

A Japanese view on Scandinavian libraries:

# The public library as a space for informal learning

Introduction: Public libraries and citizen participation

**The purpose and future direction of public libraries are currently being reconsidered, and therefore it is necessary to establish a new model for future library services. In Japan, when the “Local Autonomy Law” was partially revised in 2003, private organizations got the opportunity to take over the management of public institutions. This raises vital questions about the further role of public libraries in the Japanese society.**

The purpose of my research is to introduce a new theoretical framework for the Japanese public library service model with reference to the practices and philosophies of Danish public libraries.

In Japan, public libraries have evolved while maintaining close ties with the local residents, because the library system is so poor that it took the initiative of local citizens to obtain basic library services. There was an extensive grass-roots movement to establish libraries and upgrade the library services in Japan that began in the 1960s. From there local citizens were more involved in public library activities. Through their activities participants planned and conducted various programs, such as reading clubs, study sessions for children’s books and discussions about social issues. They tried to improve themselves through communication with others and by exerting their influence on the outside world.

It is clear that those who took part in the library activities sought out library spaces as places where they could express their own intellectual desires and improved their own social awareness within the activities. This movement showed the potential for libraries to achieve empowerment through interaction with others.

Indeed, the library creation movement might rightly be regarded as the source of much of present-day citizen participation in library activities.

## **New model of citizen participation in library activities**

In the early part of the 1990s, new types of groups introducing new approaches to library participation have emerged. These groups develop their study sessions and volunteer activities based on the library. The libraries support their activities by offering the necessary lectures and training programs for citizen groups. The joint programs developed by citizen groups and the libraries include the promotion of children’s reading, the peace movement, special services for the disadvantaged, study sessions, and open lectures. They are considered multiple learning opportunities for the participants.

My main assumption is that new user groups essentially contributed to the revival of the civic library movement. At the same time it becomes obvious that new models of citizens’ participation are needed. In this regard the

Nordic Countries and Denmark in particular can serve as a model, because Danish public libraries have originally emphasized their role as places for lifelong learning. This is deeply related to the fact that they have a long history of providing access to information and fostering various study activities in local communities. To achieve these roles, librarians have continually enhanced their professional skills. By referring to the new direction of the practices and philosophy of Danish public libraries, it may be possible to introduce a new theoretical framework to the Japanese model. Therefore I have done some research into the cultural, social, and political context of Danish public libraries in order to better understand their services and systems.

## **Some preliminary findings of my fieldwork**

During the fieldwork, I visited several libraries in Denmark to interview librarians about the practices and systems at their libraries. One of the main challenge facing public libraries in Japan is the correction of disparities in information access and learning opportunities. Therefore in this fieldwork, I focused on the new status of public libraries as places for informal learning and for the socially disadvantaged users with multicultural backgrounds. Danish public libraries take the initiative to implement learning programs for minority users and there are a lot of practical cases.



Photo from Vollsmose. Niels Lund Pedersen

To take an example, the Gellerup library (Århus) is working on a project known as CCG-Community Center Gellerup. The purpose of the project is to promote public services and community involvement based on social inclusion, and it is characterized by collaboration between librarians, volunteers and residents. The Vollsmose library (Odense) actively works at diversified programs for immigrant and refugee women to encourage the social participation.

It should be noted that these projects create sound social capital constructing a network for social activities in the community in cooperation with local groups. Using local libraries as their bases, participants try to achieve empowerment and at the same time have feeling of belonging to community. These activities show the new model of citizens' participation to public libraries.

On the one hand, the digitalization of library services has been rapidly developed through the use of the Internet, but on the other there is the strong demand for the library as a space. In particular, public libraries play a crucial role for the socially disadvantaged as bases for accessing information, learning and empowerment. I was able

to confirm these trends from the fieldwork and interviews.

**Conclusion: The significance of existence of public libraries in local communities**

Public libraries are unique cultural institutes in local communities in that they are places that promote public discussion through a large range of media and a self-learning place for people who want to solve their intellectual problems on their own.

It is in this area that we find a means of survival and the significance of existence of public libraries. It is hard to find places in local communities where people could meet and freely discuss issues in a neutral setting, despite their importance. The physical presence of libraries has increased under this condition.

At first, the modern public library started as an educational institute for all citizens and in the process of development, it has changed into a versatile cultural institute. As a result, the educational function of the current public library is relatively weakening. However, considering there is no alternative to the public library as a place for informal self-learning, a re-examination of the principles concerning the educational function of public libraries

is strongly required. The important point to note is that it doesn't mean we need to merely affirm the past philosophy, but that a new interpretation of the learning at libraries based on the current multicultural circumstances is necessary.

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