

New Library World

Developing the multicultural school library: Vahl Primary School, Oslo

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New Library World

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Keywords

School libraries, Librarians, Multicultural management, Drama, Norway, Teachers

Abstract

Norway is becoming increasingly multicultural, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the capital Oslo. While immigrants only make up 7 per cent of the population at the national level, the figure is 20 per cent in Oslo, where in addition, 35 per cent of all pupils in primary and secondary schools belong to a linguistic minority. In Norway, and especially in the capital Oslo, multiculturalism is rapidly becoming the rule rather than the exception. At the same time reading tests show that immigrant and minority children have special problems. Successful integration of "new Norwegians" starts in the kindergartens and schools, including the school library. In this situation traditional librarianship training is inadequate. Improved pedagogical and communicational skills are required of the librarian in multicultural school libraries, and drama is a promising technique to improve language proficiency among pupils. The article presents some insights from Vahl Primary School in Oslo which has the highest concentration of multicultural pupils in the country – 95 per cent.

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Methodology

The article is a case study of the library in Norway's most multicultural primary school, including the role of the teacher-librarian. Sources include official Norwegian policy documents, international and national reading test results, an interview with Rector Trine Hauger, Vahl Primary School, and relevant research. The article is based on the authors' joint paper at the 12th BOBCATSSS conference "Library and information in multicultural societies", 26-28 January 2004 in Riga, Latvia. The authors are grateful to Rector Trine Hauger for having commented on the manuscript.

Oslo – an increasingly multicultural capital

In a recent history of immigration to Norway, the percentage of immigrants[1] in Norway was shown to have increased from 1.2 per cent of the population in 1865 to roughly 7 per cent in 2001. The great majority of immigrants from the Viking Age right up to the 1970s was of Nordic, European and North American origin. From the 1970s onwards, the number of immigrants originating from countries in Asia, Africa, The Middle East, Eastern Europe and Latin America has grown significantly. This group now constitutes the largest immigrant component, corresponding today to more than half of all immigrants in Norway (Kjelstadli, 2003, Vol. III, p. 396; Lie, 2002, p. 16).

Norway is therefore becoming more multicultural, and nowhere is this better seen than in the capital Oslo. Today 20 per cent of the population in Oslo are immigrants, which is three times the national average, and 35 per cent of all pupils in the schools of Oslo belong to a linguistic minority. In 2001 the population of Oslo numbered 508,725 inhabitants of which 22,086 were registered as Western immigrants and 76,674 Non-Western immigrants[2]. An interesting development is that the 1:5 ratio is now also reflected politically: Among the 59 representatives elected to the new Oslo city council for the four-year period 2003–2007, a total of 12 (20 per cent) have a minority background, as compared with seven during the previous period 1999–2003. Demographically, many of Oslo's non-Western immigrants are concentrated in the inner city centre and in the suburbs (Blom, 2002) where housing is more affordable.

Oslo's municipal library Deichman has 13 branches, 11 of which are concentrated in the eastern part of Oslo. Research has shown that



immigrants in Norway for various reasons frequent public libraries and use library services much more than the average Norwegian (Leth Nielsen, 2003; Vaagan, 2003a, b). Deichman in the early 1970s started building collections of books in the main languages of new immigrant groups. A section for immigrant literature was set up at Deichman in 1983. It was named The Multicultural Library from 1996 onwards, and is located in the main office of Deichman. In addition to servicing the capital's multicultural population either directly or through its branch network, the Multilingual Library also has national responsibilities with respect to other public libraries, and for this reason the Norwegian government has extended financial support since 1975. In fact an increasing amount of The Multilingual Library's budget is spent on postage, sending book depositions to other public libraries in other parts of the country. In 2003, The Multilingual Library was awarded the "Library of the year" prize by the Norwegian Library Association for its consistent efforts to promote multicultural library services locally and nationally (Leth Nielsen, 2003). The Holmlia branch of Deichman, which is situated in a south-eastern suburb with considerable immigrant concentration, and where there had been incidences of Nazism and even a racist killing in 2001, received the same prize in 2002 for its work against racism.

Nonetheless, the encouragement of cultural diversity counts relatively low as a professional value among Norwegian librarians (Vaagan and Holm, 2004). While this impression is consistent with international trends where multiculturalism in public libraries has come under increasing pressure over the last decade, it is perhaps more surprising in the capital Oslo with its increased multicultural profile. Although multiculturalism today is an established academic discipline in the USA, there has been some debate about its relevance in LIS education in the USA (Wellburn, 1994; Peterson, 1996; East and Lam, 1996). In Europe, multiculturalism generally has low priority both in public libraries and in LIS education. This is indeed a challenge to the profession and also to LIS education and research (Berger, 2001; Krüger, 2001; Vaagan, 2003a, b, c).

Increased Norwegian focus on multiculturalism

In May 2003 Oslo University College and Deichman/The Multilingual Library arranged a Nordic conference on multicultural libraries. In terms of users, multicultural library services involve both indigenous groups as well as

immigrants and asylum seekers. Norway has one indigenous population (the Sami) and five recognized national minorities (the Kven, Forest Finns, Rom, Romani and Jews). In the public mind, however, the term "minority" is primarily associated with immigrants and asylum seekers, the "new Norwegians". The proceedings were published in November 2003 (Vaagan, 2003b). Some of the 16 papers addressed school libraries, including Vahl Primary School library (Enger, 2003). A common premise in most of the articles was that demographic changes and increasingly heterogeneous population structures are positive and permanent features of contemporary Western societies. Multiculturalism is rapidly becoming the rule rather than the exception, also in Norway. Even so, multicultural library services are subject to political and financial constraints in many Western countries, and Norway is no exception. Increased immigration, inadequate financing and forces of socio-political integration are making it difficult in Norway to justify and maintain previous levels of multicultural public library services.

In August 2005 Norway will host the IFLA Annual Meeting, when as many as 3,500-4,000 delegates from all over the world are expected in Oslo. This will be the single largest multicultural event Norwegian librarianship has ever arranged. IFLA has a section for library services to "multicultural populations", which are defined as ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities. Ambitious basic principles for these services are: equitable access to physical and electronic library material and information in the own language of the users and which reflect the users' culture (IFLA, 1998). In Norway it is The Multilingual Library in particular that has achieved considerable gains with respect to these principles.

Legislation

Ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities in Norway are fortunate to have an inclusive law on libraries: The Public Library Act of 1985 (§1) states that library services must be extended to all residents, not only Norwegian citizens or ethnic Norwegians:

The task of public libraries is to advance learning, education and other cultural activities through information and by providing books and other appropriate materials free of charge to all residents. In servicing children and adults, all libraries must prioritise quality, variation and relevance. Activities are to be extrovert and library services are to be made known[3].

Whereas the Public Library Act of 1985 (§6) calls for "an organized co-operation between the public

library and the municipal school libraries” [4], school libraries are governed by another law – The Education Act of 1998. The Education Act (§9-2) simply states that pupils in primary and secondary school” must have access to a school library” [5]. Whereas the Public Library Act is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs, which also supervises all libraries (including school libraries), the Education Act is the turf of the Ministry of Education and Research, which supervises all schools. These distinctions and ambiguities are mirrored in the function and staffing of school libraries where there is considerable variety. In 2002, a total of 3,099 primary school libraries in Norway presented registration data to The Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority. These libraries employed 667 school librarians (of whom 150 librarians and 517 teachers with supplementary courses in librarianship). Many primary school libraries are very small and/or have only limited opening hours, in some cases only a few hours per week. At the secondary level a total of 416 school libraries in 2002 employed 239 fully trained librarians, plus 69 teachers with – but also 145 teachers without – library qualifications, and also 82 office staff and 113 others [6].

From the point of view of librarianship, staffing the library with teachers without library qualifications (or other types of staff without library qualifications) is a strategy to undermine the role and potential of the school library. From the teaching profession’s point of view, librarians lack pedagogical qualifications. When, in 2003, some organizations and unions proposed a national standard for school libraries to the Ministry of Education and Research in which the librarian was identified as part of the school’s pedagogical resources, the teachers’ union (Utdanningsforbundet) protested that only teachers could be considered as pedagogical resources. The Norwegian Library Association, in a statement in October 2003 concerning a government report on the quality of Norwegian primary schools, noted a lack of comment and reflection on the central role of the school library which had been envisaged in L97, the framework policy paper for all Norwegian primary and secondary schools. Research has shown that in secondary schools the library – for a variety of reasons – is more a place where pupils hang out than actually study and learn, and that much of the blame lies with the teaching profession (Tallaksen Rafste, 2001). Many would add that this also applies to many primary school libraries.

Vahl Primary School

Oslo has 140 primary schools with 49,645 pupils and 27 secondary schools with 11,600 pupils, in addition to six vocational centres with 5,100 pupils. A total of 125 languages are represented in the schools of Oslo, and 35 per cent of the pupils belong to a linguistic minority. Vahl Primary School is located in the eastern part of the city centre in the Grønland/Tøyen area which has one of the highest minority concentrations in the capital (Blom, 2002 p. 47-49). The school is located in a three-storey building dating back to 1897, and has been renovated many times over the years, and also been closed down. It was reopened as a primary school in 1997 (see Plate 1).

Currently there are 258 pupils, which is well below the Oslo primary school average of 348 pupils, and the school has the highest concentration in the country of minority pupils – 95 per cent. Of the 24 languages spoken among the pupils, Urdu, Arabic, Turkish and Somali are the most common [7]. The school has 31 teachers including five native speakers in the main non-Norwegian languages. Since 1997, Vahl Primary School has developed a very active policy in terms of co-operation with parents, cultural activities, ICT-projects and the creation of a good school library. The school has made Web pages with pictures of its many and varied activities (www.vahl.gs.oslo.no/om_skolen_var.htm (accessed 29 November 2003)). Vahl Primary School in many ways serves as a model for other Norwegian primary schools in terms of innovative and successful teaching of multicultural children.

An interesting feature of all Norwegian primary and secondary schools, is the institution of the school council which is composed of elected pupil representatives (see Plate 2). The council serves many purposes, one of which is to provide an early training ground for later political participation. The school council regularly communicates and interacts with the school board and thereby takes

Plate 1 Vahl Primary School, Oslo



Plate 2 Members of the school council



part in school management. Some have seen a link between the high percentage of multicultural members of Oslo city council and the early training and encouragement to take part in elective school councils.

The heart and brain – the library

The library is on the top floor in comfortable, brightly coloured and renovated attic rooms with original wooden beams, and is open daily from 08:00-16:00. On its Web site the library states that it is:

... the heart and brain of the school, and open daily. It is a place where pupils can enjoy themselves and satisfy their curiosity, a place where they can meet the book and be guided into books, a base camp for themes and project work, and a place where pupils can find information from various media which they can develop into products (www.vahl.gs.oslo.no/biblioteket.htm (accessed 29 November 2003)).

The library is well-equipped with three computers, a printer, a copying machine, a colour scanner, a laminating machine, ear phones, film and digital cameras. In the adjoining ICT-room there are 14 new computers connected to the Internet. Norway is an affluent country with a high level of computerization at all levels of education (Kløvstad and Kristiansen, 2004), and Oslo is well aware that in many other European countries computers and the Internet in schools are seen as key elements in closing the knowledge gap (Süss, 2001). Vahl Primary School is one of three Oslo primary schools with a high minority concentration which the municipality of Oslo has granted extra funding for ICT-activities.

The teacher-librarian

Gry Enger has been head of the library the last four years. A graduate of The State Drama School, she had worked 15 years in drama before coming to teaching. The transition came about gradually. First, she was asked to help in visualizing the

teaching of Norwegian to children in a Muslim kindergarten called Urtehagen, situated near Vahl Primary School, where she worked for four years. She then joined Vahl Primary School, and was asked to build up the school library. At this point she completed the required course in librarianship, and later also a university degree in religion, leading to her BA degree. Being neither a traditional teacher nor a traditional librarian but in fact a new breed – a teacher-librarian – has in a sense facilitated her task in developing the multicultural Vahl Primary School library. Gry Enger is often invited to visit children and parents at home, and has herself on many occasions received pupils and parents in her own home.

Books and theme boxes

The library book collection consists of titles in Norwegian but also titles in Urdu, Arabic and Turkish, especially for the younger pupils. The school library must encourage the children to read and at the same time be a centre of knowledge and information. But to make use of information, the children must first be able to express themselves and understand. This is a primary objective for the use of the library by pupils and teachers. The library is conceived as a workshop or expanded classroom where new methods are tried out. Emphasis is placed on activating language and gaining proficiency in Norwegian. In addition to the books there are nine so-called theme boxes. Here the pupils can find objects and items related to individual writers or themes such as Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. In the Astrid Lindgren box there are picture books of her favourite character Pippi, music cassettes, videos, jigsaw puzzles and a Pippy wig. There are also quizzes related to Astrid Lindgren's works. The boxes also contain a variety of dolls which are very popular.

Library routines

The library has certain routines, e.g. everyone must take off their shoes and wear slippers, and outer garments are placed in allotted shelves. Except during theatre rehearsals, emphasis is placed on maintaining a quiet environment. Nobody is to loiter around, everyone must be engaged in an activity. Pupils can install themselves in a sofa, sit in the "secret reading corner", read fiction, find a book, sit in the computer corner, work with the scanner and laminating machine, do thematic or project work, focus on the book certificate test, listen to story telling, assist in library work, play theatre with or without dolls, play with the "theme boxes", engage in geography competitions and many other things.

Story telling

Story telling is primarily directed at pupils in the 2nd to 5th grade (7-12 years). These sessions take place in the library and also in the various classrooms. Story telling mainly involves entire classes but can be limited to smaller groups. The objective is to encourage and develop proficiency in Norwegian by slowly expanding the vocabularies. The children enjoy story telling very much, and these sessions not only give Gry the occasion to understand their language proficiency, but also get an impression of what kind of literature they like.

The Education Act of 1998, §2-8, states that municipalities are obliged to provide pupils in primary schools who have another mother tongue than Norwegian and Sami, necessary training in their maternal languages, bilingual training and simplified/adapted Norwegian until they have sufficient skills in Norwegian to take part in the normal education programmes. This provision has always caused debate among those who advocate the use of Norwegian only and those who claim that education in the mother tongue is pivotal for the child's entire intellectual development and social integration (Bøyesen, 2003; Øzerk, 1996).

In the six-year period 1997-2003 the number of pupils in all Norwegian primary schools receiving these types of training increased by approximately 30 per cent from 41,000 to 53,000 (Statistisk sentralbyrå – Statistics Norway, 2003, p. 20). In Oslo about 10,000 of the capital's 17,555 minority language pupils receive training in simplified/adapted Norwegian and about 4,000 receive training in their mother tongue. There are currently 23 languages in which mother tongue training is offered in Oslo. Receiving training in the mother tongue also means that Norwegian is chosen as a second language. Most pupils at Vahl have chosen Norwegian as a second language only, and there are currently five bilingual teachers who assist Gry when necessary during the sessions of story telling.

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2001) analyzed the reading skills of ten-year olds in 35 countries, including Norway. The relatively poor results of Norwegian pupils has caused concern. Research also shows that the proportion of drop-outs among secondary level pupils in Norway is higher among non-Western immigrants than among other groups (Lødding, 2003). Several measures have been implemented both at the national and local levels. The municipality of Oslo has, over the last two years, undertaken systematic testing of the reading skills of pupils in Oslo. Results from the most recent test confirm that reading skills have slightly improved 2002-2003, but that the situation for minority

pupils remains difficult: In 2nd and 3rd grade (seven- and eight-year olds) about 50 per cent of the pupils with Norwegian as a second language are below what is defined as a critical level. In 7th grade (13-year olds) this percentage has increased to 75 per cent. At Vahl Primary School, Rector Trine Hauger is proud that the corresponding figures are much better: 10 per cent of the 2nd graders 54 per cent of the 3rd graders and 42 per cent of the 7th graders were below the critical level. However, the rector is not satisfied with the slump between 2nd and 3rd grade which she attributes to comprehension problems when meeting more complex language[8]

The Ministry of Education and Research in early April 2004 presented to Parliament an amendment to the Education Act[9]. If passed, the revised law would curtail the system of training in and about the mother tongue and concentrate training on simplified/adapted Norwegian, with the clear ambition that all minority pupils should progress to normal tuition in Norwegian. Echoing this development, the municipality of Oslo believes that the system of bilingual education, particularly the option to choose Norwegian as a second language only which 4,000 of the 17,555 minority pupils in the schools of Oslo have chosen, serves to perpetuate inequalities and must be revised (see Plates 3 and 4).

Computerization and publishing company

As mentioned previously, both the school and the library are technologically well-equipped. When the children work on projects in the library, they can download pictures from the Internet and scan them for non-commercial use in their texts. The pupils produce reviews and presentations of all kinds. The digital cameras are also in frequent use. The computers all have digital imaging software so that much of the work on the school newspaper is also conducted from the library (see Plate 5).

In Norwegian schools, and Vahl Primary School is no exception, pupils are beginning to make use

Plate 3 Parallel story telling in Somali and Norwegian

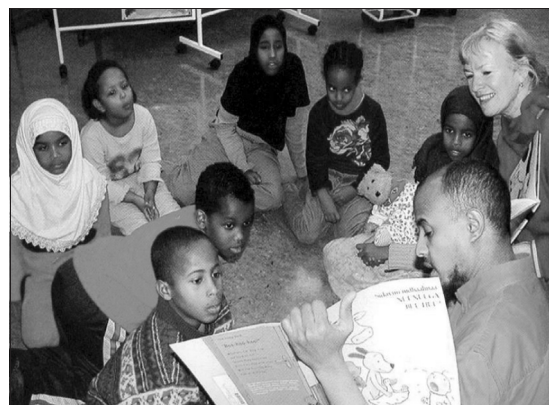


Plate 4 Visualizing the Norwegian language through fairy tales

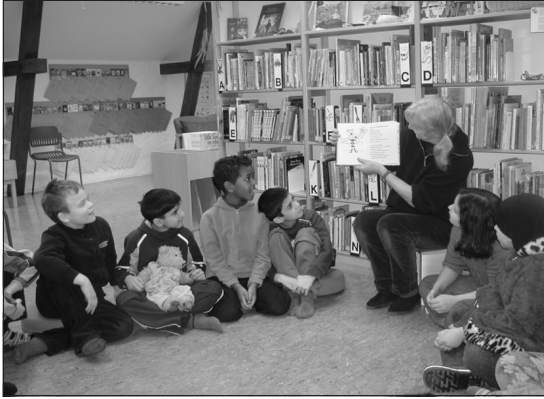


Plate 5 Computer wizards



of digital pupil electronic portfolios where they retain sample text works, Powerpoint presentations as well as recordings of reading sessions and photos. In late 2003, the pupils launched their own publishing company (Leseforlaget) and 20 titles are already printed, among them *Dikt om dyr* (Poems about animals) by Amin (3C), *Vikinger* (Vikings) by Shivali (7A) and *Min venn* (My friend) by Hassan (4C). The library regularly receives visits and questions from schools in and outside Oslo requesting information and advice based on its unique experience. A clear ambition is therefore to produce a video documenting the various activities in the library. Such a video could, for example, be streamed online to other schools and libraries all over Norway (Plate 6).

Book certificate and book police

From the 4th grade (11 years) onwards, pupils are eligible for the coveted book certificate. However, demonstrated proficiency in certain skills is required: the pupil must be able to explain what a writer is, must demonstrate an understanding of literature, must be able to locate a given book according to its Dewey number, and must be able to consult encyclopedias and the telephone

Plate 6 Proud new authors



directory. In several cases pupils have proudly recounted that after having received their book certificates, they have helped their mother's make phone calls. Two children from each class from 4th to 7th grade serve as book police (see Plate 7). This is a very popular job for which pupils must present written applications. When recruited, the book police act as library assistants and wear red book police badges, moving around school with a book trolley gathering in books that have to be returned to the library.

Drama

In Norway drama is taught as a discipline in parts of secondary school and also in teachers' training colleges. But in Norwegian primary schools drama is not treated as a discipline like music and art, it is only a method used in subjects such as English, Norwegian and religion. This is surprising because there is a long international and Norwegian tradition in the pedagogics of drama starting with John Dewey (1859-1952) and his emphasis on "learning by doing", through the advocacy of children's play by Lev Vygotskij (1896-1934), creative dramatics (Elsa Olenius 1896-1984), dramatisation (Helga Eng 1875-1966) right up to

Plate 7 The book police



the “Newcastle school” theatre-in-education from the 1980s (Bjørge *et al.*, 1999; Branaas, 1999; Bråten, 1996; Dale, 1996; Thestrup, 2001).

With her background Gry Enger knew how effective drama can be as a communicational and pedagogical method, and she has successfully applied this to a multicultural primary school setting. Sometimes parents need to be convinced and reassured of the seriousness and relevance of drama as an educational method. While drama is immensely popular with the children, parents, mostly fathers, occasionally question the need for their children to take part in performances outside school boundaries. Here tact and good taste is called for and the plays chosen are invariably related to the best in Norwegian culture and also the best of other cultures. For example, in 2001/2002, the library arranged a drama performance named after Norway’s great troubadour-poet, Alf Prøysen. The performance was staged both in a rural setting at the Prøysen centre in Brumunddal, and at Deichman Oslo Municipal Library. The performance involved 26 children from all grades representing 16 different minorities, and drew enormous crowds (see Plates 8–10).

Conclusion

Oslo is becoming increasingly multicultural, and the municipal library system and education system is adapting to the changed demographic trends. Vahl Primary School and its library are at the

Plate 8 Set for the stage



Plate 9



Plate 10



centre of this development, and are achieving good results well above the Oslo average. For librarianship, there are lessons to be learned. To respond competently to the new demographic challenges and multicultural issues in primary schools, school librarians must receive improved and adequate training in pedagogical and communicational skills where drama can play a key role. Here, the innovative teacher-librarian concept of Vahl Primary School library is promising. Library schools accordingly must calibrate LIS education to give students adequate skills to service our “new Norwegians”.

Notes

- 1 In official Norwegian statistics an “immigrant” is a person with two foreign-born parents. The immigrant population is composed of first-generation immigrants and children born in Norway by two foreign-born parents. Children with only one foreign-born parent are not considered as immigrants, and neither are adoptive children nor children born outside Norway by Norwegian-born parents (Lie, 2002, p. 10).
- 2 Statistics Norway (www.ssb.no/magasinet/analyse/tab-2002-09-04-01.html) (accessed 15 October 2003)
- 3 The Public Library Act of 1985 (www.lovdato.no/all/nl-19851220-108.html) (accessed 14 October 2003).

- 4 The Public Library Act of 1985 (www.lovdato.no/all/hl-19851220-108.html) (accessed 14 October 2003)
- 5 The Education Act of 1998 (www.lovdato.no/all/hl-19980717-061.html#map0) (accessed 14 October 2003)
- 6 I am grateful to Erlend Ra, The Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority, for his help in computing these figures from the 2002 library statistics.
- 7 At the national level the ten largest minority languages in Norwegian primary schools are Urdu, Albanian, Vietnamese, English, Arabic, Spanish, Somali, Bosnian, Turkish and Kurd (Lie, 2002, p. 55).
- 8 Telephone conversation between R. Vaagan and Rector Trine Hauger, Vahl Primary School, on Monday 5 April 2004.
- 9 Ot.prp. nr.55 (2003-2004). See also the Ministry of Education and Research Strategy Plan 2004-2009 for enhancing minority participation in K12 and tertiary education: Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet (2004) Strategiplan. Likeverdig utdanning i praksis! Strategi for bedre læring og større deltakelse av språklige minoriteter i barnehage, skole og utdanning 2004-2009.

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New Library World provides an appraisal of current library trends and emerging patterns for the future. Its international readership consists of academics, practitioners and students of information and library services.

The Editor welcomes original articles, conference papers and book reviews for possible publication in this refereed journal.

Benefits to authors include:

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- To chart the latest developments for the library and information profession.
- To examine the changing role of libraries and the information profession, and the impact that external factors have on future roles and development.
- To raise awareness within the international library and information community of the potential for change and innovation through the exchange of new ideas and their practical applications.
- To publish contributions from academics and practitioners in the form of research reports, case studies, critical comment and reports on innovative projects.

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Topics focusing on the latest developments could include, but are not limited to:

- impact and use of new information technology;
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- developments in education, including library education;
- demographic trends and their impact on library provision;
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