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Public libraries, literary art activities and social inclusion

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on literary art activities in public libraries. The aim is to stimulate discussion on how literary art activities can promote socially sustainable development, a sense of community, and social inclusion.

In Finland, public libraries organise low-threshold literary art activities that encourage both written and verbal expression, e.g. literary art clubs, rap and comics workshops, and creative writing groups. Literary art activities provide opportunities for the improvement of literacy, self-expression and social readiness, and the strengthening of self-esteem and identity. Moreover, they can promote community spirit. Libraries respond to current societal challenges and the needs of special groups by tailoring activities for immigrants, people requiring special assistance, and people at risk of social exclusion. For the promotion of social goals, it is important that libraries reach out to people who are not active library users.

Finally, the paper presents an ongoing doctoral research on literary art activities in Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic public libraries. The hypothesis of the research is that literary art activities in public libraries prevent social exclusion and promote social inclusion equality, and wellbeing.

Keywords: literary art activities, social inclusion, public libraries, creative writing, literacy

Introduction

Can public libraries participate in the prevention of social exclusion and in the promotion of social inclusion with the help of literary art activities? I shall discuss this question primarily from the perspective of Finnish libraries. I do not intend to give extensive answers, nor is it possible; instead, my aim is to stimulate discussion on how literary art activities in public

libraries can promote socially sustainable development, a sense of community, and social inclusion.

The term *literary art activities* has several definitions depending on context, language, and culture. Its closely related concept is *creative writing*. According to a simple and frequently used definition in Finland, literary art activities are the same as creative linguistic expression. It is often intertwined with other art forms, e.g. music, performing arts, or visual arts. I will not expand on the terminology any further but, rather, mainly illustrate with examples what I signify with literary art activities.

Public libraries organise versatile literary art activities

In Finland, literary art activities organised by libraries have traditionally centred more on the reception of literary art instead of its production. Examples of such reception-oriented activities are story times, book clubs, book talks, and author visits. Nevertheless, literary art activities focusing on expression have gradually gained a stronger foothold in libraries.

Libraries organise literary art activities that encourage both written and verbal expression, e.g. babies' nursery rhyme times, children's multi-disciplinary literary art clubs, adolescents' comics workshops, adults' creative writing groups, elderly people's reminiscence and storytelling occasions, and immigrants' language café meetings. These activities can be carried out together with local associations and other cooperation partners.

Literary art activities in Finnish libraries are innovative. For instance, libraries in the city of Vantaa have introduced interactive storytelling by combining programming, video game design, and creative writing (Hyytiäinen & Mäensivu 2017). Rap workshops have proven to be an excellent way to get especially boys excited about linguistic self-expression and reading. At the moment, open mic events – where participants can read aloud their texts – are gaining popularity.

Libraries arrange literary art activities in their own premises and also in schools, elderly care homes, prisons and, increasingly, even in digital environments. For the promotion of social goals, it is important that libraries also reach out to people who are not active library users (Hokkanen 2015, 12–13). This can be done e.g. by utilising mobile libraries to introduce literary art activities to villages and neighbourhoods.

One major obstacle in the organisation of literary art activities is the lack of resources. Partly for this reason, libraries use their core budget and even external project funding to carry out their activities. The Finnish Public Library Project Register is an online service detailing public library development projects and good practices. The project register shows that there are literary art workshops for children, adolescents, working-age people, and the elderly. Literary art projects are often connected to the promotion of reading as well as to media literacy, learning environment, community, and improvement of services. The register's project descriptions show that libraries respond to current societal challenges and the needs of special groups by tailoring literary art activities for immigrants, people requiring special assistance, and people at risk of social exclusion. (Ministry of Education and Culture & Council for Public Libraries 2019.)

Strengthened social function of public libraries

Throughout their existence, Finnish public libraries have had a social function as promoters of literacy and education. However, immigration and the changing age structure, to name a few, force libraries to offer more versatile services catering to different customer groups. The Finnish Public Libraries Act, the Finnish Municipal Cultural Activities Act, and the Socially Sustainable Finland 2020 strategy provide sources for the further study of the libraries' social function.

The Finnish Public Libraries Act entered into force in 2017 and emphasises community, pluralism, and cultural diversity. The Act promotes equal opportunities for everyone to access education, culture, and lifelong learning as well as supports active citizenship, democracy, and freedom of expression. Public libraries are tasked with providing guidance and support for the development of literacy skills; providing premises for learning, recreational activities, working, and civic activities; and promoting social and cultural dialogue. The Act also emphasises extensive cooperation, and libraries boast education and cultural sectors, youth services, and social and health care fields as central cooperation partners. (Public Libraries Act 1492/2016.) In my opinion, interactive and inclusive literary art activities fit tremendously well with the spirit of the new Public Libraries Act.

The Finnish Municipal Cultural Activities Act entered into force in 2019 and has many objectives. According to the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the Act “seeks to support the opportunities for creative expression and activity and for making and experiencing art and culture. It strives to foster the equal opportunities of all population groups to engage in art, culture, and education. It should improve the local residents' wellbeing and health along with their inclusion and community engagement. Finally, the Act seeks to create the right conditions for enhancing the vitality of the local area.” (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019; Laki kuntien kulttuuritoiminnasta 166/2019.) In Finland, libraries are central municipal cultural institutions and, therefore, responsible for promoting the objectives of the aforementioned Act. Not only do libraries secure access to literary art, they can also provide opportunities for its production.

The purpose of the Socially Sustainable Finland 2020 strategy is to strive towards a socially sustainable society where everyone is treated fairly and equally, to strengthen social inclusion and community, to support everyone's health and functional capacity, and to provide everyone with the necessary protection and services. According to the strategy, we must invest in health, functional capacity, and the prevention of social problems. For instance, the exclusion of the unemployed from working life must be prevented and the integration of immigrants into Finnish society must be supported. Robust basic services – combined with close cooperation between administrative sectors – are capable of early intervention in problems. In addition, minority groups and people living in difficult conditions need targeted services. The third sector is a key player in the promotion of health and welfare, in the prevention of problems, and in the development of new operating practices. One of the strategy's overall aims is for authorities and NGOs to work together to increase social participation. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2011.)

Public libraries can, in many ways, promote a socially sustainable society and strengthen its social and cultural capital. Cross-sectoral, low-threshold literary art activities provide opportunities for the improvement of self-expression and literacy, the strengthening of self-esteem and identity, and the improvement of social readiness. Libraries and their cooperation

partners can utilise literary art activities to strengthen a region's community spirit and to support its residents' health and functional capacity. Moreover, literary art activities enable the forging and maintaining of human relationships. The loneliness of the elderly is a major problem in Finland, and literary art activities can, for their part, alleviate this loneliness and provide opportunities to forge friendships.

Libraries also carry out global objectives that are connected to equality and sustainable development. By organising literary art activities, libraries can promote the universal right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts, as stated in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) and in several conventions. Literary art activities in libraries also meet the sustainable development goals set out in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015). For their part, libraries can promote peaceful and inclusive societies and ensure lifelong learning opportunities for all.

In Finland, the social role of libraries and the cooperation between various actors have been promoted laudably by the project Invisible Youth, a joint venture between the Turku and Seinäjoki Universities of Applied Sciences and the University of Jyväskylä. The project developed a service model that enables libraries to reach out to young adults at risk of exclusion. It also trained and networked library professionals and guided them on how to recognise the needs of the youth and how to encourage them to become active members of society with the help of art-based methods such as rap, comics, creative writing, and digital stories. Youth activators form a central link between libraries and adolescents. (Hytinen & Salmela 2017; Hytinen & Tanskanen 2018.) Invisible Youth is an excellent example of how literary art activities in libraries can promote social wellbeing.

Research reveals the impact of activities

I worked as a literary art club instructor for elementary school students organised by three municipal libraries in 2009. This work made me realise how important it is that libraries arrange free, low-threshold literary art activities for all, regardless of one's financial situation. It was rewarding to see children who were not into reading or writing join the club. (Kleemola 2019, 94.)

I am currently conducting doctoral research at the University of Jyväskylä on literary art activities in Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic public libraries. My hypothesis is that literary art activities in libraries prevent social exclusion and promote social inclusion, equality, and wellbeing. My dissertation, which lies on the interface between creative writing and library and information science, explores the types of literary art activities organised in Nordic libraries as well as their social impacts. As part of my research, I discuss the affiliation of writing and reading. In Finland, boys' literacy skills have continuously declined. Because poor literary skills may lead to social exclusion, it is important to examine whether literary art activities in libraries can support the development of versatile literacy skills.

In addition, it is important to highlight the impact of literary art activities, especially when it comes to municipal decision-makers and their distribution of scarce financial resources. It is good that libraries can utilise project funding and, thereby, develop literary art activities. However, I feel that it is vital to establish creativity-supporting literary art activities as an

even stronger part of the basic function of libraries. Activities often fade out following the completion of projects, and participants are left disappointed when their meaningful activities come to an end. In terms of the promotion of social wellbeing, it would be beneficial for libraries to be able to provide a greater amount of more continuous activities alongside projects.

Conclusion

I have discussed literary art activities in Finland in my article, but I understand that similar creative writing activities are organised in libraries all over the world. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive data on how widespread and established these activities are in Finnish libraries. Nevertheless, I venture to suggest that literary art activities centred on creative writing have established themselves in public libraries.

I believe that literary art activities in libraries can promote social inclusion, whether they are target-oriented activities tailored for special groups or activities with no defined goals in terms of the promotion of social wellbeing and inclusion. I hope that I have been able to provide tips for practical library work. My aim is to inspire insights, spread information, and implement good Nordic practices also through my dissertation.

Libraries are changing both in terms of their premises and functions. When the significance of traditional collections declines due to digitalisation, the role of libraries as activity organisers is emphasised. Modern libraries are not book storages – they are the residents' living rooms. Finland received its own flagship at the end of 2018 when the multi-purpose central library Oodi was inaugurated in Helsinki. The city wishes that the new library concept strengthens community and gives its residents an opportunity to produce knowledge and culture. (Helsinki City Executive Office 2016; City of Helsinki 2019.) The ongoing transition in libraries offers literary art activities that encourage creative expression the opportunity to become an even more central part of library work both in Finland and abroad.

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