

Report on future library services to children (2008)

English abstract

The library continues to be one of the most important cultural resources for children and is used by about 80 % of all children. But children have acquired new media habits and more leisure arenas, and this means that the use of libraries is decreasing. The number of children using the public library at least once a month has fallen from 51 % in 1998 to 39 % in 2004.

This is a significant fall which gives occasion for considering how the existing offer can be vitalized and optimized. Can and will the libraries meet these children and their culture in a new way that makes it meaningful for more children to visit the library - and what do we need to make this happen? This is the major, actual challenge facing the library.

Children's culture is a media culture

A new media culture, globalisation, commercialisation, individualisation and children's changed play culture are all factors that have a bearing on how children's culture is shaped and thereby the context in which the libraries have to function.

Children of today can be described as a multimedia generation. Over the past 10-15 years we have seen an enormous spread of new, digital media technologies like computer, Internet, games and mobile phones. This offers media users completely new opportunities for communicating person to person and for creating content like homepages and text/image/sound products. Websites like the Danish Arto are also popular among children, as they offer the possibility of sharing and communicating with others about personal photos, profiles and diary blogs.

Today an increasing part of children's cultural network is created with the media as pivotal point, and when four out of ten older children and young people meet, the purpose is for them to use the media together. The boys often play computer games, while the girls watch films and listen to music. Children's use of the library also indicates that new media play a decisive role in children's culture of today. Fewer children borrow books and magazines, more borrow DVDs and games. Using the library's computer is still a very popular activity, although the interest has subsided as today nearly all families with children have a computer and Internet access at home.

Children's culture is now to a great extent regulated by global commercial companies with focus on selling culture as a commodity and by appealing to children as consumers. Public institutions like libraries have a completely different approach, as they make cultural products available as a general social asset. However, the library must consider how to function in an interplay with increasingly more global and commercial players: For those children who have access to and understand how to use

the cultural commodities, global media contribute to widening their mental horizon - satellite TV and pod casts supply words and images for other ways of life; online games and social net pages put the users in touch with people and languages that are different from the well known etc. Supporting all children's cultural encounters with the unknown is, however, also a vital task for libraries.

Danish children's everyday lives are very institutionalised and regulated by adults until the age of ten, while older children must themselves organise their leisure time and develop identity and attitudes within a large number of areas - from musical tastes to spending time with their parents in a divorce situation. It happens in several arenas, ranging from their private rooms with TV, computer and music centres to public social meeting places on the net, net cafés, shopping centres, libraries and the town's parks and squares.

In the public debate children's individualisation is viewed both positively and negatively. Some find that individualisation encourages children's independence, while others feel that it can turn children into egotists who are unable to fit into a group. In that case individualisation is considered a negative antipole to community spirit.

It is important to include individualisation as a social condition in the understanding of children's culture, as cultural activities is the pivotal point in children's development of their identities. Children create their identity in the specific area between that which is common and that which makes them differ from each other; and it is perhaps more important than ever for children that they have cultural development spaces like the libraries, where they can experiment with and clarify these identity processes.

Play is one of the most important ways in which children can express themselves culturally and create their cultural identity. The play has changed character, though, because children's everyday lives have changed. Play possibilities are no longer to the same extent mediated from older to younger children in self-organised games in the street. That is why modern toys offer many more possibilities, just as toys are often linked to computers and other new media. Because toys and media increasingly form the basis for play and play culture among children, access to and knowledge of these play tools are often crucial as regards the individual child's possibility for participating in the play community.

The library can help ensuring all children the chance to develop play competences by supporting usage and quality assessment of toys, games and other children's culture products, and providing the space in which to use them.

Challenges and new possibilities

The library can no longer base its legitimacy solely on giving children physical access to sought-after materials as was the case in the industrial society.

Today the library is not an unambiguous concept with one clear function: The library is both a physical building in the urban space/at school and a cultural institution in

society. The libraries therefore have to find a new legitimacy and a more definite profile in relation to children.

Libraries for children are today designed on the basis of a local prioritisation of:
The library as a 'place to be' with focus on experience, fitted up as a safe oasis with experiences for the senses and social activities without any demands as to a definite usage.

The library as a 'place to learn' with focus on information gives children the chance to seek knowledge, get help with their homework and access to search functions on the Internet.

The library as a 'place to do' with focus on cultural activity/communication gives children the opportunity to meet over certain activities like playing computer games or finding new friends on social net pages with the assistance of the staff.

In order to support children in areas relevant to both their everyday lives and their future, the libraries must combine the library act's three overall objectives about enlightenment, experience and education.

It requires a broad perception of these objectives:

Enlightenment is not just giving individual access to information via search engines, portals etc. Enlightenment is also application with insight. The library's task is therefore to contribute to developing children's ability to transform information into relevant insight.

Experience is not just mediating fiction in book form and creating frames for cultural events. Experience includes all cultural expressions - visual, auditive and multi-medial. The library's task is therefore to contribute to developing children's quality awareness in relation to all kinds of expressions and to encourage their interest in the curious, surprising and provoking content in all kinds of materials.

Education is not just the 'measurable' that takes place in the formal classroom. Education also happens in semi-formal rooms such as the library, and in informal rooms where leaning is not the prime objective, when children e.g. learn the rules of role play in order to join the game.

If the libraries are to realise the vision of to a greater extent choosing as the starting point what children need and want to experience, know and learn instead of what the library would like to mediate, it also requires:

that the children can be physically present in the library over a longer period of time, together with others that professional adults can facilitate the children's search- and learning processes that the children have access to a variety of materials of quality. Today there often seems to be a gulf between what the users actually do in the library and the mediation tradition which many librarians represent. Therefore:

the printed media must be combined much more systematically with the audiovisual and digital media so that the library supports the quality and complexity in the users' exploitation of the media for experience, information and communication the physical library must be more closely attached to the virtual library so that they appear as a cohesive, visible and credible cultural institution ? in dialogue with and of relevance to the users.

A new basis for development

Instead of discussing whether we should focus on children's cultural development or their information needs, on books or computer games, on places 'to be' or places 'to learn', we need a new foundation for development. A vital resource in the knowledge society is people's ability to create, interpret and exchange all forms of content in physical and digital media. These abilities are called multimodal competencies. Multimodality means 'use of many modi'. Writing is one modus which can be used together with other modi like for example pictures in the same media. The concept is closely related to 'new literacy', i.e. the competence not only to be able to read and write, but also to master a number of visual and auditive modi. (Kaspersen, 2008).

Today children primarily exercise their use of the media when in their leisure time they acquire experiences, information and - particularly - communication via printed, audiovisual and digital media. However, most children need adult support over a longer period of time in order to develop their multimodal competences.

Consequently, a new 'cultural formation' concept can form the basis for progressive library service. The concept includes both information, experience and communication, both intellectual and emotional learning components and 'old' as well as 'new' media. This formation concept is identical with digital education, the concept used by professor Kirsten Drotner in the background analysis. The committee wishes to stress that the cultural formation we should like to see stimulated in the library, is nurtured by a broad range of media, materials and processes that go beyond the digital and naturally also includes the printed media. The usage of traditional and digital media creates a new cultural formation platform.

The new developmental basis for children's cultural activities and information needs by means of books and electronic media can be described as a 'formation platform' on which educational institutions, library functions and leisure time activities should work together to ensure that all children develop.

In 2006 the American MacArthur Foundation launched 50 mil. US dollars for the development project 'Building the new field of digital media and learning'. The aim of the project is to examine how media development and digital technologies change children and young adults' learning, play and social participation. In the project's white paper professor Henry Jenkins et al. from The Massachusetts Institute of Technology identify (Jenkins et al., 2006) a number of new digital competences which children today develop particularly in their leisure time, and which are both a necessary prerequisite for cultural participation and for working life in the future.

The new cultural education, which supplements the school education, includes i.a. the following points:

Play - the ability to experiment with the surroundings as problem-solving

Performance - the ability to try out alternative identities with a view to experimenting and improvising

Appropriation - the ability to sample and remix media content in a meaningful way

Multitasking - the ability to decode the surroundings and change focus

Collective intelligence - the ability to share knowledge and cooperate with others in order to obtain a common goal

Information competence - the ability to judge the reliability and soundness of various information sources

To navigate across media - the ability to follow the flow of narratives and information across different media expressions

To network - the ability to search, gather and share information

Social comprehension - the ability to be a part of different cultural communities and to identify and respect differences.

Children's use of the different media is guided by an existential desire to produce and decode letters, pictures and other signs as a tool to understand causes and contexts in their own lives and in the surroundings. It is therefore an important driving force in the cultural process, which the central institutions in children's lives must support, among them the library whose most important task is to meet children's desire for signs and to acknowledge their frames of reference.

It is the library's task to help create frames where children in the company of other children and adults can 'cultivate' themselves and develop competences. The library cannot and should not be a school. But the library can become a bridge builder between informal learning processes, individual networks and formalised educational institutions like school.

For libraries with an age-long tradition of mediating the book as the essential medium, the new dialogical forms of communication and mediation are a challenge to customary ways of thinking and acting. Library staff cannot any longer control the content of what the library is mediating, and in which form this happens. Instead they must include children in dialogical communication and let go of the control, relying on the children themselves to be able to create contexts while the adults must use their professional competence to facilitate and qualify the children's process.

Future library employees must also possess professional competences, both in terms of personal communication with children in the physical library and in terms of mediated communication online. This requires i.a.:

insight in the themes and subjects that children find relevant, including games
competence in quality assessing all kinds of materials with equal skill
ability to meet and communicate with various target groups and differentiate the communication according to the users' need, content and context of use.

Generally speaking, the professional service should be based on dialogue with the children and the possibilities in the actual library space - not in the collections.

The library must continue to be a 'book place', but the libraries' collections fulfil only a limited part of the information, experience and communication needs children have. The libraries must, therefore, intensify the efforts to turn the library act's objectives into concrete practice by giving the children the chance to choose among and exploit a broad range of media, including music. This requires the libraries to extend the definition of materials to incorporate more than material and virtual products so that it also includes processes that can provide the frames for playing and a starting point for learning.

Library service in the future

The conclusion of the above is clear: The library is still one of the most important cultural resources for children in the local communities. The library must, therefore, maintain and mediate an up-to-date profile as a relevant cultural arena - not only in relation to parents and institutions, but also in relation to children themselves. But we need radical changes if we want to make sure that the library maintains its status as a central educational institution for children. Important focus areas in this change are the staff's ability to communicate with children and to support their cultural development and competences as well as their play culture.

Library services in the future must provide broad media experiences across materials and genres. Mediation should be adapted to the children's need for participation, and they must be given exciting physical frames within which to expand. New partnerships with i.a. school libraries and more outreach activities are also areas open to change and innovation.

There is also a need for closer interplay between research into new library functions and mediation in practice. The aim is to place children as library users at the centre and to add dynamics to library innovation. The way forward can e.g. be monitoring research for development projects, e.g. in connection with media convergent mediation, revitalisation of literary mediation, digital library functions, etc.

In the report the committee passes on a number of recommendations and suggestions for the libraries' services to children, so that they can match children's actual everyday lives, children's media interest and children's various other cultural needs with focus on i.a. the position of play, social inclusion, cultural formation and good reading skills.

Ten commandments

The committee's main recommendations are set as ten commandments:

1. New competences create new activities in the library

A new media landscape, new cultural habits and different demands and expectations require the development of new competences in the library. Library staff must be more visible on the net, facilitate activities in the library and organise meetings and dialogue with users where they actually are.

2. The library space must create surprise and inspiration

We need new concepts for the design of the physical library space. The library must be attractive for children to be, learn and play in.

3. The libraries develop their net services

The libraries create new frames and facilities i.a. by exploiting social technologies and using staff as hosts and resources in virtual networks for children.

4. Children play - in the library

The library can turn play and play culture into a central area of activity. The library can create space for play, make toys and games available and advise on games and toys.

5. The library gives children reading experiences and reading skills

The library continues the work on encouraging children's zest for reading, reading experiences and reading skills.

6. Create assets in new forms of cooperation between school library and public library

Schools and libraries can work more closely together and coordinate services to children. Exploit the various competences of the two library types by doing things together.

7. The library creates community feeling - also for those outside

The library adapts its services to children with special needs: Handicapped, socially vulnerable and children with ethnic background other than Danish.

8. The library supports learning and cultural development

The library supports formal and informal learning that enables children to grow and develop competences in coding, creating and exchanging text, sounds and images.

9. The library must reach out to children

The library reaches out to children and offer services where children actually move around: Kindergartens, day-care centres, schools and associations.

10. The library's management focuses on children

The libraries' management prioritizes staff, money and time - for continuously rethinking, innovating and locally adapting the library's services to children.