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The democratic assignment at Swedish school libraries: a best practice study of librarians

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Introduction

Libraries and schools have democratic missions and assignments. Thus, so have school libraries. According to the IFLA/UNESCO school library manifesto access to services and collections from the school library should be based on the declaration of human rights and freedoms (Önal 2009). This entails important tasks for librarians working at schools.

In Sweden, school libraries, as all libraries, have the obligation by the Library Law (SFS 2013:801) to work towards the development of the democratic society by contributing to the fostering of knowledge and the freedom of opinions. Furthermore, the Swedish educational act (SFS 2010:800) mandates a work with fostering and establishing respect for human rights and fundamental democratic values. Thus, issues of democracy, human rights and equality form the work conducted at Swedish school libraries.

This paper builds on my doctoral dissertation (Centerwall 2022), examining best practice school libraries in Swedish secondary and upper secondary schools. One of the aims of the study was to contribute to deepened understanding of the work of school librarians who have established (created, developed and managed) what is commonly referred to as *successful* school libraries. These libraries are rare, however important as best practice examples. The study showed how in best practice school libraries it is possible for the school librarians to devote a large amount of their time and focus on the democratic assignment.

Theoretical framework

Various practice and information practice approaches are commonly explored in Library and Information Science research (e.g. Pilerot et al. 2017; Byström and Lloyd 2012). In this study, the practice theoretical framework is built on theories of performativity (Butler 1993, 1997, 2002), information infrastructure (Star and Ruhleder 1996), infrastructure for learning (Guribye 2005), and the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014). The theoretical framework consisting of

these various theories and perspectives created a theoretical toolbox (Nicolini 2012) for examining school librarians' sayings, doings and relatings. The theoretical work conducted for the study also inspired the development and use of the concept *school librarian practices*, as an analytic tool for further understanding the complex practices of school libraries (Centerwall 2022). Using this practice theoretical framework schools are seen as sites for sayings, doings and relatings (Kemmis et al. 2014; Star and Ruhleder 1996) in a certain time and place (Schatzki 2002). School libraries are thus understood as sites for numerous practices (Schatzki 2002).

Using the concept of performativity (Butler 1993, 1997, 2002) made it possible to consider how librarians and their identities were continuously constituted through various practices at schools. The starting point is the idea of identity as performative in the sense that it is created. This means seeing the school librarian identity as created at specific moments, closely linked to time and space, as well as to practices. Perspectives from practice theories were combined with analytical concepts from studies on information infrastructure for learning (Guribye 2005; Guribye and Lindström 2009). When using the infrastructure for learning approach I view school as sites for various practices supported by several different professions and vocations within their own infrastructures. All school infrastructures are of course organized around the students.

Research question

In what ways do best practice school librarians work with the democratic assignment?

Methodology

Identifying best practice school libraries in Sweden was a challenge. I used criteria developed by a Swedish library trade union who yearly award best practices based on staffing, media budgets, the quality of collaboration, as well as support from management. Thus, libraries were chosen from a list of awarded secondary and upper secondary schools. The selection resulted in fourteen schools in twelve municipalities where twenty-two school librarians worked. The results in this study are based primarily of interviews with these school librarians and visits to twenty-one school libraries. The full empirical material consists of interviews, group interviews, library visits and tours, everyday conversations and readings of different types of text, such as regulations, library plans and policy documents. I had spent a decade working as a school, children, and youth librarian before returning to the university to research school librarians and I used this professional lived experience to further understand the work of school librarians.

Research Results

A broad variety of themes connected to the democratic assignment was drawn from the empirical material. These themes included equality, gender equality, gender roles and norms, anti-

discrimination and anti-racism, citizenship, ethnicity and race issues, critical pedagogies, norm critical perspectives, freedom of speech and opinions and a general work with values and views. Some of these themes can be interpreted as very closely connected to the mission of school libraries while others are connected to the more personal interest and aims of each individual librarian.

The analysis of the creation of professional identity as a school librarian showed various ways for participants to create and express themselves as leader or developer of the democratic work of their libraries. A result is therefore that the democratic work is central for the identity of best practice school librarians. Another identity position that arose was that of an educational professional that values the freedom of speech, human rights issues or as an LGBTQ ally or person. A desire to make oneself visible as a democratic resource at the school, to gain recognition for one's democratic competence and to reach recognition may include being seen as an educator, colleague and partner to other educators working with the democratic mission, towards inclusion and against discrimination.

The central position of democracy within the school librarian's identity is also related to the ways in which school librarians strive to create visibility for the library and themselves at their schools. While all practices at the school are in(ter)dependent and act in relation to each other a shift can be seen in how the best practice libraries have an increasingly prominent role in the democratic work.

Like other practices, school librarian practices consist of tensions and inconsistencies. These arise, for example, when new requirements for the work with inclusion and against discrimination are presented. When policy documents and regulations of inclusion and anti-discrimination change, they give rise to new goals and tasks for education and schooling. An example of such new requirements are the norm critical agendas of Swedish education. Norm critical perspectives therefore impact educational practices when they are proposed by the authorities, as is usual in Sweden. At some of the best practice school libraries, implementation of norm critical projects was enabled by the management or the librarians' positions close to the management. Norm critical work was also enabled by prevailing political and educational discussions and discussions among practicing librarians of Sweden (cf. Centerwall and Langelotz, 2022).

Discussion

It is assumed that school librarians should play a role in promoting and fostering reading, media- and information literacy as well as in the democratic assignment, but these roles are a challenge as part of the diversified and demanding workload of school librarians. Being a study of best

practices, these libraries are well-functioning partly because they are supported by conditions that allow practices to be carried out. Such conditions include well-staffed libraries with trained librarians, a well-equipped library room with a variety of resources, as well as colleagues and management with interests and competences in school library development. Of importance for this paper is that best practices provide opportunities for librarians to be involved or prominent in the school work with the democratic assignment.

Making a difference in the work against discrimination and exclusion is one of the driving forces behind the librarians' work with the democratic assignment. Often, librarians in these best practices are leading the democratic work of their schools, advocating for inclusion and norm-critical perspectives and projects.

Further, through the examination of the ways in which school librarian practices contribute to the creation of best practice school libraries working with the democratic assignment a tension arose. School librarians seems to be juggling two competing ideological, and possibly political, directives. On the one hand; the work of school librarians fostering freedom of speech and information, countering censorship, and working towards inclusion and participation. Such a directive has a long and steady position within the history and mission of libraries and schools. On the other hand, in a political climate where a far-right party is gaining increased influence on the government and political discussions, school librarians are faced with protecting the school library and its students from anti-democratic texts, ideas and conversations. This tension creates challenges in the everyday work of librarians in general, and especially for those school librarians devoted to the democratic assignment.

Conclusion

Apart from trying to gain important positions at schools, librarians work with making a difference in the lives of their students and in the democratic society. At most of the schools visited for this study, the library had a central and important role in the school, both in teaching and in several other areas such as the democratic work. Within school librarian practices discussions on the democratic mission of school libraries are being held. These discussions contribute to the perception on school libraries and their roles in the overall work with the democratic assignment in schools. The overarching results of the study show that the work towards an inclusive and democratic society is a central aspect of school librarian practices.

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