

Needs, reads and possibilities in a suburban library in a multicultural setting

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Abstract:

Public libraries in multicultural suburbs face immense challenges. The library should provide equal access to all kinds and forms of information in our modern multicultural and multilingual society. It should be a universal, public, social, neutral and welcoming space for every patron, and a unique resource for self-development, promoting personal careers as well as human relations. But how do you realise all this in your everyday library work?

With our paper we would like to share our experience, describe methods and put forward ideas about the role and possibilities of a suburban library, taking Biskopsgården Library in Göteborg, Sweden, as our starting point. We will also include some of the knowledge gained from our editorial work on the book “Det mångspråkiga biblioteket – en nödvändig utopi” (BTJ Förlag, 2012) (“The multilingual library – a necessary utopia”)

Biskopsgården is a multicultural city district that has been targeted by Swedish media and public debate because of severe social problems which have lead to gang conflicts and many shootings.

The public library in Biskopsgården is a natural partner in a lot of the positive initiatives taking place aiming to change the city district as well as the public image of it.

Our paper will highlight successful methods like language cafés, computer courses, cultural events, study assistance and homework support. We will especially highlight the library as a democratic arena, the importance of openness and network activism and the amazing possibilities that an involved and creative friendship association may present.

The aim of the paper is to highlight the original educational task of the public library – to offer access to knowledge and participation in social progress for all, irrespectively of their ethnic or educational

background. A hundred years ago it was about the domestic working class population with a low education, whereas today it is also about the newly arrived migrants and refugees who need to acquire a new language and other tools to be able to take active part in society.

Keywords: Immigrants, multilingual library services, community organizing, social exclusion, Sweden

Needs, reads and possibilities in a suburban library in a multicultural setting

Since the Second World War many people have come to Sweden escaping war and persecution and to seek employment. As a consequence, Swedish society has changed in a relatively short time. Today one fifth of the Swedish population has fresh roots in other countries, and many of the other four fifths have also their original roots outside of Sweden. The EU membership entails, in principal, free movement of capital, goods, services and people, primarily within the Schengen area. New more liberal rules on work migration from the whole world, in parallel with a more restrictive asylum policy, lead to a new and constantly changing situation in terms of linguistic and cultural diversity all over the country.

As the global village enters each society, the library has to become bigger, more global and at the same time represent a safe place in everyday life; become “glocal”. With this article we wish to convey our belief in, and knowledge of, the unique opportunities the library has for becoming a dynamic force in the creation of a society in which diversity constitutes a richness. We hope to inspire placing the issue of the library’s democratic civil function for integration at the top of the agenda so that it is accorded its natural place in library services. To transform the library into a cosmopolitan living room in every day life is both a challenge and a necessity.

These ideas are not new, but they have not been at the top of the agenda in Sweden in recent years when the libraries have had to focus their energy and work on IT development, hunting higher loan figures in parallel with budget cuttings.

Challenges

Libraries in multilingual suburbs face immense challenges. They should, according to this IFLA session invitation, ”provide equal access to all kinds and forms of information in our modern multicultural and multilingual society; becoming a universal public, social, neutral and welcoming space for every patron, and a unique resource for self-development, building relationships and careers.”

All too many public libraries put their head in the sand and refuse to see that the current reality outside the library walls now is totally different from what it was only one generation ago. However, there are several amazing suburban libraries which have opened their eyes, opened their arms and embraced their important role as an arena for life long learning in the local community.

The case of Biskopsgården

Taking Biskopsgården Library in Göteborg as our starting point, we would like to share some of our experiences, describe some methods and put forward some suggestions about the role and opportunities of the suburban public library. We would also like to share some of the knowledge acquired when editing the book ”Det mångspråkiga biblioteket – en nödvändig

utopi” (“The multilingual Library – a necessary utopia”) (BTJ 2012), and working in the EU projects “The Interlingual Library” and “Libraries for All – ESME”.

The city district of Biskopsgården in north western Göteborg has been targeted by Swedish media and public debate because of severe social problems which have lead to gang conflicts and many shootings, some of them fatal.

In Göteborg, Sweden’s second largest city, every third resident has come from outside Sweden. The city is very segregated. In some suburbs more than half of the population are migrants, and in enclaves within the suburbs nearly all residents are first and second generation immigrants. The residents are from many different countries and more than one hundred languages are spoken in Biskopsgården, for example. As in many of the city districts of the same makeup, unemployment is high, particularly amongst the youth. The level of education, household income and general health are lower in the suburbs. Poverty and social exclusion results in major social problems and some of the youngsters are attracted to rival criminal gangs. This rivalry leads to violence and it is easy to get hold of fire arms. Residents describe their city district as unsafe and move out as soon as they can. Thus segregation increases. The sensational reports in the media about acts of violence present outsiders with a totally negative image of Biskopsgården, which in turn further enhances the segregation.

However, a lot is being done to counteract and turn around this negative trend, not only by the police authorities, but by many public bodies and NGOs.

Although the public library in Biskopsgården does not receive extensive funding, it is a natural partner in a lot of the positive initiatives taking place. Thanks to the commitment of the staff, the library cooperates actively with authorities and organizations and takes part in various local networks which aim to change both the reality and the image of the district.

Biskopsgården Library does not lack challenges, and larger funding would be more than welcome. There used to be another, much larger library in the northern center of Biskopsgården, but due to the limited local economy, the politicians decided to close it down some years ago. The dilemma of politicians is that the library is competing for available Kronor with the education, health care and social services.

Successful methods

The library can contribute a lot to the process of decreasing social exclusion and facilitating integration in the majority society. Now we would like to highlight some methods created in different libraries in Sweden and then adopted and further developed in other libraries, as in for example Biskopsgården Library.

Dare press – basic computing courses

The digital divide is the gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology, and those with very limited or no access at all. This is a problem that has been increasingly noticed in society, and many Swedish libraries have offered basic Internet courses since the late 1990s. At first the courses primarily targeted senior citizens.

The public libraries in Gamlestaden and Kortedala, branch libraries in Göteborg, applied for funds to cover the costs of several projects with the purpose of offering basic Internet courses to the public at large, not only to the elderly. A very important target group was the great number of immigrants in north eastern Göteborg, many of them with a poor educational

background. For a couple of years a number of courses with teachers talking not only Swedish, but also Arabic, Farsi, Somali, Serbo-Croatian, Chinese and other languages were held. After some time it became apparent that most people with a non-Swedish mother tongue actually preferred a Swedish speaking teacher who also gave them the opportunity to practice the new language.

Today most libraries in Sweden offer free basic courses for people in need of a second chance to start the voyage of becoming a digital citizen. There will certainly be a great need over the next few years for this kind of service for those who have not had the opportunity to learn ICT in school or through their work.

Language café

The “Language café” is a learning method which originated in Kortedala Library. The background comes from the basic computing courses held since the end of the 1990s. After sitting at the computer for some time the need for a relaxing coffee break was obvious. The breaks tended to become longer and showed an intrinsic value as border-less conversations where nobody cared about language, age, background or present social position.

The coffee breaks combined with the fact that many people go to the library to ask for training in the Swedish language encouraged the staff to start an activity called “Café Bridging Words – conversation in easy Swedish”. Once a week the library held an afternoon conversation group on a specific theme: a tradition, current affairs or a debate issue. On some occasions a guest was invited, for example a social security person or somebody from the local pharmacy.

The leader of the conversation has the role of seeing to it that each participant gets the chance to speak. The leader should also handle the conversation so that it doesn’t become too personal and avoid conflicts concerning politics or religion. The important thing is to create an atmosphere of dialogue, not a debate.

At present many libraries in Göteborg and the rest of Sweden offer free drop-in language cafés of different kinds. In some cases they are led by library staff, in other they are run by different NGO:s like the Red Cross. The number of participants varies from time to time; some people travel all around Göteborg to be able to participate in as many cafés as possible.

AnnaCarin Elf, librarian at Biskopsgården Library has, as a part of her action research project, analyzed and further developed the language café concept. She initiates the language café with all participants in a large group, and then she divides the participants into smaller groups in order to give all the participants the opportunity to speak and take an active part in the conversation. In each of the smaller groups there is somebody competent in Swedish and familiar with Swedish society. Apart from language practice the language café offers an opportunity to receive information and to discuss how things work in Sweden compared to other countries. It becomes a rewarding intercultural exchange and results in mutual integration.

Some libraries, like in Biskopsgården, also offer free English language cafés, which is appreciated as all higher studies in Sweden also requires English language skills, which not all migrants have had the opportunity to learn previously. The method can also be used for any other language now spoken in the country. Biskopsgården Library has tried Turkish and Kurdish language cafés and other libraries have held language cafés in Arabic. The

possibilities are endless! The library can thus become a place where you not only borrow language learning materials but also where you acquire a new language.

Life-long learning support

For newcomers to Sweden the first step into society is to start learning the language. Adult refugees are offered Swedish lessons (Swedish for immigrants), usually 15-20 hours per week. They also receive financial support during their first period of establishment. Non-refugees are also offered free tuition in Swedish, but only if they are registered as residents in Sweden and have obtained a Swedish personal code number. Thus, unemployed EU migrants who come to Sweden to look for a job do not have access to free Swedish language courses. In Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö, however, EU migrants and undocumented migrants can have a free library card and take part in all public library services.

Schools offering Swedish courses for newcomers rarely have libraries of their own. This has resulted in a growing demand in the public libraries for media, ICT and well educated staff. Many libraries have met these requirements either with project support or, as should be the case in every library, as part of regular activities. In Göteborg a project, VIL (Vuxna I Lärande – Adults in learning), has been going on since 2003. In the participating libraries, including Biskopsgården, extra media resources and computerized learning areas are offered. All kinds of material to encourage the learning of Swedish as a foreign language is purchased. Many learners also want to learn basic English and are offered resources for learning English in their own language, for example Arabic. The libraries also offer schoolbooks at different levels, both in Swedish and other languages. The libraries involved in the project organize the basic computing courses and language cafés already mentioned. The visitors can have individual guidance concerning ICT matters, searching for information and counselling. The described actions all take place in a learning area within the libraries. These are places especially designed to offer a quiet yet active environment to encourage people to learn more.

Homework assistance

Homework tasks can be difficult for many learners at different levels. Young people, parents and adults without sufficient knowledge of the Swedish language are certainly those who encounter the most problems. For this reason, many public libraries in areas with large numbers of immigrants offer homework assistance once a week or more. In many cases the activities are run by NGOs with volunteer students or senior citizens. Homework assistance is much appreciated both by adults and young people studying at different levels. In some cases homework assistance is specialized in fields like science or mathematics, but mostly volunteers handle all kinds of subjects through united efforts and by using the resources of the library. At Biskopsgården Library Red Cross Youth run the highly appreciated homework support.

Storytelling for children

Storytelling in Swedish takes place in most libraries. This has been developed in various ways to be more inclusive. Stories from many countries can be read in Swedish and that is one way to attract children with parents coming from different countries. You can tell folktales in simple Swedish and dramatize them so that all can understand and get caught up in the intrigue. Often the children recognize a similarity to folktales they have heard at home, set in a different environment, with other animals and another landscapes. The children will thus have a common experience while the event becomes an exchange across cultural boundaries and a realization that many stories are common to all cultures.

Some libraries arrange storytelling in different languages. Sometimes staff members have language skills, or the libraries involve preschool teachers and parents. Biskopsgården Library has had several storytelling projects in many languages with bilingual preschool teachers as storytellers and bilingual preschool children as actors performing for invited preschool groups. It is obviously desirable that this not only occurs in project form, but becomes an integral and funded part of the regular activities, just like Story Time in Swedish.

To sum up

A common trait of the methods presented above is that everyone is invited to participate. Basic computing courses, languages cafés and homework assistance are free services open to all, even if there is a greater need amongst those whose mother tongue is not Swedish. Usually these activities take place in libraries in districts with a diverse population. As the activities are open to all, the libraries become important as meeting places and intercultural arenas where dialogue, cooperation and meetings can occur.

All these methods demand a carefully reflected type of outreach library work. The key to success is cooperation. The local library has to work together with other local actors such as educational organizations from preschools to adult education as well as social services and NGOs.

Both AnnaCarin Elf and head of Biskopsgården Library Olivera Djudja emphasize the importance of good contact and continuous dialogue with the organizations and individual volunteers who are involved in the library services. It is important to ensure that the services maintain good quality and respects the values of the library – such as neutrality in terms of religion and politics and respect of human rights.

Library friends associations

Swedish public libraries have a long and varied tradition of Friends of Library associations which were created in connection with specific libraries for different purposes. In recent years mostly various action groups have been created to defend libraries threatened by closure.

The creation of the Library Friends association in Biskopsgården is unique. In the EU project, “Libraries for All – ESME”, where Biskopsgården Library was the Swedish pilot library, a multilingual advisory board was set up in order to help develop intercultural library work. The multilingual advisory board was further enhanced when the Swedish project partner, the Immigrant Institute, accepted three trainees; international master students in Intercultural Communication from the University of Gothenburg. One of them was Gülüzar Tuna, raised in Biskopsgården and a member of the advisory board.

This is how AnnaCarin Elf, one of the librarians involved in the multilingual advisory board at Biskopsgården Library, describes the creation and work of the advisory board:

”We started by inviting eight residents who represented the major languages spoken in Biskopsgården. They were all frequent library users and had a large network in the local area. We told the advisory board members that they were not only to represent themselves but also their network in and outside the library. During our first meeting, which three of the librarians attended, we informed them in more depth about our ideas about developing the library as an intercultural meeting place and a forum for lifelong learning. In addition to these

two big issues we were also aware that our facilities were not so attractive and that many visitors found it difficult to find what they were looking for on the premises.

At the same time the city district carried out a survey in which 100 residents (50 with Swedish background and 50 non-Swedish) were asked questions about their use of the library and its services, and were asked to suggest improvements. Based on the respondents' answers and the purposes of the ESME project – to develop the public library and create new models for intercultural library services – the advisory board chose five focus areas:

- Develop the library as a forum for language learning
- Bridge the digital gap
- Develop the library as an intercultural meeting place and offer cultural activities for children, young adults and families
- Improve the library environment (signs, comfort)
- Improve information and marketing

The first year was characterized by great enthusiasm and wild ideas. We looked at other libraries for inspiration. We had funding thanks to the EU project which enabled us to purchase literature in other languages, dictionaries, language courses and easy readers in Swedish to a greater extent than would otherwise have been possible. We invited authors and lecturers. We organized concerts, family days and story telling events in many languages. We ordered new signs, including signs in many languages for our non-Swedish department and we received help from our advisory board members and trainees to translate information into several languages. The advisory board took active part in all the activities. We met three to four times per semester. A constant ongoing stream of activities took place at the library.

In 2011, the year after the end of the ESME project, the advisory board decided to meet twice per semester instead of every month. I think we needed this in order to be able to reflect and evaluate our achievements and to figure out how we wanted to continue our work. The enthusiasm of the first year was replaced by a calmer involvement. The ESME project had ended, but we all wanted to continue our cooperation. The fact that we did not meet so often and were not able to make large and costly changes entailed a different way of working.”

Gülüzar Tuna, one of the members of the advisory board, describes the project from her point of view as a library user:

”Before the ESME project Biskopsgården Library was above all a meeting place where I met my acquaintances over a cup of coffee or tea when I visited the library to borrow or reserve books. Time and place stood still in a nostalgic way at the library. The ESME project gave me and several other residents the opportunity to take part in shaping, developing and concretizing ideas regarding the library program, library signs/display, media purchases etc. New influences from mutual exchanges made it possible to implement ideas in the library which I had previously experienced as ”non touchable”.

In order to reflect the surrounding local community it was important for the library to include local residents on the advisory board, or the Library Friends in Biskopsgården as we call ourselves today. The group represents the residents in the local community. We are representatives of a multicultural area. Of course we cannot know and foresee everybody's needs, but we try to be as open and receptive as possible to all developments. We are the ears, eyes and mouth of the residents. We pass on the words, interests and wishes of our acquaintances to the librarians and the other Library friends. Ideas are developed and

processed into a concrete plan, if it is possible, feasible and feels relevant. By listening actively to the residents' wishes and meeting their needs we create a venue for all. Bonds of trust grow when residents take part in and are integrated in the library activities and with time these bonds grow stronger and lead to deeper relationships. Volunteers may receive new assignments. It could be assuming responsibility for a themed book table, developing library programs, suggesting authors for author visits, running language cafés etc. Developing this kind of confidence as a resident and being able to participate in the library development is a positive way to integrate in society.

I wish the librarians would actively dare to ask library users if they would like to contribute to the library and library visitors with something that the library lacks. It could be anything between heaven and earth. We all have different knowledge and talents, not always visible on the outside. It could be showing someone how to look for an apartment via search engines on the Internet, how to download audio books etc. All this on a volunteer basis, and how many faithful visitors hasn't the library got? All these individuals with different backgrounds, interests and knowledge. If the library wants to develop and to reflect the surrounding society, well, then it should reflect its residents. Seize the opportunity to use us! Dare to take the step to ask enthusiasts who want nothing more than to help and contribute to the library and the local community.

Actually it's really only in direct contact with local residents that you find out what they wish for or aspire to. By asking and by exchanging ideas. It is the residents who make the library the multicultural meeting place that it is. Here people integrate in a natural way. Here new relationships and collaborations arise all the time. As soon as you start new activities at the library new constellations and new meetings follow. Thanks to the cooperation between the library and us residents in Biskopsgården, both with migrant background and Swedes, new contacts are established. This, in turn, leads to us all getting in touch with each others' cultures. Thanks to this cooperation you create a platform, a venue open to all, without rejecting anybody. When I think of myself and my surroundings – imagine the chance we have got, and how much we can give back.

Biskopsgården Library has always been important in my life and in that of my loved ones, in the past as well as today. Thanks to the project and other activities after the project end, I have, as a resident, created bonds with the librarians and also with many residents in the area. These bonds feel like the beginning of a lifelong cooperation and a lifelong friendship. In fact, everything is possible if the library gives us the chance and trust. Have confidence in us. Believe in us. Believe in the residents' collective power!"

In autumn 2012, the Library Friends in Biskopsgården was formally established as an NGO. Both residents and librarians are on the board. The NGO has applied for and received funding from the city district administration and other organisations. The broad networks and personal involvement of its members has resulted in a series of activities at the library, such as Family Saturdays, lectures on national minority languages, performances by local authors etc. The NGO also runs the library cafeteria in conjunction with various events. Thus a group of Somali boys baked waffles for the library visitors at the latest Family Saturday event.

This is how the association describes itself on its website/blog and on Facebook: "Biblioteksvännerna i Biskopsgården (BiB) – The Library Friends in Biskopsgården (BiB) is a religiously and politically neutral non-government association that functions as a bridge between the library and the residents in Biskopsgården. BiB aims to:

- Promote cooperation between the residents and the library
- Develop the library as a multilingual meeting place
- Offer cultural and learning activities for children, youth, adults and families
- Improve the library environment
- Improve information
- Bridge the digital gap

Both AnnaCarin Elf and Olivera Djudja emphasize the important link-working role of the NGO, and they have great expectations for future activities and the influx of new members. They think it is important that librarians are also represented on the board together with the local residents to ensure ongoing cooperation with the library.

Democratic arena

The majority of the residents in Sweden are library users, and everyone has their idea of what a library is and what it should be. You go to the library for different reasons – in order to receive help with your homework, read newspapers from your home country, get help to fill in forms, borrow books about most things in the language you prefer to read in, make genealogical research, take part in cultural events, receive health advice, read a journal, learn Swedish or another language, see an exhibition, hang out with friends or on your own, play chess, yes, the list is almost endless. To sum up, this means that the library is what we call a low intensive meeting place, a place where each and every one of us is welcome to use the public resources based on our needs, together with others, but without any demands for interaction. Research shows that this kind of low intensive meeting place promotes integration more than a high intensive one which requires a specific common interest, like a chess club, or group belonging, like an ethnic association.

In Sweden today, both religion and major ideologies have lost much of their power as orienting systems. These systems give most people a common meaning to life and thus keep society together. People now seek for something else, no longer one answer but many, and the library is an arena of diversity. It can be crucial that this place really is accessible and welcoming for all in a time when there are also tendencies to seek simple solutions and to avoid nuances and compromises in an increasingly complex world.

This venue of knowledge and experience is one of the most important institutions which hold together a multicultural reality. The library provides opportunities for the development of a more cross-cultural structure, necessary in order to benefit from the richness that diversity brings for both individuals and society. You have to see "cultures" not as isolated coral reefs which grow and have to take root in the same physical place as the former generations, but as magnetic fields which are constantly changing, affecting and integrating with each other. This means perceiving culture more as communication and the future, rather than tradition and history.

The coral reef and the magnetic field perspectives are two different ways to analyze the same reality. In some contexts one of the theories is preferred. The magnetic field view needs to be applied for handling a "multicultural" society. Very few countries, if any, are inhabited by "one single people", and with modern technology a common territory is less necessary in order to hold together a subculture in the current ever growing, cosmopolitan, World Culture. We are all part of many different "cultures". A 25 year-old lesbian librarian residing in Sweden with a Finnish mother and an Indian father, who is vegan, socialist and Buddhist, and

whose greatest hobby is traditional Indian weaving, she cannot be understood from the coral reef perspective, cannot be unambiguously categorized under a single label.

The debate on multiculturalism and integration is more relevant than ever and the tone is often disparaging. Senior politicians go out and say that multiculturalism is a failure and right wing populism is spreading at a frightening rate. Yet it is a fact that we all live in multicultural societies and so it is important to see the richness and opportunities this offers instead of only focussing on what are perceived as problems.

The most important thing is to maximize the possibilities and to communicate over all "cultural boundaries", to create as huge a cultural and social interface as possible, to strive for the widest interculturalism. Of course the library is a necessary part of such a common interface, while at the same time offering everyone the possibility to grow their own coral too.

The public library appears to be the rational, obvious solution, when it comes to satisfying the seemingly conflicting interests and needs, and at the same time, creating a common diversity, in cooperation with other organizations.

The library can be a venue for many voices which form new local identities and history together. Several suburban libraries in areas similar to Biskopsgården, e.g. Fisksätra in Nacka and many of the libraries in Botkyrka, both municipalities surrounding Stockholm, have profiled themselves very successfully as democratic intercultural venues. Fisksätra Library has initiated a local interreligious dialogue between Muslim, Jewish and Christian representatives, which resulted in the joint creation of God's House.

The library has also initiated a museum/archive for Fisksätra residents' life stories and artistic expression from the whole world, a way of forming a local identity and history. Fisksätra Library calls itself @rena for democracy, which also entails such practical things as borrowing speaker systems, megaphones and other necessary equipment needed to organize meetings and demonstrations.

Open Stage, Open Meeting and an International Bookfair are some of the democratic venues which Hallunda Library in Botkyrka has created for intercultural meetings, debates and performances. It has also started a project aiming to reduce illiteracy among newcomers. Literacy is the foundation for active citizenship and a condition for access to library and information.

For several years, most Swedish public libraries have been used as advance voting locations in the general elections, a natural development of the library's democratic mandate, which probably has resulted in a higher turnout in suburbs like Biskopsgården.

In both Fisksätra and Hjällbo Library in Göteborg residents have asked to hold a gathering at the library after the funeral of prominent persons in the city district, because the library is perceived as a natural and neutral venue.

Biskopsgården Library and its Library Friends association with their common vision of the library as a bridge-building intercultural venue see large opportunities for further development in every sense. The idea is to be able to further together open up more parts of the library and also involve other associations such as senior citizens to run the library café

and then via the café services involve them more in the library and its services. Thus the role of the library can be broadened, provided the doors are kept open. Olivera Djudja, head of the library, calls for more openness from other institutions, organizations and individual officials in the city district. Less territorial thinking and “drainpipe mentality” would make the district more open and accessible, thus increasing the sense of social security. Why do they all work between 08.00 and 16.30, when you actually need people in the evenings? Why do organizations isolate themselves in their own premises when premises can be better used shared, like the library?

Reads and needs

In their book “Public Libraries and Social Justice” John Pateman and John Vincent ask if libraries should focus on reads or needs, i.e. hold on to the traditional mission of the library to provide reads in premises made for this purpose, or try to satisfy the more social needs in an increasingly excluding society. Their answer is within their question. Time has already passed for the traditional library. But they throw the baby out with the bathwater!

Nowadays you often hear, almost like a slogan, that “library is not only books”. It is an unfortunate expression implicitly signalling that books are a bit old-fashioned, on their way out, and now libraries are indeed much more trendy, offering much more modern material. It would have been somewhat better to state that “a library is much more than books”. It is books, newspapers, magazines etc. that visitors expect the library to offer, and the dissemination of the written word that is the unique mission of the library.

All the other things that libraries do, like offering cultural events, courses, meetings, exhibitions etc, could actually be carried out by some other organization. This is also true for activities like language cafés, homework support, study assistance and other services promoting integration, services which more and more libraries are launching. Libraries often initiate services for which they perceive a great need, as noone else is taking care of it, and the library has suitable premises and skilled staff responsive to more or less explicit needs. All this is very commendable, and libraries are often really the right place, but the risk is that the unique mission of the library is neglected – the media supply which only the library is able to carry out.

Next door to Biskopsgården Library a civic office is about to open. It will take on many of the issues and questions that the library now tries to handle, i.e. people’s social and personal problems, and offer individual community guidance, housing information, consumer services and financial counselling. There are other organisations planning to start both language training and homework support. From the library’s point of view it is very positive that more people can help, cooperate and jointly agree on who will do what. It is important that there is no rivalry. In a district with so many problems everyone has to pull in the same direction. Hopefully the library will then be able to focus more on “reads”. To work with media, to purchase and loan books, magazines, newspapers etc in many languages is laborious. It is perceived by many as difficult work with a poor return in the lending statistics. A single dictionary costs the same as ten CDs of popular music. While the dictionary renders maximum one loan, the CDs may render 30 loans in the same time span. If the library funding is based on the number of loans, which is currently often the case, this becomes a Catch-22 for the library.

The development and upgrading of multilingual library services, which can at last be perceived in many places in the country, has a tendency to be about everything except media purchases. You choose what attracts immediate attention and success, instead of the long term tedious work of building a relevant media stock in a reasonable number of languages.

”Buy on demand” has been a popular slogan for quite some time, but most library visitors do not approach the staff, and may or may not find what they are looking for. The library is above all, especially for those who have language difficulties, what exists in the physical library, not what the librarian may find in the catalogue for later delivery. Creating a true multilingual library, where as many visitors as possible will find books and periodicals in their first language in the local library, is a challenge that all too few libraries accept today.

It is a lot easier to purchase all the media that are important for integrating into Swedish society, i.e. language courses, dictionaries, easy readers, schoolbooks for primary and secondary education, magazines in easy Swedish etc. Yet many libraries have major gaps even regarding these purchases. These needs were explicitly expressed by the advisory board members in Biskopsgården.

The Internet provides fantastic opportunities for multilingual library services. Therefore it is of utmost importance that each library has plenty of well-equipped computers and competent staff who really have time for guiding and tutoring. TV, radio, newspapers, news sites, dictionaries, language courses and many other things from most parts of the world are out there in the cloud. Many find their way and help each other, but of course the library staff has to be up to date in this endless digital space and be able to find at least the nearest planets. An introduction to all of this should be included in the basic computer courses which more and more libraries now offer.

Media stored digitally or in print is and remains the unique primary mandate of the library. So, both reads and needs!

Education and participation

The library cannot end gang conflicts nor change the overall social situation, not in Biskopsgården nor elsewhere. However, the library is a venue for meetings, conversations, education, competence development and provides visitors with some of the security and calm needed, and a vantage point that can lead them onwards.

This is to highlight the original mission of the public library, to provide all, regardless of background and education, with opportunities to obtain knowledge and participate in the community development. A hundred years ago it was all about the unskilled Swedish working class. Now it is about the newcomers who need language and other tools in order to participate in the new society. “Being educated is to be able to navigate in society”, says AnnaCarin Elf, “and the library should be the natural place for learning this.”

New voices to be heard

The next step may be to copy the initiative launched in Fisksätra; the library becoming a venue for more voices and the creation of an expanded and renewed cultural heritage. Who writes history and how it is written is of utmost importance for our democratic development. People today both want to and can express themselves. We see this in social media where particularly youngsters take the chance to be seen and acknowledged.

Cultural heritage is not a fixed set, but something ever changing, dynamic, which can contribute to openness and broadening views. Together with popular educational and other organizations the library can participate in building a new, inclusive and diverse local history. Almost every library in the country has a local collection comprising literature about the municipality and district. This may be used as a good starting point for the collection of stories using different media reflecting how the local reality changes and how new identities are formed.

The libraries can, by using new technological possibilities, become "a Next Generation Resource Center" offering space for a new type of local journalism – "hyper local journalism" and the printing of books, print on demand, self publishing. Allen Weiner, research vice president at Gartner, used these concepts in a symposium held in November 2011 where he encouraged libraries to take the chance that new technology offers and also encouraged librarians to work more as "curators". Many educational associations organize media workshops and many participants create texts and images. In cooperation with a library it could be possible to develop and make what is happening in such groups and study circles available in new forms. When people living in an area join together and express themselves, make themselves seen and heard, they can influence society. Thus you can create empowerment, local development and cultural heritage.

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