

Malmö libraries for refugees

Torbjörn Nilsson

Malmö City, Malmö City library, Malmö, Sweden

E-mail address: torbjorn.nilsson5@malmö.se



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Abstract:

With the escalating crisis in Syria and the difficult situation in Afghanistan a very large number of refugees came to seek asylum in Malmö in 2015. Many of the asylum seekers, both grownups and children, found their way to libraries. The public libraries in Malmö acted fast to increase the services aimed at refugees and immigrants and also developed new services and new ways of working. Language training, digital services for newcomers and social activities for unaccompanied children are some of the things the libraries in Malmö have arranged. There have also been events to make the people of Malmö better understand the refugees situation and volunteer to help. The refugee situation has made libraries in Malmö improve and strengthen service for refugees and immigrants and has accented the important social role libraries have.

Keywords: Refugees, libraries, social inclusion, language training

Malmö libraries for refugees

Malmö is a multicultural city. Over 30% of the population is born abroad and half of the preschool children speak another language than Swedish with their parents at home. 178 countries from all over the world are represented in our city.

The twelve public libraries in Malmö have under a long time developed and offered services for newcomers. Mainly it has been different language training activities at the libraries. We also have a well functioning cooperation with Swedish for immigrants, the language education given by the municipality of Malmö. Earlier experiences and user dialogues have shown that language training and the possibility to meet other people, both other immigrants and other people is a priority for newcomers.

With the escalating crisis in Syria and the difficult situation in Afghanistan a very large number of refugees came to seek asylum in Sweden in 2015. 162 877 people sought asylum in Sweden in 2015 compared to 81 301 the year before. For many of these people Malmö was first arrival city. As a comparison the number of unaccompanied children that arrived in Malmö in 2014 was 1 567 and in 2015 the number was almost ten times as many, 13 412. Malmö city worked together with volunteer organizations to welcome people and it was obvious that all forces were needed to meet the new situation .

Many of the asylum seekers found their way to our libraries very fast. We had put up “Refugees welcome”-posters at all library entrances to make it visible that we are open for all. The demand for our language service activities increased enormously and we also discovered other needs as social activities for the unaccompanied children who lived in special homes under poor circumstances, increased need for digital services like Skype and information about Swedish society.

As a respond to these needs more libraries in Malmö started language training and it’s now possible to learn Swedish five days a week at the libraries in Malmö. We also offer language training with support from arabic and farsi/dari-speaking staff for those who are absolute beginners in Swedish.

To be able to provide meaningful social activities for unaccompanied children we have employed two arabic- and farsispeaking youth activity leaders. Language training has been combined with physical activities as soccer and table tennis and also with movie nights and time in our medialab. This has been a very good opportunity to establish closer relations with the children and to introduce them to the library.

To reach refugee families and their smaller children we have a trainee with a background from Syria who has experience working with traumatized children through storytelling. She has together with library staff visited a number of the libraries in Malmö but also other places where newly arrived families meet.

To fulfill the digital needs we have installed Skype in more computers and reserved some of them for people under 20. We offer free wifi for all. You need a library card to use computers or wifi but it’s possible to get a library card even without id and if you’re an unregistered immigrant.

A cooperation with a citizens advice bureau makes it possible to offer free services in many languages for immigrants at two libraries once a week.

To exchange experiences and good ideas librarians from different libraries in Malmö formed a group for our work with refugees. The group has helped to coordinate and develop our services for refugees and has also arranged some events for people in Malmö to help them engage in voluntary work. There has been well attended lectures about the situation in Syria and also opportunities to meet representatives from Red Cross and other organisations.

Some project initiatives has now been taken to continue develop our services for refugees and immigrants. We are for example planning for a virtual learning space for newcomers and for participation in a EU-project about telling refugees stories.

We can see how the refugee situation in many ways has made us improve and strengthen library service for refugees and immigrants and has accentuated the social role libraries have. Public libraries are important contributors to social inclusion and cohesion.