart operates in 20 different residential areas in 15 municipalities spread across Denmark. (Enemark, 2009)

### **Case 2: Kindergarten libraries**

One of the recommendations in the report on future library services to children states that the library must reach out to where the children actually spend their daily lives. The objective is for the library to define itself in relation to and interact with other partners, e.g. kindergartens, schools, associations – and even the home as stated above.

Around half of the Danish municipalities (49) have established one or more kindergarten libraries. They are examples of the library reaching out. All Danish public libraries can in collaboration with day-care offers apply to the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media for grants (a sub-programme of the Joy of Reading programme) to establish kindergarten libraries, so that children and staff get extended daily access to books and reading, and children and parents get the opportunity to take out books and other materials. (Madsen and Poulsen, 2008). In September 2009 grants for 75 kindergarten libraries were allocated.

The concept 'kindergarten library' covers everything ranging from a repository arrangement with loan of books and other materials to an actual satellite library in the kindergarten with visits by librarians and cultural arrangements. Whichever model one chooses, the pivotal point in the kindergarten library is to give children access to daily experiences with books, and to encourage parents' interest in reading aloud and bringing the children into the library during an otherwise hectic day with many other options.

The kindergarten libraries contribute to the process of democratising children and parents' access to books and other material, as they provide all children with equal access to books and reading. They also help to reduce social and cultural inequalities and can be instrumental in levelling geographical and time-factor barriers for visiting the library.

The offer also gives pre-school teachers and librarians the possibility to develop new dimensions in their interaction with children and give pre-school children experiences with books that support their linguistic and personal development and their interest in learning to read.

Thus the kindergarten libraries help to strengthen the day-care institutions' work with the national learning plans related to language and culture.

The Danish researcher, Kjeld Kjertmann sees kindergarten libraries as part of a necessary reform in relation to children's reading and writing: "If written language and books are not incorporated as a natural part of our being together with the children, we are bound to lag behind, because the school alone will be responsible for teaching children to read and write. In my mind it seems completely absurd that in a 100 percent developed writing society we keep the written language away from children on the assumption that it does not belong at this or that age".

Kindergarten libraries are therefore part of a strategy to ensure that fewer people encounter reading problems in the future, that more develop a zest for reading and begin to read and write, and that more will not have problems about embarking on the educations offered to young people when they leave school". (Cranfield and Enemark, 2007)

The model of making an alternating selection of library books available to children, parents and pre-school teachers can be transferred to other places in children's daily environment, possibly supplemented with activities like reading cafés for beginners, book clubs and lectures for parents. This satellite model can be used in after-school centres, clubs, sports centres, civic centres and cultural centres. The overriding premise is that the library seeks out children in their familiar environments and moves its materials and offers outside the classical library space.

### **Case 3: The reading quiz 'Ready - steady – answer' for school children**

Competitions and events contain particularly catching elements that sharpen children's interest in participating. Among these elements is the possibility to gain the audience's recognition of one's knowledge or capabilities and the chance to gain a position as role model for children in the class who do not read a lot or in the daily group of friends. Events like competitions and quizzes also have a considerable entertainment aspect which can motivate learning that takes place outside school, e.g. in connection with camps or visits to museums.

The Joy of Reading project Ready-steady-answer (a quiz) is based on the competitive aspect and on modern children's need to be visible in the media picture. By employing these elements of fascination, the quiz makes children aware of the fact that there are other ways of qualifying for a place in the limelight than popular song- and X-Factor contests on television. The quiz is run as a team competition for 7. graders where each class produces a quiz team consisting of five pupils from the class accompanied by their classmates as audience.

The type of prize can be instrumental in underpinning the participating children's function as role models. If the children are competing for a prize which will benefit the whole class, the class will be interested in getting the most avid readers (and not necessarily the most popular pupils) into the team and back them all the way so that the class will get the best chance of winning. This turns readers into positive role models who can inspire others in the class to read more.

The quiz also gives reading a social dimension; normally reading is a solitary process, but here it becomes the pivotal point for a social process where you - together with others - will be using what you have learned on your own.

There are many types of questions in the quiz. The categories cover all aspects of reading: The broadly informed reader, the genre-fixated reader, books from childhood, songs, rhymes, proverbs, the origin of words, films and books, recipes and user guides, nonfiction etc. Many libraries collaborate with the teachers on how to prepare the pupils for the quiz. Experience shows that the teacher's involvement is important in terms of motivating the pupils. The most successful pupils typically have a teacher who has been working hard on preparing them for the event.

This form of quiz and other strategic reader events is a good way for the children's library to profile itself in relation to the children. The role as organiser and facilitator engages the libraries in a new way as enthusiastic people with a love for the same literature as the children appreciate. This can motivate the children to visit the library. Moreover, the library is aware of the latest popular trends and has the competence to formulate questions within the field of children's literature.

The children's library can expand the event itself with preparatory games and activities, e.g. competitions in acquiring knowledge as quickly as possible via searching the Internet, which is also a central media competence. Librarians, teachers and school libraries can also establish leisure time offers for the children who are going to participate in the event, so that they can go to Ready-steady-answer reading club and practice the different genres.

Quizzes like Ready-steady-answer, which are based on collaboration with local schools, are therefore obvious tools for libraries in their work with giving children reading experiences and reading skills. (Cranfield and Enemark, 2007, p. 36-40)

#### **Case 4: Author school for the young**

Another Joy of Reading project 'Author school for the young' is based on the assumption that reading and writing are closely associated. To many young people, there is an attractive aura about writing. It is seen as an artistic process, while the mere fact of reading can be perceived as a passive and less interesting activity. The author school for the young in Brønderslev in the northern part of Denmark is a nursery for budding writers between 13 and 18 and is supported by Brønderslev municipality.

The school's aim is to give the young people the possibility of manifesting themselves as writers. They attend an intensive course for a week with professional authors as instructors and are also given the opportunity to create a network of other young people with the same great interest in writing whom they can use as sparring partners after the course.

The author school provides two annual courses during the summer vacations which are very popular. The school selects the participants based on their reasons for wanting to apply, and on the basis of the texts which they submit with their application. The high number of applicants implies that professional interest and motivation among those who have been accepted is high. For all participants it is therefore a big and powerful experience to meet a network of people with the same interest, who are interested in each other's writing talents and wish to exchange thoughts and ideas, discuss writing processes etc.

After each course the pupils' stories are published in an anthology which is distributed to libraries nationwide. To see one's own text in print is an experience that enhances young people's self-understanding as writers and accelerates the development of an identity as a writer. The collection of stories can also encourage other young people's joy of reading and interest in writing, as many find it particularly interesting to learn how other young people express their feelings and thoughts.

Lecturer Peter Kaspersen from the University of Southern Denmark has evaluated the author school in Brønderlev. He sees a great potential in working with this form of instruction: “The writing exercises, the students do at the school, remind them of what many of them have done in elementary school. The big difference is however, that at the Author school they are all dying to write, and nobody is frightened of being labelled ‘teacher’s pet’ if they seem too keen. This creates a far greater enthusiasm and motivation. The instructors’ function also differs from that of the Danish language teachers in school. Instead the authors act as advisers, helping the students through personal processes and putting forward subjective suggestions as to how they themselves would tackle the situation. By involving authors as instructors, the school’s offers are being qualified and professionalised. I consider the Author school for the young and the other Joy of Reading projects to tend towards the building up of a halfway informal education system with a certain management framework, but a free development of content”. (Cranfield and Enemark, 2007, p. 57)

Public libraries can adopt this model and collaborate with professional authors and illustrators on arranging similar creative processes for children and young people. Obvious partners would be the local youth club or continuation school, just as libraries can join with high schools in planning creative writing workshops for pupils in connection with theme courses. The instruction can also contain elements such as recitation techniques and oral story telling.

### **Case 5: Homework cafés**

Almost half the pupils in Denmark with Danish as their second language are not able to read well enough to complete a youth education when they leave the ‘Folkeskole’. Especially for these children – who often cannot get assistance for homework from their parents - homework cafés can offer them - and young people - a better chance to develop their Danish language and subsequently be able to complete an education.

The Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs and the Ministry of Culture are joining forces in establishing a total of 100 new homework support schemes in libraries as well as developing existing homework support schemes with support activities. Like Bookstart the homework cafés are not part of the Joy of Reading programme, but the cafés play an important role in strengthening reading, learning and language specifically for children and young people with another ethnic background.

The library provides a good framework for a homework café. It is a neutral place, which is open to everybody and has a staff who can advise the pupils on how to navigate in the almost unlimited access to knowledge in books and electronic media. Moreover, homework cafés in libraries can stay open at other times than those traditionally offered by the schools. Most children and parents with a different ethnic background also see the library as a refuge where girls too can come on their own. Finally, the library has good opportunities for letting homework cafés interact with other educational or cultural activities. (Lektiecaféer, 2007, p. 5-10)

For some children with Danish as their second language the contact to the homework supporter is the only relationship they have with ethnic Danes who are not employed to look after them. Homework supporters in the library are unpaid volunteers. They are not

professional teachers, but assist children with their homework at the same level as other children might get from their parents which means that neither volunteers nor library staff normally have a great knowledge of teaching methods.

However, the library's homework café is dependent on good cooperative relations with the children's teachers, if the homework supporters are to help the children extensively in the areas where they have to improve, and if the offer is to support the actual subjects which the children are studying at school.

A typical homework café is open a couple of afternoons a week. In some cafés the children can just drop in, in others they must be registered. A homework café does not necessarily have to operate on the library's own premises. The library can easily organise homework support in the local sports club, the housing association premises or in a club for older children. The important thing is that the offer is available right where young people come.

#### **Case 6: Online support to homework**

Online homework is a net-based offer of homework support for the eldest pupils in elementary school (children aged 12 – 15). Via a net portal the pupils can get in direct touch with a homework assistant. Homework assistant and pupil communicate via:

- webcam and microphone
- a chat program
- and an electronic board where both can work in the same document.

The Danish government's target is that at least 95 pct. of all young people should get an education in 2015.

An extraordinary effort is needed to reach the goal, as the "PISA-ethnic" report (Egelund and Tranæs, 2007) makes it perfectly clear that almost every other young person with an ethnic background other than Danish by the end of primary and lower secondary school is not sufficiently proficient in reading to be able to complete an education. Add to this that the number of Danish young people with an immigrant background is expected to almost double in the period up to 2015.

Traditional homework support can contribute in a positive way to improve young people's professional and social competences, but some of the older boys do not feel very comfortable presenting themselves in a physical homework café, and it is therefore necessary to find alternative methods in order to "get to" them.

So in connection with the approval of the National Budget in 2008 the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media received special financial means for an experimental project for the establishment of online homework support for pupils in disadvantaged residential areas. Online homework support is a joint project with the Ministry of Integration and the Ministry of Education. About 1 mil. Euros have been set aside for the project for the period 2008-2011.

The most important experiences from a previous pilot project are:

- It is possible to help the pupils with their questions

- By and large it has been possible to develop the appropriate software. It is still necessary to try to make sure that both sound, picture and sharing of documents take place in 'real time'. It has turned out to be one of the most difficult aspects in relation to the IT-part of the project and more hard work has to be put into solving this. Using the mobile phone as communication channel also has to be considered.
- Pupils' and homework assistants' IT-competences are at a much lower level than expected.
- Homework assistants should work in call-centres and need both training and support during the initial phase.
- Pupils can easily use the service both from decentralized 'pupil centres' (e.g. schools and libraries) and from their homes.
- Success depends on a considerable central effort to coordinate and keep track of the homework assistants in relation to those pupils who want help.
- The public has paid great attention to online homework support and the results of this support. The media have shown an almost overwhelming interest.

At the moment the project is in the planning phase. It will be divided into three sub-projects:

- Technology  
Development of software, test, supplier contract and hardware
- Pupils and homework assistants  
Recruitment and training of homework assistants, call-centres, pupil-centres and planning/coordination and administration
- Marketing and communication  
Responsibility for web page, internal and external communication material, profiling of the scheme, help desk, events, outreach work and possibly 'advertising'.

The project is expected to start in January 2010, and the vision is to create Europe's (the world's) leading homework support portal. Maybe an export success on the same levels as Skype!

## **Conclusion**

Strengthening children's reading requires a major practical and strategic initiative in many areas. Traditionally the library is one of the most important culture resources for children in the local communities, but if this status is to be upheld and strengthened, it requires that the library becomes better at exploiting its external relations.

Danish experiences show that the best results are gained by sectorial cooperation. When libraries, day-care offers and schools collaborate with housing associations, sports associations and other leisure organisations about joint joy of reading activities, ranging from competitions and games to writing exercises and methodical language stimulation, it does have a profound impact on children and young people.

It is all important that the activities are not seen as just one-off events, but continue to be visible and turned into more permanent offers. If the library is to continue to constitute a significant and relevant cultural arena, it has to create the space for children's cultural and children's cultural-political dialogue in its network. It is also necessary for the library to strengthen its formal and informal networks both locally and nationally, and both in relation to other public institutions and private actors.

The library's action plans can help to put focus on the strengthening of external relations by containing strategies for external communication and cooperation functions. Another important point is that proficient reading requires an early and joint effort. All children are born curious and with a desire for learning and developing. Already when they are infants they are ready for conceptual perception, communication and vocabulary. Together with local partners the library has a special responsibility to make sure that also the very young infants acquire a solid linguistic foundation and a desire to learn to read.

In solving this task it is essential that the library focuses on initiating and supporting a broad professional collaboration with other staff groups such as pedagogues, teachers, hearing and speech therapists, pedagogical consultants, consultants for infants with Danish as their second language, children's cultural advisers, authors and parent committees in day-care offers and schools.

Local Joy of Reading projects can also act as a lever in relation to reaching the children's primary role models, namely their parents. Together with for example kindergarten libraries, the library can provide the parents with tools and inspiration to read to their children. The common effort to encourage children's reading appears in many variants. There are various traditions for cross-sectorial collaboration about children and children's reading in Denmark. Some libraries have a strong relation to other local cultural institutions as well as schools, while others have a special tradition for collaborations with local volunteers or associations.

This diversity of local offers and collaboration across sectors contribute to the development of activities that further children's reading. A decisive factor is that knowledge sharing is going on, both between the municipalities and between the state and the municipalities.

The Danish Agency for Libraries and Media considers it a vital task to gather and disseminate examples of best practice to all public and school libraries and motivate them to develop local variants. This can happen e.g. via inspiration material, project advising, theme meetings, national reading conferences and the financing of research projects. The Joy of Reading campaign has demonstrated that good results are achieved by spending the means on many different activities and projects and place the focus on significant 'beacon' projects which can inspire and spur the libraries in the collaboration with local players to develop and carry out activities in service of the joy of reading.

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