



Date 15/05/2006

The Storymobile
A trailer designed for reading stories aloud and storytelling

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Meeting:	81 Libraries for Children and Young Adults with Reading
Simultaneous Interpretation:	No

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 72ND IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
20-24 August 2006, Seoul, Korea
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/index.htm>

Abstract

It is important to point out that the space were reading aloud and storytelling takes place is very important for the success of these activities, an area available for quiet listening, and reflection. The Storymobile Project was created to address this problem, by providing an appropriate space that could be shared by many childcare centres.

The project was not to make a mobile library. In 2004 fifteen childcare centres in Vaerlose were visited by the Storymobile and in 2005 nineteen childcare centres had the pleasure.

Traditionally childcare centres in Vaerlose and other cities have had reading aloud and storytelling as a part of their activities. In order to facilitate these activities intimate, relaxing, spaces, decorated to promote a positive atmosphere for storytelling and reading where present within the childcare centres. In recent years, however, these spaces have been disappearing because of increased enrolment, and because of new technology. This in turn has decreased the quality of the storytelling and reading experiences for children.

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF THE STORYMOBILE PROJECT.

The main elements of The Storymobile Project are:

To assist the childcare centres in Vaerlose with reintroducing reading stories aloud and storytelling as a major activity by providing an intimate, relaxing space for these activities.

The focus groups for the project are: children in the childcare centres ages 2 to 6 and a few childcare centres with children ages 6-9, preschool teachers, parents, and grandparents. Parents and grandparents are invited to volunteer to be readers and storytellers.

The reading space has to be mobile so that as many of the childcare centres in Vaerlose as possible can participate in the activities.

The individual childcare centres can structure the reading activities as they wish while they have the Storymobile. However, librarians will visit for reading stories aloud and storytelling.

BACKGROUND.

Almost all children in Denmark between the ages of 1 to 9 go to some kind of childcare centre. Children ages 1 to 6 typically attend childcare all day. At age 6 children start preschool class and up to and including 3rd grade children usually go to childcare centres from 1 or 2 pm when school is over until about 5 pm when they get picked up by one of their parents.

Most women and men in Denmark have careers, and work outside the home. This is also true in Vaerlose where the project took place. Vaerlose is located North of Copenhagen, and has a highly educated population. The childcare centres in Vaerlose function very well and have many different activities for the children in their curriculum. But often there are too many children in too little space, which means that many childcare centres lack the relaxing, quiet spaces that are necessary for successful reading and storytelling.

The idea for the project dates back to 2003 -2004, when the Danish Ministry of Culture started a reading campaign by providing grants for children's literacy programs. The librarians at the Vaerlose Municipal libraries saw this as an opportunity to create The Storymobile, and the project was born.

FUNDING AND PRELIMINARY PLANNING.

In May of 2003 an application for funding from the Danish National Library Authority was approved. Further funding was provided by the City of Vaerlose, and by the Municipal Libraries of Vaerlose. The total budget for the project was 97.000 DDK which is equivalent to 13.000 Euros.

After the funding was secured representatives from the childcare centres in the municipality of Vaerlose were invited to a meeting where the Storymobile Project was presented to them, and they were invited to become possible partners. This meeting took place in September of 2003. Fifteen

representatives from the childcare centres came to the meeting, and all fifteen of them enthusiastically joined the project.

A project committee was created. The committee was made up of childculture-consultant Ingrid Barsballe, librarian Nina Rise, 3 preschool teachers from 3 different childcare centres, and project leader Lena Murmann Jensen, who is a librarian.

It was furthermore decided that the preliminary planning period should last until December 2003. This period should be used for:

1. Working out the communication between the different partners.
2. Deciding what kind of trailer should be used for the project.
3. Planning the interior and exterior decoration of the trailer to create the Storymobile.
4. Discussing how to move the Storymobile between childcare centres.
5. Agreeing on a schedule for the Storymobile (what route and how long the Storymobile should stay at each childcare centre, etc.) .

DECORATING THE STORYMOBILE.

During the fall of 2003 the committee shopped for trailers which could be used to create the Storymobile. They decided to use the type of mobile trailer that is used by construction workers to store tools, hold meetings, take breaks, etc. In November a nice mobile trailer was purchased. During the first months of 2004 the mobile trailer was prepared for it's new function as a Storymobile, The artist Julie Brabcova was hired to do the exterior decoration of the Storymobile. For the interior a comfortable chair for the reader or storyteller was purchased, and shelves plus a mattress followed. All the participating childcare centres were asked to sew two beautiful pillows and an inspiration crate to support the storytelling or reading activities. The municipal libraries in Vaerloose bought a collection of books for the Storymobile including both classical children's stories and new picture books.

It is also important to mention that the Public Works Department of Vaerloose and the Activity Centre Sogaarden, which is a centre that creates activities for the unemployed, did a lot of work for the project. They provided practical help in buying the mobile trailer itself, painted, placed shelves, installed electricity, and installed a heating system. Furthermore, the people working for the Activity Centre Sogaarden took the responsibility for moving the Storymobile between the childcare centres. Without these two institutions, the project would not have happened.

PLANNING, PREPARATION, AND INSPIRATION.

In the month of January 2004 another major meeting was held, and representatives from all the involved childcare centres and the committee attended. The agenda was to review the process so far, and plan for the future.

The next step was to get all the detailed plans worked into a schedule. In order to accomplish that, Nina Rise, the librarian, and Lena Murmann Jensen, the project leader, visited all the 15 involved childcare centres, and held meetings with their staffs. During these meetings it was decided which specific themes the staffs of the different childcare centres were interested in exploring during their Storymobile visits, and what special materials they needed.

The staffs from several of the childcare centres chose to let the librarians choose what they called "good stories", others wanted books and materials to cover subjects like nature, teddy bears, heroes and heroines etc. Once all that was in place, a route for the Storymobile was mapped out. Deciding on a route turned out to be a little complicated, because the municipality of Vaerloose covers many square kilometres, and because some of the childcare centres had special wishes for what time of the year they wanted the Storymobile, but it succeeded. Most childcare centres were scheduled to have the Storymobile visit for two weeks. A few had the Storymobile for three weeks because of vacations.

TRAINING PROGRAM FOR THE STAFF IN THE CHILDCARE CENTERS.

Most of the staff in the childcare centres are educated. The preschool teachers have a 3 year education. They are trained in child development, pedagogical theories, and in music, literature etc. Even though they are trained in how to read stories aloud to children, the committee still chose to create a seminar in reading aloud for the preschool teachers. They called the seminar "Reading Stories Aloud - a Special Art form". The committee did this to upgrade the skill level of the preschool teachers, and to inspire them before they would receive a visit from the Storymobile.

During the seminar, the preschool teachers received recommendations on how to maximize the benefits of the visits of the Storymobile. They were advised that it was best if the children visited the Storymobile in groups of 6 to 8, and stay for 1/2 to 1 hour. These decisions were made based on the attention span of children between the ages of 2 to 6, and on the fact that when children are divide into small groups it is easier to create an intimate, calm and positive reading or storytelling experience.

In the best organized childcare centres, the preschool teachers would take turns taking a group of children out to the Storymobile every 1/2 to 1 hour. This meant that 6 to 7 groups of 6 to 8 children a day would get a high quality reading or storytelling experience.

In Denmark it is not common practice to have volunteers connected to a project such as the Storymobile, but this project had 3 volunteers. They were all retired teachers who were proficient in storytelling and reading aloud. The parents and grandparents who volunteered were mostly highly educated and were experienced in storytelling and reading stories. The volunteers who didn't feel comfortable with the reading activity acted as aids during the reading sessions.

THE STORYMOBILE IS READY TO ROLL.

On March 25th, 2004 the Storymobile was officially opened with a ceremony. All the children from the partnering childcare centres and their staff were invited. Lena Murmann Jensen, the project leader, and Jens Svendsen, the chairman of the committee of culture from the City of Vaerloose, greeted the crowd. Later there were speeches, music, and songs followed by juice, coffee and rolls.

The ceremony ended with the Storymobile being pulled down the road behind a tractor under cheering and flag waving.

A GREAT SUCCESS

Fifteen of the childcare centres in the city of Vaerlose were visited by the Storymobile in 2004. All of the childcare centres utilized the visit optimally. A lot of stories were read and told by the staff of the childcare centres, parents, and grandparents.

Lena Murmann Jensen from the library in Vaerlose spent one day in each childcare centre reading stories to the children. Librarian Nina Rise and Helle Egeborg also had the opportunity to go out and read aloud. On a typical visit, the librarians read to 4 to 6 groups of children. There were between 6 to 8 children in each group. The librarians reported that it was a great experience to read and tell stories to so many children. After the reading sessions the librarians experienced that not only did the children recognize them when they visited the library, they would also remember which of the stories they had heard.

The staff from the childcare centres, who had been involved in the project, shared many positive stories about the success of the project. They commented on how nice it had been to have a quiet room without telephones, and other distractions, a designated place to go which was designed for reflection and for quiet time with the children. Representatives from the childcare centres also reported that some parents would on impulse take their own child and a few other children to the Storymobile for a reading session.

Furthermore, everybody involved agreed that it was an advantage only to have the Storymobil visit for a shorter period of time, because hereby special focus was placed on reading and storytelling while the storymobile was present. However, several representatives from the participating childcare centres also said that an optimal visit should last longer than the initial visits.

There is no question that the ultimate goal of placing focus on reading aloud and storytelling for children in the childcare centres of Vaerlose has been met.

THE FUTURE OF THE PROJECT.

Based on the results from 2004, and on the fact that the childcare centres again in 2005 wanted to focus on reading aloud and storytelling, the project committee unanimously decided that the Storymobile again in 2005 should visit the childcare centres. At this time 19 of the city's childcare centres were interested in a visit. The committee bought more books, cleaned the Storymobile, and refurbished the interior. On February the 7th, 2005 the Storymobile again started its journey.

The following anecdote from October, 2005 illustrates the success of the 2005 reading season: A little girl asked her mother, "Do you know what I would like for Christmas?" When the mother responded, "no". The little girl answered, "A Storymobile!"

There is a guest book in the Storymobile. Many experiences were recorded in it with accompanied by children's drawings during the 2 years.

In 2006 the project committee decided to lend the Storymobile to the neighbouring municipality of Farum, so that staffs of the childcare centres in Farum also would have the opportunity to focus on reading and telling stories.

In January of 2007 the municipalities of Vaerlose will merge with the municipality of Farum and create a new municipality which will be named Fureso. The project committee believes that the Storymobile will continue to bring joy to the children of Fureso for a long time to come.

CONCLUSION.

The success of the Storymobile project has played a major role in reintroducing reading stories aloud and storytelling for children into the curriculum of the childcare centres in Vaerlose. Also it has proven how important it is for the children to have an area available for quiet listening, and reflection.

After the visits of the Storymobile the staffs of some of the participating childcare centres have taken steps to create a room or an area within the centres for reading stories aloud and storytelling. But even with these spaces available, everyone agrees that the visit of the Storymobile is a valuable, special event in the routines of the childcare centres.