

Fredrik Ernerot

School Library West

fredrik.ernerot@grudskola.gotborg.se

Efforts and Changes Around School Libraries in Sweden Today: When Great Things are Happening... How Do We Communicate with Authorities and Decision Makers?

Abstract

As the IASL conference themes in Long Beach (2017), Istanbul (2018), and Dubrovnik (2019) have influenced progression, impact, and innovation around school libraries, it is interesting to focus on how ordinary school librarians best adopt fields where communication on a higher level marks the spot! The theme for this paper will work as a useful contribution to different methods, practically applied in Sweden for over ten years. Methods of communication that function as an inspiration to the higher governmental work and processes for school libraries, both on a national and international level. A wider scale on the following topics will be presented - mainly to create a developed knowledge adapted for school libraries. Knowledge ready to be transformed when participants return to their homes, communicating with their own contacts responsible for school libraries.

Keywords: Sweden, school library, national agency of education, the department of education, reference group, school library education, governmental investigation

Objectives of the Presentation:

The following topics are set to work as inspiration and methods, presented through the session: In relation to the efforts and changes around school libraries in Sweden today – When great things are happening, how do we communicate with authorities and decision makers?

The topics are:

1. Sweden's reference group for school libraries - an effective working tool established and developed by The Swedish National Agency for Education.

2. An investment in a national school library education - something that is not the reality in Sweden today, but will be done on a smaller scale, with an intended start in autumn 2020. A first start that hopefully will spread rings on the water to other major educational sites.

3. A governmental investigation of the situation for school libraries in Sweden today -from the political decision of a one year long investigation, where The Department of Education is running as the responsible part, to a series of meetings, where a special group of regulatory experts has been created.

The ambition is to give participants in Denton, Texas thoughts on how efforts around school libraries can be done on a higher level, all according to legal, democratic ways. Also, for participants to learn about how to communicate with authorities, believing that discussions can lead to useful knowledge.

Introduction:

Sweden (10.4 million people) has 290 municipalities, 290 public library systems, and about 4,000 school libraries. Local authorities finance public libraries and school libraries. The municipal council makes decisions in matters concerning libraries, compulsory school, upper secondary school and preschool. Sweden has a long tradition of local municipal autonomy. Local authorities are independent bodies, which are free to make their own decisions within certain limits. Compulsory schooling in Sweden is from first to ninth grade. A preschool year from six years of age is a part of Swedish schools, but not compulsory for children.

“When local authorities are given new tasks, their right to municipal autonomy must be taken into account. This sort of situation may arise when an area in which local authorities have previously provided services on a voluntary basis, such as libraries, is brought under regulation,” according to the Swedish government. This is why legislation often is not detailed. School directors and principals are the ones who have a mandate from the local authorities to decide how the money is spent and how the schools are going to follow the law. The Swedish schools, principals and municipalities must now manage school libraries.

The Swedish Education System 1:

In Sweden there are almost 11,000 schools (preschools included). 1.5 million pupils (21% of the population). There are about 4,000 school libraries connected to compulsory and upper secondary schools (6,078 schools). According to statistics from 2010, 67% of the Swedish school

units have a school library. One third of the Swedish pupils have no access to a school library. Statistics from 2018 and 2019 show similar figures as mentioned above.

The Swedish Education System 2:

The Swedish school system has been decentralized since 1991, which means that the municipalities/local school authorities are responsible for and finance the schools, even the independent schools. Independent schools account for 9% of the pupils in compulsory and 17% in upper secondary school (figures from 2018).

The national goals for Swedish schools are set by The Swedish Parliament and Government in The Education Act, Curricula, Course Syllabi and Program Goals.

The Education Act:

A proposition about a new Education Act was left for political decision in 2010. It was approved. The start was set to autumn 2011. One important reform within the Education Act is that Swedish pupils are guaranteed access to school libraries. This does not mean that every rural school with 50 pupils has to employ a librarian, but as a school authority, you have to include a school library, and the pupils need for information and reading possibilities, in your plan for school activities. Being part of the Education Act also means that the school libraries are included in the inspection of schools (made every third year by The Schools Inspectorate). Ten years down the line from the approval of the act, this is still not in place.

1. Sweden's reference group for school libraries - an effective working tool established and developed by The Swedish National Agency for Education.

The Swedish National Agency for Education is one out of three national authorities for schools, belonging to the Ministry of Education and Research. The other two governmental authorities are The Schools Inspectorate and The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools.

The goal for the Swedish National Agency for Education is to steer and support schools through different steering documents. The Agency was in charge of big national school library projects during the years 2000-2004 as well as in 2007, including competence development for school librarians.

The Agency has a valuable department working with school library issues. Most important and of the biggest use is a reference group for school library matters. An Agency officer manages an

online discussion list for school librarians (with around 1000 subscribers), provides informative journalistic web articles on a wide scale of school library topics, and publishes research reports about school library and information literacy. Since the summer of 2018, a more modern web portal has been running for the Agency, where a special section for school libraries is established.

The reference group for school libraries:

The reference group was established back in 2009. At the start, there were discussions about strategic issues. Printed/digital materials were produced through the group. Later on, the group started to focus on a referral for the new Education Act, as well as a definition on what a school library is. Some parts of the definition mentioned in the Education Act are taken from the suggestion, headed over by the reference group.

A new reference group of school librarians (40-50 members) was formed around 2016. As an effect of that, a wide scale of conferences, meetings, and projects has been organized until 2019 (unfortunately, those initiatives have been forced to stop during the corona pandemic). There were more meetings arranged for the group in the early years of its existence. But, back then, there were only school librarians called for meetings, and almost no conferences were arranged. With the start of the new group that shifted rapidly. This time there has been relatively few meetings, but when they took place, it happened with a great variety of participants – such as librarians, teachers, and responsible persons for digital development. Shifted meetings, where different professions get together around relevant issues, have been a massive challenge and of great use – for the Agency, as well as the reference group itself.

The main activity for the reference group has consisted in being an active part of the conferences arranged by the Agency. One conference every six months has been offered for the group. They have been spread out all over the nation. The model for each conference has been informative content with several lectures and workshops around a current topic, as well as an interactive element, where participants at the conference have discussed certain topics, managed by the members of the reference group, including myself. One main purpose has been to engage active and reflective discussions out of the group, mainly as important knowledge for the attendees' development, inside their own professions.

Digital applications and suitable programs have been used for documentation, where attendees either have contributed all together, or simply by purchasing resources on each attendees' digital

tool. Much of the information collected by the Agency has been used for developing relevant support platforms, as well as implementing further discussions and new printed material. To note: This happened before the pandemic. Today, we can easily see that the ways of using digital tools, with a certain distance to practical moments, was ahead of its time. This is a present way, handling different issues between different roles, around the school library field. When mentioning the field, reference groups and digital communicative solutions, which has been one of my main priorities over the last ten years, I would like to take the opportunity to state the following fact - Sweden has gone from being a quite slow starter, to establishing themselves in the front, when it comes to the ability to communicate, discuss, and create an ongoing working dialogue, using social media platforms in an interactive way. The reason for the development of this digital environment goes way back in time, as Sweden has a long tradition of democratic forms, such as free speech and free press, as well as laws that support those specific parts of the democratic system. But, to get a tradition like this into a modern upcoming digital environment, where the school and the library field, the teachers and the librarians, together with the knowledge and support from decision makers, is handled on many different levels, has been a long and quite difficult path to walk. But, as the development of digital tools has increased over the years, and many of the traditional arenas for documentation and communication have been left behind, the whole practical interaction has more or less moved to a whole new platform. A digital interactive platform designed and put into work for the whole school library base, concentrating on communication, interaction, discussions, dialogues, and, most important, further education, beyond the regular traditional agenda, known as library education. As the wheels are turning faster, and the need for new knowledge to guide the pupils into a modern age grows, especially when a major pandemic put pressure on fast digital solutions, the educators are forced to let go of old habits and follow the sound and the demands of their own time.

We are not finished. But, we are on an exciting adventure together - towards what is yet to come. With the support from the Swedish democratic laws and traditions, the will and needs inside present schools and libraries, as well as bigger demands and a higher curiosity of new digital solutions, we will certainly advance even further. Then, if we want to reach the digital top and stay there in the future, we need to do this journey together. Schools, libraries and decision makers need to work as a unit - tight together. There is really no other way around. Of that I am most sure today. When it comes to different arenas connected to decision makers and school libraries, one special network should be mentioned here. It has been both unique and of great importance when it comes to preparing questions and handing them over to the government. The National Agency of Education has between 2016-2020 been a member of a network consisting of

eight national authorities, three of them, school authorities. The main issue for this group has been school libraries! The group has supported the work around the national library strategy with some external environment monitoring. For example, as a kick off, the network published an overview about Swedish school libraries. After that, the group created a leaflet publication, addressing school providers, as well as several hearings and lectures which have been offered to a broader public. One of their public meetings was presented in the autumn of 2018. It was arranged at the major book fair in Gothenburg. The meeting was a really crowded event, as it gave people inside the library community a good chance to ask questions and discuss different issues around Swedish school libraries.

2. An investment in a national school library education.

In the abstract, the following information is mentioned, “An investment in a national school library education- something that is not the reality in Sweden today, but will be, done on a smaller scale, with a start in autumn 2020. A first start that hopefully will spread rings on the water to other major educational sites.” The truth is that there has not been a single school library education in Sweden before. There is, since way back in time, a standard library education, but it offers only selected parts needed in a school library. On the contrary, the standard library education is filled with administrative and theoretical parts. Ok, it gives access to the research field, but it does not offer useful parts of pedagogical skills, needed in a modern school library in Sweden today. Close neighbours to Sweden, like Denmark and Norway, have themselves decent school library education. Sweden has none. Until now. The main reason for a new school library education in Sweden is simply because one researcher connected to Södertörns College in Stockholm made a survey and found a big gap between the educational demand and the reality shown in Sweden today. Therefore, a decision was made: A first education for school libraries should be launched by Södertörns College. The start took place in autumn 2020. This will hopefully be the real start for a new wave of education throughout the learning institutions based in Sweden, providing staff that the modern school of today needs. This is in no sense a big massive national breakthrough, but at least it is something. Like a crack in the old traditional foundation of how to look at a school library. At least, this is my personal hope. The sooner the better! The premiere group consists of 30 students. The education will go on for three years and lead to a bachelor degree in school library science. In time, the education can turn out to be a master degree, and then on a much broader scale, where an interdisciplinary intercultural profession will be possible to achieve. It is interesting to note how knowledge and skills inside an ongoing school, in such short notice, can transform to a brand new education. The communication between the research field and the decision makers shall be valued as a major

tool to this outcome. The need for progression through established teaching platforms can't be underlined enough. If the will to develop is there, nothing is impossible! Södertörns College is a proof of that statement.

3. A governmental investigation of the situation for school libraries in Sweden today.

From the political decision of a one year long investigation, where The Department of Education is running as the responsible party, to a series of meetings, where a special group of regulatory experts has been created. "All teachers should have a relationship with the school library. All school librarians should feel that they have the opportunity to do the job they can. And every student should have a relationship with a library when they leave school, which makes it a part of their lives. It's about democracy and power over understanding the world." When former Swedish Minister of Education Gustav Fridolin, the 2011-2019 leader of The Green Party, left his work at the government, and got back to his former occupation as teacher at a Folk High School in Stockholm, he was also commissioned to investigate for the government how the Education Act should be rewritten, so that all students have access to school libraries. Some of the knowledge he gained during the working process is in quotes. Now, the interesting thing for this paper is the fact that, what we have here is a former politician and Swedish Minister of Education who is telling us, and the rest of the world, what school libraries should be about. This is something I have not seen before, at least not during my years in this field. The same goes for the Swedish acclaimed researcher around Library and Information Science, Cecilia Gärdén. She is speaking out loud, challenging us all, "To think that school libraries are good and important is not enough. There is a need for improved and strengthened dialogue close to the students. More dialogue, less monologue!" We have the opposite situation here. Since 2019 until today, we have decision makers and people with power in our society, telling us what we should do. We used to be that voice. Often all by ourselves. Speaking out loud without anyone listening. Not even teachers. That is our feeling. So, how come we have this big change in Sweden today? Because there has been a change in how we act and interact around the topic of school libraries. Since the start of this new investigation by the government, there has been an inversion in communication. Gustav Fridolin, as a professional teacher, knows the value of getting colleagues involved. To get them going, they must be part of an environment that is bigger than themselves. It is then that the individuals learn to cooperate, listen carefully, and to interact, not only act, because they can. I met Gustav Fridolin and his two colleagues, part of the investigations office, in spring 2020, right at the start of the corona pandemic. We met on Skype, as the travelling routes around the country had been stopped. I and two other librarians had a one hour chat with Fridolin, answering his questions, but, more importantly, talking about the background to the questions and answers,

analyzing the meaning of real importance around the school library issue, nationally and internationally. We compared knowledge from the working field with the research field, having an open conversation around school libraries, where everybody in the meeting was both heard and seen. Gustav Fridolin did a good job during this meeting, but it was not the only meeting on his agenda. More like a drop in the ocean, so to speak. Gustaf Fridolin and his colleagues met more than one hundred librarians, teachers, principals and local authorities. They met library councils on schools, library groups on school library centers. met staff in schools, as well as pupils. They met a lot of people, and talked with even more.

And on top of all that, right at the side of the investigation group, a massive group of experts from different school related departments and agencies got established. Among the ones taking place in that special group is Anette Holmqvist, teaching council at the National Agency for Education, and also the person responsible for the reference group for school libraries. To have access to such a large base of knowledge, where communication is the keyword on all possible levels, is a winning concept for anyone that has serious intentions around an issue far more complicated than anyone outside this world ever can imagine. And the message from Gustav Fridolin to the school library community in Sweden was clear, "I hope librarians around the country read the investigation and become part of the local discussion. I want them to get involved in the consultation process." After the consultation process, which got massive response from a lot of different arenas, including part of the school library community in Sweden, the study has been placed on the desk of the present Minister of Education, Anna Ekström. A proposition is now handed over to the government. Now everyone is waiting for the final decision. As you know, it can take a while. And for your interest, he inquiry proposes, among other things, that The Education Act shall define that school libraries shall be a common and orderly resource with a range of digital and analogue media that shall be characterized by versatility and quality and be made available to students and teachers. The purpose of the school library shall be to promote students' reading and media and information literacy. It must be stated in the Education Act that school libraries must be staffed. The principal shall strive to primarily employ staff who have a degree in library and information science. It must be clarified in the curricula that the principal shall be responsible for developing forms of collaboration between school librarians and teachers. The school library must primarily be located at its own school unit. If there are special reasons, the school library activities can, instead, be organized by the school collaborating with a public library or with a school library at another school unit. This applies if the library is in the immediate vicinity of the school or if the school has few students.

Conclusion - Communications Makes a Difference!

After four different papers, published as one paper every year for three years, and one paper with a gap of almost two years, due to a global pandemic, I can see what the keywords are. Words following the work like a red thread all the way through. Ok, there are several keywords mentioned through this paper, but only one that bumps through all the papers, time after time, again and again - communication! There is nothing strange about that. Not at all. Because it is really that simple, trustworthy communication, everything is possible. At the same time, without any kind of acting together for common goals, it won't happen. At least, it will not happen on such a degree and level that it will make differences in the long term. I think many of you that are a part of the everyday work in school know about this. I think that all of you are able to relate to the specific feeling that I am pointing out here, right? Cause when it happens, in a creative open environment that allows communication in form of dialogues, that allows you to discuss and reflect, where the roof is of high level, and leaders as well as decision makers want to know, want to hear, want to learn, then it is like stepping into a learning heaven. I have been there many times myself. Therefore, I know it is worth every second of your time, if you have not been there before, to get you into that state of mind. To get you progressive and proud of the work you do and the communication you have!

Just recently, I had the chance to read a new research report focusing on the kind of support librarians value the most, when it comes to their further learning. It was interesting to go through the data coming out of the report and, even if the amount of answers were of small validity, it proved one thing – that the most satisfied librarians were found in the places where cooperation and communication between colleagues made a natural part of the everyday work. There were also figures connected to the answers, from the different nations included, that showed that new digital tools, combined with traditional ways of communication, made high levels of satisfaction in everyday work. This is a report that owns a topic that goes really near this paper. Because, doing things together, with clear goals, stated out on a higher level than before, makes us feel stronger in our profession. The culture grows, the visions turn into action, and the pupils, teachers, and decision makers get a feeling that it is worth the effort. I can easily see how the new report mentioned here, presented in Taiwan, for the Chinese section of school libraries, is making an impact. The report also mentioned Dr. Ross Todd's research from 2009, where focus was put on what was called Guided Inquiry. The interesting thing is that Ross Todd states almost the same thing that interaction and communication through the library community makes differences when it comes to how we learn and how we interact with each other. If this pattern mentioned here and through this paper is used as a guiding light for you and your work, there

will be a lot of wide open doors for you to find. But, if it is going to happen, you and your colleagues must communicate. Besides that, you must do the work you need to do, and I must say this, you must love to work like this. At least, you must want to try!

Some impacts are of more use than others. Here are a few examples for you to try out: To create a Sounding board. Being the first ones to know. Being the first ones to get questions around new things coming up. Being the first ones to test new material. Being the first ones to get responses around the field. Being the first ones to communicate, listen carefully and exchange knowledge with each other, both between the Agency and the members in the group, and between the members inside the group itself. This is of big importance. In my opinion, this is the best education a single school librarian or teacher can possibly get. Interact together. When the process is running, a lot of different activities can take place. There are so many things that you can do. From arranging meetings and creating places for learning, and, in our new troubled times, digital places, like IASL 2021. Under ordinary circumstances you can do this at fairs, conferences, and exhibitions. You can hand out prizes for great achievements, then get the media to write about it, taking pictures for social media exposure, doing interviews and articles, using the social media platforms as marketing tools. Most of this demands creativity and action, but that's about it. The actual costs for marketing stuff on social media is zero. When has it ever been like this? Exactly. Never ever before! I wish you all the best of luck with your upcoming work. If you want to learn more about how to make it happen, get in touch. Don't hesitate to put me on for a presentation, lecture, or even a project. I am most willing to help you down the line.

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