

Denmark is a small country with 5 million inhabitants who have Danish as the mother tongue.

In Denmark we have a long tradition for equal and free access to the public libraries.

The Danish Public Libraries

We got our first public library act in 1920.

Since 1964 the public library act has ensured that all municipalities in

Denmark have their own public library with a trained librarian as the leader and a department for children. This official recognition of children as an independent group, with a right to materials and special attention according to their requirements, has done much towards developing children's libraries both within the library system and in the soci-

ety at large.

The leading principles of the Danish Library Act of 1994 can be summarized as follows:

- The aim of the public libraries is to promote the spreading of knowledge, education and culture by providing books and other suitable materials free of charge.

- The public libraries should aim at:

 - making music on gramophone records, cassettes and compact discs available

 - making computer-programs and other electronic materials available

 - adapt the opening hours to the need of the users.

- The public libraries should also aim at serving those children and adults who are unable to visit the library in

- The public libraries should co-operate with the school libraries and the same classification systems should be used.

- The objectives of the public libraries must be achieved by providing a selection of materials exhibition quality, topically and comprehensiveness. The selection must be based solely upon these criteris, and not on the religious, moral and political content of the works in question.

What do these words mean to the child, the parents, the educators?

Every child and every adult in Denmark may go from the street into any public library, get a borrower's card go out again with a pile of books in any corner of the country.

In Denmark professionals say that a child have a radius of one kilometer within which the child can move.

In the good 60's and the 70's we tried to place a library offer for all children within that radius.

Many new main libraries and branch-libraries were built and mobile libraries were seen all over the country.

In the economic bad 80's there was a tendency towards centralising.

If the distance between the child and the library is too long the child can find the books in the kindergarten and in the school libraries.

In Denmark most small children go to kindergarten while their parents are working because women work away from home as men. The pedagogues usually visit the local library with a group of children every month to borrow books and maybe to watch a film or a play.

One fifth of our lendings from the children's libraries are referring to the kindergarten. The children get a good habit of listening to stories and watching the picture-

books.

When the small children come to the library with their parents on a Saturday or in the afternoon the children surprise their parents because they know the books by titles even though they cannot read.

Through more convenient openinghours we try in Denmark to make it more comfortable for small children's families to visit the library. Openinghours on Sundays are a new successful service in many big cities.

Good reading habits ensure that the child has acquired a good language through storytelling, adults talking with the child and through good books.

Good reading habits require good books suitable for the child's maturity and skilled librarians and educators who can bring the child in connection with the right books at the right time. In Denmark investigations showed that children in the countryside at the beginning of the century did not read as much as children in the cities. But when libraries and librarians appeared in the villages the children in the countryside began to read as much as other children.

So access to books and the right intermediary are necessary for good reading habits.

Children between 9 and 15 years read on average 80 books a year borrowed from the school libraries and children's libraries. But nevertheless librarians and educators are worried because they see a tendency towards more and more children and adults who are not able to read well.

In Copenhagen I have plans of making a reading campaign for children in a noncultural area to increase their reading habits by reading for pleasure. I find it very important that the children get the right books to read.

Maybe the right books will be fantasy books or even computermagazines. I have seen children in Copenhagen who are not able even to read a comic. We must find a way to get the children interested in reading. Young boys are reading less than girls.

Maybe because we do not have the right books or because they think they are doing more interesting things.

If you cannot read properly you cannot participate in the democratic proces in your country.

So the libraries have a responsibility for combating illiteracy.

Usergroups or userpanels is a method we will try in Denmark in order to get the right materials for the young people who are dropping out of the library because the librarians bought the wrong books for them. Novels and nonfiction books do not attract them but if you listen to them you might find out what materials they need.

In Denmark we have two pints of view about what kind of books the libraries should buy.

The librarians want to buy books that are needed and the critics and literates think the public libraries should buy quality books only.

I think we should buy books that children will read for pleasure for the sake of good lives and for the sake of democracy.

Vivi Fahnoe

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in Copenhagen*