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The PISA-shock and its consequences: The future of libraries for children in Germany

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Abstract:

When the first results of the PISA-test („Programs for International Student Assessment“) were published in the beginning of December 2001, it was quite a shock for Germany. The German's self-esteem was thoroughly shaken by the bad ranking (number 21 out of 32) and still today the entire nation is desperately searching for an answer as to how such bad results could occur. Librarians as well as their professional associations came into action almost immediately. They had prepared concepts all along – reading promotion as well as the promotion of media and „Information Literacy“. Librarians repeat again and again that PISA was nothing but a visible proof for the importance of libraries and school-libraries – the Finnish school- and library-system was taken as a role model and positive example. The paper reports on the development and opportunities German Libraries have taken since the beginning of this discussion.

PISA 2000 – a healing shock?

When the first results of the PISA-test were published in the beginning of December 2001 („Programs for International Student Assessment“ – see Max-Planck-Institute for educational research, summary of Berlin's results: <http://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/pisa/ergebnisse.pdf>, in English: <http://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/pisa/english.html>), it was quite a shock for Germany and it started panic as well as horror. The German's self-esteem was thoroughly shaken by the bad ranking (number 21 out of 32) and still today the entire nation is desperately searching for an answer as to *how* such bad results could occur. These reactions and discussions were

nowhere to be noticed in any other country. As such, they are somehow unique and they are doubtlessly worth it to be analysed more closely:

PISA was the first international test concerning the practical use of acquired knowledge and information. Therefore it is regarded as a symbol for the internationalization of schooling, teaching and education at a time when our industrial society turns more and more into a cultural society. This is also why Germany's bad results do not fit into the image of a land of „poets and philosophers“, as Germany sees itself. Reputedly, Germany has always been a country of culture and education, the hallmark „made in Germany“ has always been something to be proud of. And then: PISA. Politicians, pedagogues and parents have now been discussing the reasons for this calamity *and* the necessary consequences for two entire years, the years „after PISA“, but with no noticeable result – until now. Nothing much has actually happened.

Reminder:

What is PISA?

PISA is an internationally standardized procedure to measure the capacity or knowledge of 15-years-old pupils of different educational background (i.e. from different school systems). All in all, 32 countries participated, 28 of which are members of the OECD.

The PISA-tests have been developed as an concerted action of the participating countries and take place directly at school. In Germany, all in all about 50.000 pupils from roughly 1.500 schools were tested. The tests are organized in three shares: In 2000 everybody concentrated on Reading Literacy, in 2003 the Mathematical Literacy is to be tested and in 2006 the question hinges on Scientific Literacy.

With „Reading Literacy“ the first test was regarded as of special significance, since „reading“ was seen as a universal „cultural technique“, a knowledge without which it is impossible to participate in social and cultural life in an adequate manner.

Adolescents who largely face the change from school to apprenticeship, were asked to gain pieces of information from certain texts. They had to interpret, think about and evaluate the given texts. The results were scaled in a special „Proficiency Scaling“ in five different competence levels – level 1 standing for the lowest, level 5 for the highest skills. Level 2 was marked as the minimum for professional chances and the adequate participation in social life. The results of the PISA-tests were shattering for Germany! They showed that almost a quarter of all students did not reach this minimum and that they were way below the average results of the OECD-nations. Furthermore they brought up the information that 40 % of the students (mainly boys) did not read at all and that the social group a child grows up in Germany alarmingly influences this child's chances in its further educational chances.

PISA and the libraries:

How did librarians react when being confronted with these results, that all in all represented a very sad picture of German educational politics? Librarians as well as their professional associations came into action almost immediately. They had prepared concepts all along – reading support as well as the support of media and „Information Literacy“, this was nothing new to the librarians, and they did not get tired to repeat again and again that PISA was nothing but a visuable proof for a useful inter-action with libraries and school-libraries – the Finnish school- and library-system was taken as a role model and positive example. „Listen to us, we have a lot to offer! Support the libraries!“ was to be heard in Germany. But did anyone really pay attention to these claims? The answer is not easy and can only be regarded in very differenciated manner, since it is necessary to understand the presuppositions of every part in Gemany, being the result of the federal structure of this country.

The state governments of 16 different provinces make their decisions in a completely autonomous way, especially in terms of cultural or educational politics. Apart from that, the organisation of schools is by law the duty of every province or municipality – other than the organisation of a school library or a common library, of which every single city or community is responsible for – if they like to feel responsible!

This is the reason why there do not exist any legal norms or standards, but only recommendations in Germany. And since it is no legal obligation to have a library (or school library), many municipalities and schools simply do not have one. Apart from that, existing libraries are in constant danger to lose their budgets as soon as the town lacks money. Up to this very day, it has not been possible to establish in the minds of our politicians the institution of municipal libraries, libraries for children and school libraries as an important foundation for education and culture.

According to statistics there are 14.500 municipalities in Germany, of which only about 3.000 have got approximately 3.600 public libraries that are run by employed professionals. There are even no reliable statistics about school libraries at all. After all: can you now call Germany a “developing country” concerning the institution of public libraries?

Every municipality, every province can decide individually whether and how a library shall be established, how many people shall work there and which tasks they shall fulfill – this means that there are big differences between the provinces and communities concerning the standard for libraries.

Put nicely, this also means that in places where politicians have realized the worth of libraries, very interesting interdependent library concepts have started to exist – libraries that due to a lot of creative work and thinking have developed very individual profiles.

Missing legal standards and norm on the other side also mean space for individuality – and so German libraries tend to be various and plentiful.

We now would like to introduce and present some examples of libraries for children and young adults that can be seen as models for other libraries.

1. Exemplary program of events

The children’s library Stuttgart, „KIM“, did not establish any special rooms within the ancient building, but has created a special concept for the library-work:

(<http://www.stuttgart.de/stadtbuecherei/kinderbuecherei/>)

There are two rooms that can be used: One room (with narrating media) is called (and adequately decorated) „The Sea of stories“. The other is called „Info-Planet“ – here you can find non-fiction and learning-programs for computers.

The program of events outlines various series that have been developed by the library-team themselves.

Narration game:

This game has been invented and developed in the children’s library in Wilhelmshausen. It is a mixture of narrating and a free putting on scenes. The children are the centre of the action, they represent the different protagonists and thus get to know literature by playing. One room is decorated with costumes and properties. The one who does the narrating (someone of the library-team) follows the thread and integrates the children by addressing them personally, by looking at them or touching them. These impulses then further develop, always roughly following the thread of the story. Because of the interaction between narrator and children, the story always redevelops.

Picture-book-show:

This has also been created in the children's library Wilhelmshaus. The interactive picture-book-show is a vivid visualisation of children's books. It offers a completely new perspective and understanding of illustrations by presenting the pictures from a different viewpoint and by thus discovering details. The pictures get scanned, worked at with a special program for presentations and are then shown on a screen via beamer.

Open your „reading ears“ – There's a story just for you!

Honorary readers are sitting in the rooms of the children's library and withdraw with 4 to 31 children for a „reading aloud session“. This is a very personal situation – individual allocation is possible.

Music between books:

Children's literature gets arranged with music, rhythms or melodies by and for children. These events come into being in cooperation of the music-school in Stuttgart and the children's libraries.

Expert-kids:

Working with non-fiction-books, children do some research and thus receive information to questions they are interested in. This can be done with „specialists“ or authors of relevant non-fiction-books or CD-roms, including information about the book itself, the production of media and the work in a house of publishers.

Media-rallye for school-classes:

Using the example of a special topic, children get the possibility to try out various media. Students have the chance to learn how to find a suitable medium for their questions by trying out 4 or 5 different stations. By doing this and by finding the answers to given questions, they have to show creative and cognitive skills.

Right now the following rallyes are being offered: Pirates, Fairy Tales, Nature, Internet, Art, Cities, Languages and Elements.

Internet-reporter:

A group of children is asked to work as reporters. They have to find pieces of information to a certain topic and create a web-site with a special editor's program.

CreARTive-Workshop:

In this workshop, artists are introduced. Children shall feel the artistic technique, main motives or colours of a painter in a following action. Studios can be visited and the children get the opportunity to interview the artists themselves.

Language-balcony:

Media in different languages are presented and introduced in bilingual events.

2. Youth-libraries / Libraries for adolescents and young adults

Public libraries in Germany find it as hard as libraries elsewhere to deal with the aimed-at-group „adolescents and young adults“. Two different concepts shall briefly be introduced here:

[Medien@tage](#) in Dresden got quite famous because of the building and the inner establishment. This library became well-known even outside the closer area of Dresden. A

highly aesthetic claim for public rooms was realized with a very modern equipment. The demand for a current and up-to-date media-system got realized as well.

See: <http://www.medienetage-dresden.de/d1/ueberuns/rundgang/index.html>

The idea of the youth-library in Mönchengladbach, „Mediencorner com.mal“ fully integrates young persons in the organisation of the library. Adolescents have the possibility to choose their media, and they serve as contact persons for other young people, using the library. The result of this is that they identify with „their“ library. The presupposition for this system is a room they can use on their own.

<http://www.hbz-nrw.de/kunden/gast/Moenchengladbach/mediencorner/impressionen.html>

3. Family Libraries

A further example of a library catering to a specific group is the Family Library in Bochum. It specifically targets parents and their children. The emphases of the collection is on books concerned with bringing up and educating children as well as on media which can be used for promoting the intellectual and artistic development of children. The media collection comprises 12,500 items, 60% of which is aimed at parents and children and 10% at grandparents, the remaining 30% reaches out to more than one specific group. The collection is presented straightforwardly and is divided into topic areas: kids(to age 14), parents, growing up, work and leisure, and novels.

<http://www.bochum.de/stadtbuecherei/familienbibliothek/>

New Structures in the German educational system

Through the analyses of the PISA study, in which the connection between up-bringing and education was proven, it for the first time became overly clear that the German educational system had taken the wrong path. In addition, it showed that the sectarianism in theory and in practice in the field of education in Germany (division of the schools in elementary, primary, and secondary) followed by mutually exclusive institutes of higher and vocational learning was a failure. The inequality of opportunity for children of social classes less prone to higher education was considered especially scandalous.

However, the PISA shock did get things moving. Of special interest is the fact that there is now an open discussion on the interconnection and interaction of a child's home, kindergarten, school and other institutes of learning, and that the role of libraries, which have always promoted reading regardless of age or level of education, has finally been recognized.

1. Support in the early years:

Although in Germany there is by far no wide-ranging pre-school program, it is becoming more and more accepted that the early years are decisive and that promotion of reading must start with the parents. The pre-school program of the Göttingen municipal library ("Mit zwei dabei" ["Two together"]) and the Berlin "Wortstark" ("Word Power") language program should be mentioned.

2. Cooperation of public libraries and schools

A main point of emphasis of the work of children's libraries has always been the work with school children. Here, too, new activities have emerged. Through PISA, the cooperation

between public libraries and schools has received new impulses. Contracts dealing with media partnerships between public libraries and schools are being signed in order to make the agreements binding, leading the way to new standards of quality control. (For more information, see <http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/project.cfm?lan=de&nid=818&aid=5640>)

On the one hand, it is a bit sad that it had to take a shock the magnitude of the “PISA shock” to have schools recognize and appreciate what we have been tirelessly doing for years and to have them finally see what we have to offer as a competent partner. On the other hand, it is a good chance for encouraging improved and continual cooperation between schools and libraries. And that is always a good argument for those responsible for funding as well as an effective "image improver" in the public eye.

3. Networking

Networking and cooperation are the new catch words. Municipalities and regions are starting to analyze and widen their educational services. The library is a part of this system of educational services and can better fulfill its purpose when its role as a partner is taken so seriously that it is seen as the hub in the municipal network. Also belonging to this network scientific libraries can be seen: Scientific libraries, university libraries and special libraries are seeking and reaching out for contact with schools, as they regard those pupils as their further student lobby, by organizing special projects and at least guided tours in the library.

A concrete example:

"Center for Literature" at the Fantastic Library Wetzlar (Phantastische Bibliothek Wetzlar):

Born out of years of working together with schools and kindergartens (this term is used here in the German sense denoting not just the final year but all years from age 3 to 6) , a full six months before the “PISA shock”, a so-called "Competency Center" was founded at the Fantastic Library Wetzlar. In contractual cooperation with the state school authorities, its aim is to promote access to language and literature for gifted as well as for weaker school children, promoting reading as the basis for broad media proficiency.

This "Center for Literature" strives to support general education in the field of literature independent of the language (hence not only in German lessons) and to show ways in which literature can be used for targeted learning goals (not limited to a single field but overlapping fields / subjects)

After the PISA shock, this "Center for Literature" experienced rapid popularity, as school administrations and the responsible ministries as well as politicians suddenly recognized that this could serve to solve (at least some of) the many problems. The Fantastic Library Wetzlar is by its very nature well equipped to deal with the unusual, as it is the only library in Europe specializing in the area of fantasy literature and has always been open to intermediary and intercultural projects. It has long been active in the area of teacher training, has actively sought contact to universities while supporting and running seminars, has held courses on creative writing for school children, and has cooperated with such educational institutes as the Volkshochschulen (publicly funded adult education institutions), continuing education academies, and the German-English, German-French, German-Italian and German-Russian language societies. After PISA, the needs for just such a networking hub were concretely formulated. Now, after two years of continual work, the profile of the "Center" has been broadened and elaborated as follows:

- The tasks of the "Center" have expanded from simply offering courses and the like (seminars for teachers, work groups for school children, running classes, reading-aloud projects, enrichment opportunities) to functioning as an open network. Information,

contact and impulses come together here and are then channeled into projects according to the needs and desires of those who have expressed interest. This leads to interesting synergetic effects; many concepts don't have to be "invented" again.

- through the active financial and moral support for the early literacy program by Hessian businesses and industries, who recognized that the causes of poor qualifications amongst youths in the job market were to be found in the lack of pre-school education, cooperation with business and industry organizations was able to begin and a comprehensive concept of promoting reading in kindergartens formulated:
 1. Books for lending were donated by businesses to kindergartens. The books are chosen by the Fantastic Library in close consultation with kindergarten teachers who are then required to take part in seminars offered by the "Center for Literature" specifically for kindergarten teachers so that they can be trained in mediating and managing the books.
 2. Training readers (for reading out loud to others) with the specific goal of bringing these readers together with families where the children are not supported in the acquisition of reading, for reasons of either of language (background of migration) or of a social nature (social background where education is neglected). After the reading session, a personal conversation should be held with the parents to make clear the importance of books and reading for their child's education and opportunities for advancement.
- Creation of a modular children's and youth library (approximately 10,000 volumes by the end of 2003) for schools and kindergartens: the decentralized collection will be distributed to several sites (schools, kindergartens, smaller public libraries), some of it in boxes of books dealing with specific subjects that would "wander" from site to site, complementing the permanent collections.
- Media partnership with the local press:

For a period of six months, the local press will run a series of stories on all the various projects of the "Center for Literature" and further, will solicit monetary donations to be used for purchasing up-to-date children's and youth books to be used in schools and kindergartens.

Because of all these networking activities, the Fantastic Library Wetzlar has, at least in Hessen, attained the status of a "model" for similar attempts at cooperation, as it has been able to demonstrate the wide thematic range as well as the flexibility of a library in the context of a comprehensive reform of educational institutions.

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