

Biskopsgårdens public library as a multicultural meeting place - Development after the ESME-project

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***Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to examine how libraries are working with multilingual speakers in their area and how they can develop library services with help from the locals. We focus on how Biskopsgårdens public library in Gothenburg, Sweden, has worked as a multicultural meeting place after their participation in the ESME project. The ESME-project "Libraries for all" was an EU project that ran from 2009 to 2011 with the goal to develop a multicultural library service. We conducted one semi-structured interview and performed an observation at the library. The main results we found was that the library became more open minded and cooperative with the locals in Biskopsgården after their participation in the ESME-project. Our conclusions are that a project such as ESME surely can work but to gain the long-lasting effect on society you have to keep on the good work and develop your operation.*

Keywords: Public libraries, multilingual, ESME-project.

Introduction

Sweden is a country with many different cultures and therefore we think it is interesting to research how the public library works with multilinguals and issues that can be connected to these groups. The public library is supposed to be seen as a place in the community that is open to all, free and with no judgment. The library is supposed to reflect the society it is a part of and pay special attention to groups with special needs, either if it is materials for vision impaired or materials for those who are in the process of learning a new language.

The Swedish library law declares that special attention should be paid to people with disabilities, immigrants and other minorities. The libraries shall offer literature in other languages than Swedish and literature adapted to these group's needs.

8 § Folk- och skolbiblioteken skall ägna särskild uppmärksamhet åt funktionshindrade samt invandrare och andra minoriteter bl.a. genom att erbjuda litteratur på andra språk än svenska och i former särskilt anpassade till dessa gruppers behov.

8 § Public- and school libraries shall devote special attention to disabled as well as immigrants and other minorities for instance by offering literature in other languages than Swedish and in forms especially costumed to these group's needs.

The ESME-project "Libraries for all" (European Strategy for Multicultural Education) was an EU-project that ran from 2009 to 2011. Four pilot libraries from four different countries were chosen to participate and start up the project. It was Czech Republic, Austria, Germany and Sweden. The goal was to develop a multicultural library service and at the same time make multilinguals involved in the shaping of the library. The library in Sweden, Biskopsgårdens library, is our focus in this paper.

Biskopsgårdens public library in Gothenburg is a typical Swedish public library that services the local's needs and interests. It is financed by the city of Gothenburg. According to the

Swedish library law the library should reflect the society it is a part of and this is very noticeable in Biskopsgårdens library. As well as it is a place for education, information and culture it is also a strong meeting point for the people living in Biskopsgården.

Research problem

In this study we aim to research Biskopsgårdens public library. How has the library worked as a multicultural meeting place after the ESME project? Has the library become more open for immigrants after the project? Did the librarians notice any difference since the ESME project? Was the ESME project enough to make the library more open for immigrants?

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to study how Biskopsgårdens public library in Gothenburg, Sweden works as a multicultural meeting place in an area with a high proportion of immigrants. In the spring of 2009 Biskopsgårdens public library was offered to be a part of the two year ESME project. The purpose of the project was to develop the public library from the locals' needs and interest.

We like to find out what changed at Biskopsgårdens public library after the ESME project, if the project really changed anything for the library. These kinds of projects usually take a lot of time and cost a lot of money and therefore it is interesting to research if the ESME project was useful.

Research questions

- How has the library worked as a multicultural meeting place after the ESME project?
- Do the librarians notice any difference?
- How do immigrants use the library as a meeting place?
- How does the library get immigrants interested in coming to the library?

The ESME-project

The public library in Biskopsgården was chosen as a pilot library on behalf of Sweden for ESME due to an interesting mixture of people with two or more cultures, who also used the library to a high extent. The district administration and the library staff also had a big interest for such a venture. The projects vision was also consistent with the library in Biskopsgårdens policy.

The public library in Biskopsgården, as well as the other libraries in the project, put together a reference group with librarians and locals who used the library to a large extent and also spoke other languages beside Swedish. They also represented the biggest group of languages in the area. The focus for the project was to develop the library as a place for language learning as well as developing the library as a multicultural meeting place, overcoming the digital gap, improving the library environment, improving and adjusting displays and information signs and to work with advertisements in different languages to better reach out to the locals. They also put a lot of effort on activities such as language cafés, family events, theaters and fairytales in different languages, to name a few.

Method

The method used in this report is a qualitative case study on Biskopsgårdens public library in Gothenburg which already works by a multicultural approach. The research method used in

this report is a case study. This is the most suitable method when the focus is on one specific case (Bryman, 2008, p.73). In this case the intention is to focus on the outcome of the project and what happened after.

We did an empirical study with one group interview with a qualitative approach and observed the library as a physical room. We made a semi structured group interview with two of Biskopsgårdens librarians that worked with the ESME project. The reason why we interviewed these two librarians is that they worked a lot with the project and were involved in the ESME project from start and were able to give an interview. One of the pros with doing a semi structured interview is that the librarians were able to speak freely about their experiences and thoughts on the matter. The advantage of doing a group interview was that our informants were able to help each other to remember and the interview became more relaxed and more like a conversation. The questions we asked were broad but at the same time had a specific theme and “thread”.

Theory

We built our foundation on the Norwegian LIS professor Ragnar Audunsons theories, which made a lot of research about the importance of low intensive meeting places in a society. The library as a meeting place is a research focus of his, and he is an authority in the area. In this paper we focused on his texts ”Bibliotek som møtesplasser i det flerkulturelle samfunnet” (Libraries as meeting places in the multicultural society) and “The public library as a meeting-place in a multicultural and digital context - The necessity of low-intensive meeting-places”. Audunson claims that it is utterly important to distinguish between high- and low intensive meeting places. He read upon the importance of low intensive meeting places, where people can meet without the need to be a part of a particular group. A high intensive meeting place on the other hand is characterized by the fact that people in it have something in common. His theories are rooted in Habermas theories on the public sphere. Audunson states that the public libraries traditional roles as an agent for a democratic society goes hand in hand with Habermas theories on the public sphere. Audunson takes these theories and reflects them on the library field. He also draws parallels with Putnam’s theories on the importance of voluntary associations, the importance of people meeting face to face no matter social class and barriers. Audunson also describes the library as a creator of social capital. The library is an arena for social integration. For example an immigrant in the process of learning a new language, can in the library meet locals who speak the majority language, who maybe would have been hard to get in touch with without the library and the open arena it constitute.

This study is also built upon the book from Mikael Stigendal, “Biblioteket i samhället – en gränsöverskridande mötesplats?” (The library in the community – a cross-border meeting point?). Stigendal writes about how the library should be a place for everyone, even though you don’t speak the language. You don’t have to be a part of any special group, you can just come to the library without anyone knowing who you are. He writes about what the library should stand for. Stigendal also explains the challenges immigrants can face when moving to a new country, for example language barriers. He explains the risk of how easily immigrants can feel left outside and fall into social exclusion. With social exclusion he for example means when people feel themselves standing outside a certain fellowship at home, at work, in the community or in a new country etc. That person doesn’t feel welcome and feels like no one understands them. Stigendal says that the library has a certain social responsibility towards those people who have fallen into social exclusion. You shouldn’t feel unwelcome at the library. On the contrary to social exclusion is social inclusion - when you integrate to the

community. There are two different ways to integrate; system integration and social integration. By system integration Stigendal means the fixed frames in one's life; work, social network and routines. Social integration is on the other hand when you become a part of the society; you should look a certain way and dress in a specific way.

You adapt and accept the common language of the society. By doing so you may have to give up certain aspects of your old life, your old culture, that are inconsistent with the new society. At last Stigendal says that the library should not distinguish between people who have integrated or not, the library often targets those who have fallen into social exclusion, those who feel left outside. The public library often offers different activities for people who may feel left outside, for example unemployed and immigrants. The library then offers adult education and language education to help those people feel more like a part of the community. (Stigendal, 2008)

Results

One of the biggest differences after the project was that the librarians at Biskopsgårdens library got to know their users better. They became more open and user friendly and have better conversations with their users. After ESME they have started to listen to their users more and using them as a resource, they are more involved. The users are also more forward in speaking to the personnel and have ideas about what the library can offer.

We asked the librarians if they thought that a project like ESME was enough to make the library more open towards different cultures, languages and to include more people in the library than before. One of our informants pointed out that a project for the projects sake is not enough, but when you notice that something works, you keep going. And that is what happened in Biskopsgården. They also mention that the ESME-project gave them new air under their wings and also now that they reached a new point and a new way to work they can't go back to the time before the project. As we understand it, they have pushed a button and our interpretation is that the project actually helped them to go further with making the library more open to all.

We also think that in this particular case the prospects were good for a project as ESME. Our informants, the other staff and especially the reference group, were very engaged in the project. The project gave them a budget that made plans and ambitions realizable, but we also think it is more than that. We get the picture that the staff on Biskopsgårdens library and the locals generally had a big interest in the society, saw the big advantage with working with questions as the multilingual, multicultural and to make the library more open to all.

According to the informants statements and their experience of the ESME-project it seems that such a project can make a big difference and make the library more open and user friendly. The informant's answers were consistent with what we read in the literature, that the library became more open after the project and user friendly.

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