

A Regional German School Library Association: A Story of Success?

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There is no national or stateside legislation and regular funding for school libraries in Germany. The responsibility for school libraries is left to the municipalities and local public libraries. The article describes the history of a regional German school library working group (LAG) from 1987 to 2017 founded by a group of teachers and school in the federal state of Hesse to advise the government. It was questionable if a private association could in the long term be a viable solution for the development of an underdeveloped school library system but it has been successful.

Introduction

“A country without a library would be like a garden without plants, a meadow without flowers ...” wrote Umberto Eco in his novel “The Name of the Rose”, and in the course of a school library seminar the participants collected statements, which were just as striking, such as “A school without a library is like a journey, which takes you nowhere” or “A school without a library is like a desert without an oasis”. These metaphors emphatically express the necessity for school libraries.

In 1987, 30 persons from 16 school libraries in Hesse came to a first informal regional meeting that was later called the first Hessian School Library Day. Long before the so called PISA-shock, the disappointing outcome of the achievements of German students in reading and math, the main concern of this Regional German School Library Association – called LAG - was to work on the students’ problems extracting information from texts. It was thought that well-equipped school libraries could be helpful in this task (Schlamp, G. K., Brée, H. G. & Fritz, M., 2013).

A traveling library, which goes to its customers in the schools, was put into practice in 1995. When the ambitious plans for regional help centers came to nothing, LAG had proposed this traveling advice center. The Ministry of Education developed the mobile education unit - a truck with an extension for cultural and instructional purposes.

Soon thereafter the Project Office for School Libraries was developed. The Project Office, under responsibility of the Ministry of Education, advises schools in the development of and the work in the library. Additionally there are two teachers with half of their workload working in the Hesse Department for Public Libraries that belongs to the Ministry of Science and the Arts.

Association Activities

School Library Conferences

In 2017 the 23rd School Library Conference was held. Like the years before this further education event had about 30 seminars and through the years 170 speakers (among them 14 authors) on reading promotion, media education, IT and data protection, guided inquiry, library education and organizational matters. The conference is hosted each year by one of the member schools and this gives participants the opportunity to visit other school libraries. For years the Hessian School Library Meeting had been unique in Germany. “The mother of all school library meetings” now has imitators. There are currently school library meetings in several states, like North Rhine-Westphalia, Berlin/Brandenburg, Bavaria, Saxony-Anhalt, Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein. The founding of LAG Schulbibliotheken in Hessen enabled teachers to become active and work on school library topics outside the official channels. The Hessian Ministry of Education was open-minded and a close cooperation began - the LAG became a non-governmental organization, whose recommendations were highly valued. Up until the central Hessian Teacher Further Education Institute was closed down, 25 one-week-courses on school library topics were held. More than 400 teachers, librarians and parent helpers participated.

Successful Projects

There was also a course in working with the thematic bookcase “Die Bibliothek in der Kiste” -- Library in a Box. The participants could spend a week reading and planning how to use the bookcase in teaching. This successful project, also financed by the Ministry of Education, has reached 60,000 pupils over 20 years. Schools often used

the list of 30 to 40 books and other media per topic to help construct their own libraries. Other schools could use the bookcases for 8 weeks free of charge.

1992 was an eventful year for the school libraries. It was not only the start of Library in a Box, it saw the introduction of the Austrian OPAC program ---- LITTERA ---- in a modified version which met users' needs in Hesse. Supported by the "Servicestelle EDV in Schulbibliotheken", a special institution to help work with LITTERA cataloguing software in schools, the program became available for school libraries and their textbook stocks for a moderate fee. LITTERA is used by two thirds of all schools in Hesse, which also networks the catalogues of the participants.

Several prizes are used to raise the awareness of colleagues about the work done in the library. At first the prize "The Little Hessian Bookcase" honored attractive reading activities in the library. Later, "School Libraries of the Year" were awarded a prize. To become school library of the year, one had to document extensive school library activities and the presentation of the school library on the school homepage. Then came the prize, "The School Librarian / the School Library Team of the Year", which invited Heads of School to acknowledge the achievements of those responsible for the library. These initiatives have spread in other German states. The publications of the LAG are a service of a special kind, particularly the thematic brochures, which deal with central issues of the daily running of a school library. Some of the brochures reflect the cooperation with the colleagues in Austria and Southern Tyrol. Topics are reading promotion, the multi-media library, collection development, organizing the school library, research, encouragement to read and learn, the use of the Hessian cataloguing program LITTERA and data protection. Brochures can be seen in Figure 2 and other publications in Figure 3.

Unrealized Initiatives

As early as in 1996 the Ministry of Education was prepared to help finance another project suggested by the LAG – to improve the use of the Internet in school libraries. It was submitted to the Federal Commission for Education and Research. Unfortunately, experts from the Federal Ministry of Science rejected financing the project, with the extraordinary argument; all these things were already available in public libraries! This was slightly exaggerated in the year 1996. The LAG did go online with a homepage and a mailing list (Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft Schulbibliotheken in Hessen, 2017). A digital newsletter took its place several years ago. Finally a blog about topics concerning school, school libraries and pedagogy went online from 2007 to 2017 (Das Schulbibliotheks-Lexikon, 2017).

Further vocational education widens the horizon and promotes the professional competence of those responsible for the school library. The LAG pursues the concept of teacher-librarian by suggesting a further education course for colleagues to promote the pedagogical use of school libraries. The concept has not been realized.

Core Principles

The fact that there are quite a number of successfully working school libraries and multi-media information centres in over two thirds of the 2,100 Hessian schools, is mostly due to a concept of the LAG that can be described with three maxims.

1. Begin here and now and do not wait until a local or federal institution presents a library to the school for free. This is the trademark of the LAG, the narrow path to a library, created by your own initiative and hard work, using all available school resources.
2. The school library is an essential component of the school's concept of learning to read and reading promotion, media education and library pedagogics.
3. The school library has to be closely integrated into teaching and the organization of the school. The library must be stocked in cooperation with the school departments and in accordance with the school program.

Together, these maxims build an active school library, which does not wait for the users, but is visible in everyday life in school and is central to all governing bodies of the school. It is a place for learning that is regularly evaluated (a recommendation by LAG to the Hessian institute that evaluates schools). The concept is backed by American school library impact studies (Scholastic, 2015) which, after the evaluation of thousands of school libraries, confirm that students, using good school libraries achieve better results in school tests. In its manifesto "What the LAG Wants" the association has set down its views on integrating the school library into the daily life at school which can advance the Hessian school library concept in a sustainable way:

“The school library is part of school and teaching. Its embedding means:

- Part of the school programme. The main concepts are reading promotion, media education and information literacy.
- Part of the curriculum.
- Funded by state and local authorities.
- The governing body of the school is responsible.
- The school library is a department as are languages, sciences, and physical education.
- The teacher-librarian has access to all decision-making bodies of the school.

Last but not least, it’s about equal opportunities for all students in Hesse, independent of where they live or what status their parents have. A part of modern education policy is the promotion of multi-media and multi-functional school libraries. Modern multi-media libraries enhance the quality of schools.

Conclusion

It is hard to judge, if the concept of the “Library From Below” has created permanent change. However in schools, where the project “school library” has been running for ten years or even much longer, certain habits have emerged - not only in teachers, who have direct access at any time to the media of a central multi-media library, but also in students, who can read and learn and work in various social forms in rooms equipped to a very high standard.

The Hessian school libraries from below, mostly run by volunteers, dependent on donations, and supported by the self-help organization LAG, are a story of success. There is absolutely no reason to stop here. The future will show if the LAG could have laid the foundation for a successful school library system.

References

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