

Stronger Mental Health for Children and Adolescents in the Library

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Abstract:

Does reading novels and watching movies improve our mental health? In Troms County in Northern Norway, the project “Stronger mental health for children and adolescents” has been focusing on collecting and spreading information about mental health in books, graphic novels and movies. Through a two-year project granted by the National Library of Norway, we have established a website-collection of media with topics concerning mental health suitable for young people. In addition, we have re-launched a website containing letters and answers from a column in the largest newspaper in Norway, and arranged a theatre tour to libraries in Troms County with a play about life and death. We have collaborated closely with the Public Health Youth Centre Tvibit, to secure the quality of the content on the website. This paper brings you through our achievements of the project, concluding with the need for libraries to develop services from a health-perspective. Libraries do have a lot to offer concerning mental health issues.

Keywords: Mental health, Libraries, Children, Adolescents, Antonovsky.

Stronger Mental Health for Children and Adolescents in the Library

Introduction

I want to start by expressing my gratitude for being able to come all the way from Northern Norway to beautiful Cape Town to talk about mental health and libraries. For two years, mental health in reading was my main concern though still working in Tromsø Library and City Archives. Why was that? Before I go on telling you more about this project and its background, I will tell you about Tromsø, its geographical position, and the library in which I work.

Tromsø is a city of 70 000 citizens and it is still growing, due to people moving from municipalities in the area around and due to the university. It is located approximately 2000

km north of the capital, Oslo. Tromsø is the largest city in Northern Norway, and as in the rest of the region, the fish industry is important. The location of the city, north of the polar circle, has also given us a large number of tourists, coming to see both the midnight sun in the summer and the northern light in the winter. Skiing in the mountains is also a draw, as you can do this almost all year around.

Tromsø Library and City Archive is the largest library by far in the region, in size of facility as well as in number of staff, books and visitors. The library is situated in a relatively new and breathtaking building, built in 2005, and in two smaller branches. The number of staff is approximately 30 people, mostly qualified librarians. We also have a book bus for children and adolescents, serving schools and kindergartens in the outskirts of the municipality. One of the library's main concerns is promoting literature to both children, adolescents and adults, and we won the library-users voting as the Best Public Library of Norway in 2009.

Salutogenesis – the origin of health

What is mental health actually about, and what is *good* mental health? Is it the absence of illness, or is there more to it than that? The sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1981) thought so, inventing the term *salutogenesis*, meaning the origin of health. He spent his entire professional career examining what makes people remain healthy rather than what makes people ill. Why is it that some of us can cope with both mental and physical adversity without developing disease symptoms? The short answer is *active participation* in your own life: The feeling of belonging, being able to handle your own situation and to identify the meaning of it. Many factors combine to give us good mental health. Some of these we cannot change, such as what diseases we are susceptible to, but what we ourselves put into the sum total of our life experience is also important. What mental attributes do we possess that we can draw on when and if we need them in times of crisis later? What this have to do with the library, you may ask. Well, Antonovsky names cultural experiences such as reading and visual arts as factors that can help us when times get rough. I really believe this to be true, and for many of us working in the field of people and literature it makes perfectly sense. The libraries are health promoting in many ways, and with some guiding into the terms of mental diseases they can be even more so.

Bibliotherapy

There is a connection between libraries and psychotherapy called bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy represents a context where the reciprocal interaction between reader and literature sets focus on the reader's personality so that literature becomes a tool for the therapist. Put in simpler terms: bibliotherapy is treatment through books, and arises in the interaction between the participant, the therapist and the literature. Gradually the reader will attain a deeper understanding of his or hers feelings and patterns of reaction and in the end may be able to assess and change whatever has been the breeding ground for problems. Thus, literature will be a tool and a catalyst in the change process. In Norway, there has been little use of the term bibliotherapy, but I do know that other countries use it more frequently. However, there is an extended use of the tools from bibliotherapy in libraries, handing out lists and helping people finding books about themes like death and sorrow, bullying and lonely children. I would argue that librarians are bibliotherapists in the widest sense of the word, maybe without knowing it.

The Making of the *Stronger Mental Health* Project

The project *Stronger mental health for children and adolescents*, or [*Stærkere*] *psykisk helse for barn og unge* as it is called in Norwegian, saw the light of day through the head politician in Troms County Council regarding cultural affairs. She was concerned for the mental well-being of young people and claimed that the neutral grounds of local libraries would be a good place to turn to for information and help. Troms County Council Library made an application to the National Library of Norway and in 2012, the project started with Lenvik Library and Tromsø Library and City Archives as partners. The National Library of Norway initiates and supports financially many projects every year. This is a way of developing the libraries in Norway, by funding new, innovative projects and share the newfound knowledge with other libraries at the end of each project.

The Stronger mental health-project was a two-year project running from 2012-2014 with several goals to achieve. The main goal has been to focus on what libraries in Troms County can offer on information and literature about mental health to children, adolescents and their caregivers. We have approached this goal in three different ways: Through making and conveying webpages offering a topical approach to searches on mental health, through revitalizing the webpages *På skrånss* [On the Q.T.], and through a theater play touring in libraries in Troms County with a play based on a book dealing with death and sorrow. I will in the following guide you through our achievements.

The Website of the Project

The webpages of the project are situated on Tromsø Library and City Archive's website, www.tromso.kommune.no/sterkere. We have gathered various topics that lead directly to a qualified search on the specific topic in our catalogue. Although the libraries might serve the public with keywords for every single book (and they don't!), the keywords may differ, and the books could be old or difficult for young readers. For example, I found that the topic of ADHD had four or five different spellings as keyword in our catalogue, and if you want books on eating disorders, you may have to fight your way through a jungle of different diagnoses and sub-diagnoses. We have therefore linked all the books we have approved of to the same keyword, and of course bought some shining new ones as well. In this way, we now have a quality assured web based collection of books, movies and graphic novels on various topics regarding mental health suitable for young people. The best part is that we do not have to alter the webpage when we change anything in our catalogue, new books go right in, and discarded items are deleted the moment the catalogue post is removed.

When consulting the users, we discovered that some topics were missing, and that we needed some lighter shades of topics alongside the diseases that often are associated with mental health. This led to the new topics *Feel good* and *Seksualitet* [sexuality]. Even though the project period is over, we still work on these topics, make changes and alter them. This is now a part of my everyday work at the library and in this way, the project continues even after the project period is over.

How to Make a Webpage Visible in the Library

How can we make a web collection visible in the library? By putting the items on display in the library, of course. Every second month we change exhibitions linked to different topics concerning mental health, one related to children and one to adolescents. In this way, mental

health will always be visible in the library, although the media collection is on the internet. We continue this work even though the project period is over. Right now, we are highlighting the topic *sexual abuse*, unfortunately actualized by the arrest of a care worker in Tromsø abusing children in kindergartens. By having books on display on this topic, we might be able to help parents talk to their children in ways that can prevent this from happening in the future. In addition, we show the need for these books, and we acknowledge the problem. Not everyone do so.

To reach more young readers than the ones already using the library, we collaborated with the school health care in two different schools. I attended classes together with the school nurse telling about the website and about books on some chosen topics, while she was talking about the actual topics and about what to do if they had problems to deal with. The topics were chosen together with the school nurse and the teacher who knew the class best, and therefore knew what might be useful for the class to read about. On both schools, I had the books with me, and collaborated with the school librarian on lending the books to the pupils.

For the youngest children we have made a physical collection in the library, the “Library of feelings”. It is a bright red book box filled to the brim with books about feelings. They are mostly picture books for younger children about all kinds of emotions. Mental health closely relates to feelings, and reading and talking about feelings can undoubtedly promote health.

På skråss [On the Q.T.]

Over a period of nearly 30 years, the Norwegian journalist Simon Flem Devold received letters from children and adolescents and answered them in the *På skråss* column in *Aftenposten*, the largest newspaper in Norway. A considerable number of these letters and answers deal with mental health-topics – from grief and depression to happiness and love. Lenvik Library staff have digitalized and catalogued the letters, and they are accessible on the website www.paskrass.no. Through the Stronger Mental Health-project, the website has been completed and revitalized with a new layout, and then been relaunched. The letters in this database have something the fictional narratives lack – they are authentic. Many children, and especially adolescents, love true stories about real people, and these letters with their sincere and reflective answers can give the readers an opportunity to talk about and share their own feelings and experiences.

Theater as Therapy

There are many approaches to the dissemination of mental health. Putting on plays in the library is a powerful tool. During the autumn of 2013, the theatre group *Rimfrost* gave a performance entitled *Morten 11 år* [Morten 11 years of age] in the libraries in Troms County. The performance was based on a book by Simon Flem Devold, and it was a warm, witty and deeply serious performance about a young boy about to die with cancer. The actors engaged in discussions with the audience after the performances, and reported many stimulating conversations during their tour. Ten libraries in Troms County were lucky to get this visit during the touring period.

Book Talks and Literature Group for Young Immigrants

One example of how reading can function as both health promoting and therapeutic is Tromsø Library and City Archive's work on book talks for young asylum seekers. When attending the book talk, it is not the books other people of their age want to read that are popular with them – not the action, crime and thrillers. They want books and poetry about love and books about being new or culturally different in Norway. Acquiring Norwegian friends and finding love is definitely the most important aspect judged by the books they request. The American therapist Liz Burns (2009) claims that literature can offer a bridge between one's present life and the life that is possible to achieve. These young people's desire for love and caring is highlighted by reading and talking about it. "Oh – I really wished I had a girlfriend," a young boy exclaimed once when I was telling them about young love in a novel. There is always a lot of smiling and laughter when we bring up the topic of love, but underneath there is deadly seriousness because many of them have a great need for love and care. Literature can help them to verbalize their needs.

Our experience with these book talks made us continue this work in separate literature groups for young people in the evening. As a result, we started a weekly get-together with an international profile for immigrants aged about 16-25. We read texts together and talk about what we have read, and we go to the theatre twice a year. We are lucky to have a good agreement with the theatre, which allow us to attend plays to a very good price, and to have conversations with the actors after the performance. Many of our group members have never been to a theatre before, and the excitement and the thrill of it all is worth all the trouble we might have had getting there on time.

Conclusion

My aim with this paper has been to show the potential that lies in using literature actively as a health-promoting activity. My conclusion is that libraries have a mission that extends beyond simply offering literature for entertainment and education. The project *Stronger mental health for children and adolescents* has given us experiences that other libraries can benefit from. It is vital to develop library services from a health perspective and we will keep on doing so, because librarians have a lot to offer.

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