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[Babies and Toddlers in Public Libraries of Oslo and Surroundings*

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Abstract: This article presents reflections on Norwegian public library services for children aged 0–3 made during study visits carried out in 2011 and 2013. Services have been analyzed on the example of two branches of the central public library in Oslo (Deichmanske – Oslo Public Library) in Lambertseter and Grünerløkka, as well as libraries located in nearby towns – Lørenskog, Drammen, Øvre Eiker in Hokksund and Gjøvik. The author shares observations on the operation and the diversity of activities offered to the youngest readers, postulating a greater emphasis to create special pre-reading strategies.

Keywords: children aged 0–3, public libraries, Oslo libraries.

Children have always been one of the most desirable and graceful groups of users in public libraries. Many years of experience have resulted in Norwegian libraries with adaptation of buildings to their needs and development of interesting forms of cooperation. However, in case of children younger than 3 years old libraries must prepare to take on new challenges.

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Babies and Toddlers...

Since the publication of the document *Guidelines for Library Services to Babies and Toddlers* (2007) 8 years have passed. The purpose of this report is to put librarians' attention to services for children in their early years of life and their parents. Until the 1970–1980's, this group of users was usually not taken into account when planning public library services. Today, the libraries meet the needs of the youngest “readers”, believing that in this way they contribute to the development of toddlers' early literacy skills, as well as to caretakers' education. They do this by organizing various activities, targeting both the children and their parents, helping them in the process of bringing up children. This early introduction to the world of books will, hopefully, result not only in a growing number of readers, but also indirectly, in positive influence on the achievements in the subsequent school education.

European efforts

In many library institutions of the Western European countries, we can observe a growing tendency to give priority to programming for the youngest children. This activity is followed by collection development, including materials like toys and necessary items like bathinettes. Especially the Scandinavian countries, considered by many European librarians as a model in the field of librarianship (children's as well), seem to have great cultural events and projects for children aged 0–3 years. This is evidenced by a properly furnished library, stocked with books, toys and playing facilities in Sweden (such as Kulturhuset in Stockholm), and tailored to the needs of infants programs (eg. Bogstart in Denmark). The leitmotif of the changes and projects is a deep conviction among the librarians of the great values in meeting with literature and books in the first years of life.

Public libraries in Norway are subject to change, both when it comes to architecture and within the services. Both Oslo (Lambertseter Branch), Lørenskog and Drammen demonstrate examples of customization of libraries to the highest world standards, organizing their space and services in an attractive way. It is worth to remember that specially organized activities may be the beginning of a great library adventure for the youngest readers.

Today's observations

The aim of two visits completed in late 2011 and 2013 in selected libraries of Oslo and the surrounding area was to search the Norwegian libraries for the services mentioned above. Based on literature and interviews with librarians it was possible to make a few observations. While the range of

activities for children three years and older, as well as cooperation with institutions (kindergartens, schools and others) in Norwegian libraries are rich and constantly developed, the youngest users are deprived of a special program. This does not mean that children with parents are not welcome in libraries, on the contrary – the facilities are as far as possible being adapted to their needs, and the collections are systematically being developed with books and toys for this group of age. If the library offers activities for infants, it rather depends on the attitude and commitment of the individual children's librarian, as well as the management of the library. Even without a centrally developed program, librarians strive to provide maximum comfort for parents with children, for example through the easy navigation indoors for the baby carriage holders, securing the furniture, providing additional materials relating to the development and education of children, but also, perhaps most importantly, showing kindness and understanding for the needs of this specific group of readers. Thanks to the enthusiasts in libraries, regular meetings are being organized, introducing youngsters to the world of books.

The most commonly used work method is reading aloud, it appears in all the visited libraries. Some of them carry out projects aimed at the youngest – a branch of Oslo Public Library (Deichmanske) in Grünerløkka, as well as Øvre Eiker public library in Hokksund (65 km from Oslo) and in a library in Gjøvik (120 km from Oslo). The first of the three is in a special situation because of the building erected in 1914, and despite its contemporary modernity, today it does not fit the needs of small users. Librarians, being aware of the imperfections in space planning, are trying to adapt to the conditions. Therefore, on the day set for “Knøttestund” (“Toddler Hour” welcoming children aged 1–3 years), children's branch is closed for a few hours, and thick blankets are spread out on the floor. Parents with children enjoy activities of different kinds; they listen to short stories invented or read by librarians based on a selected object (toy, fruit, etc.), and then participate in exercises related to the theme of the day (singing, rocking and other fun). Library staff considered how the program best could attract target groups like unemployed parents and staying-at-home mothers with small children. Øvre Eiker library also organizes meetings every second Monday called “Book Bear” Club. Activities are based mainly on reading aloud. The library, located in the town hall building, with the municipal swimming pool next door, does not have an optimal space to handle the youngest readers, however, the colorful furniture and shelving and the collections of books and toys make the place nice and cozy.

Regular meetings for children aged 0–2 years and their parents are arranged in a library in Gjøvik under the name “Tripp Trapp Småbarnstreff”

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(“Tripp Trapp Small Children Zone”). Expected activities include singing, nursery rhymes, reading aloud, motion games and dancing, and at the end the discussion and refreshments.

Library facilities, having in mind the welfare and safety of children, often go for interesting solutions. One of them involves the transformation of the space in accordance with the trends of “open space” which, with its indisputable advantages, may cause library anxiety, especially in a group of small children. Norwegian libraries try to prevent this by setting “security areas”, which are partially enclosed space, such as the castle of books in Drammen with a set of pillows in the middle, or the children’s lodge in Asker. Sometimes even simple colored tape designating the way to the children’s area is a good way to help (Deichmanske Main Library), as well as shelving arranged in such way as to create a semi-open space, hiding the timid reader.

The need for special programs

For many years, Norway has nurtured family-oriented traditions, and the majority of cultural institutions, like museums and cinemas have adapted to the needs of families. However, the intensification of the librarians’ work with specially prepared activities for infants should be considered due to the strongly signaled requests from parents. The problem is the lack of a coherent centrally set of strategies therefore most of the activities taking place in libraries is the result of bottom-up initiatives implemented mainly thanks to the enthusiasm of librarians and the involvement of local leaders.

The examples of activities in Norwegian public libraries remind us that modern buildings or generous budgets does not always guarantee the best quality library services. Even the less wealthy libraries and those less well adapted to the needs of the readers may be the center of culture and entertainment; the most important condition is still motivation and enthusiasm of librarians themselves. Properly supported by their superiors when it comes to education and organizing, they can contribute to the creation of an attractive library, willingly visited by members of the community.

References

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Dzieci i niemowlęta w bibliotekach publicznych Oslo i okolic

STRESZCZENIE: Artykuł przedstawia rozważania nad usługami norweskich bibliotek publicznych dla dzieci w wieku 0-3 lat poczynione podczas wizyt studyjnych zrealizowanych w 2011 i 2013 r. Analizie poddane zostały usługi dwóch filii centralnej biblioteki publicznej w Oslo (Deichmanske – Oslo Public Library) w Lambertseter i Grünerløkka, a także bibliotek rozmieszczonych w pobliskich miejscowościach – Lørenskog, Drammen, Øvre Eiker w Høksund oraz Gjøvik. Autorka dzieli się obserwacjami na temat obsługi i różnorodności zajęć oferowanych najmłodszym czytelnikom, postulując większy nacisk władz bibliotecznych na tworzenie specjalnych strategii przed czytelnich.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: dzieci w wieku 0-3 lat, biblioteki publiczne, biblioteki w Oslo