
Investigating an International Exchange of Best Practices Between German and American Teacher Librarians

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In efforts to enhance school library programs in Germany, two teacher librarians from Germany visited the United States in the fall of 2010 through the Goethe Institute's Librarian in Residence program to learn from U.S. teacher librarians. The German teacher librarians spent three weeks observing best practices in school libraries in the state of Florida in conjunction with researchers from the Florida State University. The purpose of this research was to investigate this international exchange of best practices, through documenting and analyzing the German teacher librarians' learning experiences, and observing, documenting, and analyzing the resulting implementation of the best practices in multiple school situations in Germany. This data serves to answer the research question: How can teacher librarians and school library programs benefit from a formal international exchange of best practices? Implications for teacher librarians as a global community, future exchanges, and future research are discussed.

Introduction

In the fall of 2010, as a part of the Librarian-in-Residence program sponsored by the Goethe Institute, two German teacher librarians spent three weeks visiting American school libraries in the state of Florida with the purpose of observing best practices in information literacy instruction and teacher/librarian collaboration in order to return and implement these practices in German school libraries. The researcher spent three weeks with the librarians and data were collected throughout their stay in the United States. Then, as follow-up research, the researcher traveled to Germany to observe and document the implementation efforts and the practices of teacher librarians in various locations in Germany including Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Berlin.

The purpose of this research was to investigate an international exchange of best practices related to teacher librarianship. The goal of this research was to document and analyze the learning experiences of the two German teacher librarians while in the United States and to observe, document, and analyze the implementation of the best practices in multiple school situations in Germany.

Background

In recent years there have been many developments in teacher librarianship in Germany. Many education theorists attributed these changes to the 2000 Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) results that suggested shortcomings of the German educational system because Germany was ranked number 21 out of 32 countries (OECD, 2001). Shocked, German policymakers searched for the reason behind these disappointing results, and librarians and their professional organizations seized the opportunity to advocate for their programs, including teacher librarians (Krueger, 2003; Schneider & von Jordan-Bonin, 2007). It was the 2000 scores and the progressive movement by the teacher librarians that attracted the attention of the Goethe Institute's Librarian in Residence program.

PISA is an international standardized test that measures and compares the knowledge of students in 32 countries. The test has three areas: reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and scientific literacy. The test questionnaire also contains questions about school environments. School libraries provide an environment for learning not only in the reading literacy area of the test but also in the scientific literacy area in that school libraries teach students to locate, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize information, activities which are very much part of scientific literacy.

In 2000, PISA data on students' use of the school library showed that 73% of German students never use the school library – the highest percentage for the countries included in the study (Dobert & Sroka, 2004; OECD, 2001). Though it must also be noted that at this time, only 15% of Germany's schools had a school library that met professional standards (Giersberg, 2012; Schneider & von Jordan-Bonin, 2007), this may be attributed to the fact that the federal government is not responsible for school libraries so it differs from state to state how school libraries are handled and if they exist at all (Giersberg, 2010). It was this data from the 2000 PISA report that served as a catalyst for German teacher librarians to more actively promote the value and worth of school libraries.

In examining the higher scoring countries in 2000, such as Scandinavian countries, it was found that they had "highly functional public and school libraries at their disposal" (Dankert, 2005, p. 315). While there are public libraries in Germany, there was very little cooperation between the schools and the public libraries noted. This led to steps to further expand the cooperation between schools and public libraries and also establish school libraries as an essential component in addressing Germany's educational deficits (Dankert, 2005).

Since the shocking PISA findings there have been changes in Germany, including the gradual shift to all-day school in some of the Federal States; a paradigm shift in regards to instruction from teacher-focused to student-centered; and a focus on self-motivated learning using a variety of types of media. Leaders in teacher librarianship in Germany assert that these goals "cannot be achieved without providing modern and well-equipped school libraries" (Giersberg, 2010; Schneider & von Jordan-Bonin, 2007, para. 4). As a result school libraries have received support from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research's nationwide initiative *Future Education and Support* (Giersberg, 2010). Additionally, the German Library Association established a "Library and School" commission, consisting of librarians and teachers, to address issues related to school libraries. This commission has created a school library curriculum that

includes numerous best practice case studies, promotes information literacy as an essential learning goal, and highlights how school libraries can help achieve this goal (Giersberg, 2010).

The Librarian in Residence Program

To promote and support cooperation, along with an exchange of experiences between librarians and information professionals from Germany and abroad, the Goethe Institute and the Library and Information International (BI International) agency created the Librarian in Residence program (Doellgast, 2012). In 2010, due to the recent discussions about all day school, life-long learning, consequences of the 2000 PISA study, and the professional debate surrounding school libraries, the Librarian in Residence program decided to focus on teacher librarianship.

The Goethe-Institute Librarian in Residence program, in collaboration with the Florida State University, offered two German specialists in the field of school libraries an opportunity to travel to the United States and spend several weeks visiting school libraries, meeting teacher librarians, and participating in workshops and conferences to learn about school libraries in the United States. Helga Hofmann of the School Library Department in Frankfurt and Julia Rittel, head of the library of the professional colleges of the Rhein-Sieg District were selected as the two Librarian-in-Residence participants for 2010.

Research Procedure and Data Collection

In order to determine how teacher librarians and school library programs can benefit from a formal international exchange of best practices, this research was conducted in two phases. The first phase is described here; the second phase is described in the next section.

Phase One

First during the fall of 2010 the researcher, along with Dr. Nancy Everhart of Florida State University, scheduled visits to 15 schools across the state of Florida - six elementary schools (grades K-5), three middle schools (grades 6-8), and six high schools (grades 9-12). These schools were selected based on the recommendations of their district supervisors and state professional organizations as libraries noted for excellent programs. The purposively selected schools span a range of grade levels including elementary and secondary schools located in differing socio-economic communities. The researcher also requested that the teacher librarian in the sample school schedule the visit for a time that he or she would be actively instructing students.

In preparation for the school visits the researcher and Dr. Everhart created an observation questionnaire, which asked the two German teacher librarian participants to comment on various practices they observed and what they learned through their discussions with the teacher librarians. There were questions relating to operating procedures, staffing, finances, the collection, technology, facilities, and services offered. But, there were also questions that asked them to observe what types of activities were going on in the library and what roles, if any, the teacher and the teacher librarian were undertaking (see Appendix A). The two participants filled out an observation questionnaire for each school that was visited. These responses were then entered into a spreadsheet by question and respondent.

Additionally, after each school visit the researcher conducted informal debriefing interviews with the two German teacher librarian participants. An interview questionnaire was

created with open-ended questions (Appendix B) that were more reflective in nature and allowed the participants to express their thoughts and reactions to what they observed during the visits that day (Creswell, 2009). The two participants were also asked questions in regards to the practices they observed, the feasibility of implementing these practices in their school libraries in Germany, and challenges they expected to encounter. It also provided a time for the researcher to clarify items for the two participants. It should be noted here that the two participants spoke fluent English and all interviews were conducted in English.

Utilizing the interview questionnaire and following semi-structured interview protocol, the researcher met with the two participants each evening after the school visits. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to expand on their responses and also ask the interviewer questions. Additionally, by conducting the interviews as a group it allowed the participants to interact and bring about richer dialog (Creswell, 2009). These interviews were all recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Finally, the Librarian in Residence program required the two participants to blog about their experiences and interactions with school libraries and teacher librarians on the program website.

Phase One Data Analysis

This exploratory research utilized inductive qualitative content analysis, in that themes and categories emerged from the data through the researcher's careful examination, interpretation, and constant comparison (Glaser, 1965; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The researcher, with 12 years experience as a teacher librarian, was immersed in the interview transcripts and let the themes emerge. Utilizing open coding, notes and topic headings were written in the text while reading it. The content was read through three times and topic headings were written down to describe all aspects of the content, both manifest and latent. The headings were then written down and then the list of topic headings were grouped according to those that were similar under higher order themes. Then through the abstraction process and researcher interpretation, each category or theme was given a name using content-characteristic words (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researcher then followed this same process with the observation questionnaires and the blog postings of the two participants, while also comparing them for similarities and differences (Glaser, 1965).

The themes emerged from consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas that were common among the participants (Creswell, 2009) and were derived directly and inductively from analyzing the observation questionnaire, the interview transcripts, and the blog postings from the two participants. As expected themes related to practices of teacher librarians emerged: collaboration, information literacy instruction, reading promotion, technology integration, social media, learning environment, stakeholder support, and advocacy. These themes not only represented what practices were most frequently were observed, but also reflected what the participants were the most interested in learning about.

To strengthen credibility, the researcher implemented member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through out the data collection and data analysis. The researcher thought this step was vital because even though both participants spoke fluent English, there was always the risk of misinterpretation. The participants were provided written copies of both the observation questionnaire and interview questions ahead of time for translation if they thought necessary.

Also the researcher thoroughly explained both questionnaires to participants before the first school observation and during the school observations and interviews the researcher rephrased and interpreted as necessary. Participants were asked to review interview transcripts for accuracy. They were also asked to list their perceptions of the themes that emerged, again ensure that their true meaning had been correctly represented (Creswell, 2009).

Phase Two

In the summer of 2011, the researcher, with partial support from the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) Takeshi Murofushi Research Grant, went to Germany to follow up with the two participants to establish which best practices observed in the United States were implemented, those that had been most useful in their practice, those that had not, what challenges they had experienced, and to document the progress of this exchange of best practices.

In the weeks preceding the trip to Germany the researcher conducted virtual informal semi-structured interviews with the two participants, who reported about their implementation and dissemination efforts in regards to what they had learned during their time in American school libraries. These interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Each participant also submitted a document that listed and described each practice she had implemented since her return to Germany.

The researcher performed site observations at a variety of school libraries in Frankfurt and Hamburg, including both elementary and secondary schools. In Frankfurt the researcher visited two secondary schools and spent time observing and interviewing the teacher librarians. Additionally, the researcher visited government-established library departments that provide services to school libraries in Frankfurt and interviewed the librarians who worked there. In Berlin the researcher, along with Dr. Everhart, presented to a session comprised of teacher librarians from all over Germany at the Bibliothekartag conference, which was followed by question and answer discussion and then informal interviews with a panel of German school and library experts. In Hamburg two elementary level schools were visited and the researcher again conducted informal semi-structured interviews with the teacher librarians; during one visit three additional teacher librarians from the Hamburg area attended providing an opportunity for a group interview and discussion. In Hamburg there was also the opportunity to visit the government-established library department at the public library that provides services to school libraries and conduct semi-structured interviews with these librarians as well. Throughout the time in Germany both Hoffman and Rittel traveled with the researcher and Dr. Everhart, which provided for many informal discussions about their experiences and implementation efforts.

During the school visits the researcher completed the same observational questionnaire that the German teacher librarians had completed during their school visits in America. The researcher also conducted informal semi-structured interviews with the German teacher librarians to ask about the observed practices, if they had benefited from the ideas brought back from the United States, and what successes or challenges they had experienced with implementation. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The notes from informal conversations with Hoffman and Rittel were also utilized

by the researcher, which led to richer descriptions of their experiences in implementing the best practices.

The researcher analyzed the data upon return to the United States, again utilizing inductive qualitative content analysis allowing themes to emerge from the data (Glaser, 1965; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Utilizing qualitative content analysis allowed the researcher to work within an “interpretive paradigm” and to identify important themes within the content (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

First the researcher analyzed the transcripts from the virtual interviews, the list of practice implementation descriptions, the observation questionnaires from the German school visits, and the transcripts from the follow up face-to-face interviews conducted with the two German teacher librarian participants following the same procedure as in phase one of this research. The purpose of this content analysis was to determine which best practices had been implemented and successfully transferred to this international setting. It was found that some of the ideas and practices observed in the U.S. have been successfully implemented such as an increased focus on the teaching role of the teacher librarian, utilizing instructional technologies for instruction, increased social media use, reading promotion strategies and programs, and the training and educating of teachers about topics including: collaborating with the teacher librarian to prepare lessons that work with the teacher’s curriculum subjects and how to integrate technology into their teaching.

Member checking was again implemented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) throughout the data collection and data analysis process due to the possible misinterpretations from translation. Participants reviewed transcribed interviews to verify their accuracy as well as the list of themes that emerged to again ensure that their true meaning had been correctly represented.

Again utilizing inductive content analysis and the process followed in phase one, the researcher analyzed the observation questionnaires from the German school visits and the transcripts of the interviews with the various German teacher librarians. Surprisingly the themes that emerged from this data were related to the challenges experienced by German teacher librarians rather than implementation successes, including: a lack of role definition and recognition by teachers, lack of support from the people in their schools and their government, and technology issues.

Results and Implications

Collaboration, information literacy instruction, reading promotion, technology integration, social media, learning environment, stakeholder support, and advocacy all emerged as the practices that most frequently were observed, but these also reflected what the participants had been the most interested in learning about. The two participants expressed this in their comments such as “The librarian focuses on collaboration with the teachers and had an impressive number of classes coming in for library lessons on a regular basis” and “the librarian does a fantastic job in focusing on basic literacy skills, learning to read, and reading motivation.” Technology was also a focus as noted in many comments such as “The librarian is a leader cooperates with teachers and instructs using technology” and “The utilization of technology is vital for instruction.”

The practices implemented in German school libraries as a result of this project indeed reflected those areas of interest of the two participants. Hoffman and Rittel have conducted workshops throughout Germany to disseminate what they observed and learned on their visits to American school libraries. Additional dissemination efforts have been made through professional organization work, presenting at conferences, developing training materials, online forum discussions, and professional conversations. To address defining the teaching role of the teacher librarian and how to educate teachers on the possibilities of collaboration, trainings have been developed for administrators, teachers, and teacher librarians on the teaching role and how to collaborate with the teacher librarian to prepare lessons that work with the teacher's curriculum subjects. Efforts have also been made in this area through the development of materials to promote the value of the teaching role of the teacher librarian. The ideas and strategies learned by the two German teacher librarians from U.S. teacher librarians contributed to an increased focus on working with teacher teams to promote and teach literacy and on creating and offering information literacy lessons for students to connect to classroom research projects. Additionally, it was noted that as a result of the observations of the collections in the American school libraries, there was a renewed effort to ensure that both print and non-print materials were available to support curricular areas and that these materials were promoted to teachers. Furthermore, trainings for teachers on working with the teacher librarian and how to integrate technology into instruction have been instituted through the creation of training workshops.

In the area of utilizing instructional technologies the researcher observed many instances of dissemination of practices that had been observed in America, such as the interactive whiteboard as an instructional tool, an increased focus on utilizing databases, development of the school website as a portal for students and for reading promotion, and interactive games utilized in the library for learning. Additionally Hoffman and Rittel promoted the utilization of more Web 2.0 tools in school libraries after their trip to the United States, for example creating book trailers with Animoto to promote reading, using Glogster as a presentation tool for research projects, and using Wordle with students. Social media usage by American teacher librarians was of noted interest to Hoffman and Rittel, and as a result they have both begun to utilize social media more for program promotion and communication with stakeholders in their own practice and have conducted several training sessions with other teacher librarians on the topic of social media use. Several of the teacher librarians interviewed noted use of Facebook and other social media to communicate with and promote their programs to students.

Findings from the researcher's observation questionnaires and interview transcripts highlighted the challenges or the struggles that the German teacher librarians experienced when attempting implementation. While the researcher did note the implementation of the above mentioned practices, the interviews with the German teacher librarians during the school visits in Germany focused more on the challenges they were experiencing, including lack of role definition and recognition by teachers, lack of support from the people in their buildings and their government, and technology issues. It was noted that the technology provided to school libraries in Germany seemed adequate – most of them had interactive whiteboards, several computers in the library, automated circulation system, internet access, and access to online databases. Yet the role of the teacher librarian in utilizing and integrating these technologies

was vague. Many of the teacher librarians interviewed talked about trying to institute “media literacy programs to teach students how to be safe online,” but a lack of time was a problem because teachers would not dedicate time for this. Many commented that teachers only see the library “as a book place” and not as a “teaching place.” Also several of the teacher librarians interviewed commented that most teacher librarians in Germany think this same way, in that they do not recognize that teaching is a part of the teacher librarian’s job. These indicators of challenges all point to a need for further training and education programs for teacher librarians in Germany.

Overall it was interesting to see how the interests of the two German teacher librarian visitors to the U.S. aligned to the challenges that emerged through the interviews with the other German teacher librarians. Also the parallels to the challenges of teacher librarians in the U.S. and other places in the world such as Australia (Godfree, 2012; O’Connell, 2012), England (Gildersleeves, 2012; McNicol, 2003), Italy (Marquette, 2012), Croatia (Špiranec & Zorica, 2011), and Lithuania (Woolls, 2012) became apparent. These similarities indicate that as a profession, teacher librarians around the world are all struggling with similar challenges and signify a need for increased international partnerships for research and opportunities for exchanges like the one described in this research. In order to develop these types of relationships the global professional teacher librarian community needs a way to connect.

A community of practice is defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4) and may provide a method to connect teacher librarians worldwide. The guiding characteristics that distinguish communities of practice from other groups are: 1) the *domain* (topic or theme to be addressed and advanced); 2) the *community* (members motivated by a mutual interest in the domain); and 3) the *practice* (ideas, tools, expertise, knowledge, and shared resources that serve to move the field of inquiry forward) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). This research demonstrates that there are benefits of formal exchange programs that allow concerned professionals to share knowledge about the practices of teacher librarianship. While IASL provides a forum for this, this research reinforces the need to further develop international relations and partnerships to create this true global community of practice.

Conclusions and Future Research

Asselin (2011) calls for school library researchers to connect with colleagues throughout the world to address the issues and struggles of teacherlibrarianship on a global basis. This research also demonstrates how teacher librarians can learn from each other by “connecting with colleagues in their own contexts” to broaden our perspectives. The follow-up research with the German teacher librarians occurred only nine months after their visit to the U.S., therefore only limited implementation and dissemination of the knowledge gained by the two participants had occurred. Future follow-up research is needed to continue to monitor the progress and examine the long-term impact of this project.

Additionally this project and research should be replicated with other countries. “Conducting research about literacy and information literacy in any context entails understanding cultural views about knowledge, learning, and teaching, historical contexts of

libraries in those societies, and current policies of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and their uses in education" (Asselin, 2011, p. 19). Future research of this type is needed with other countries, that is research within the native context that will allow for "connections, learning, listening, observing, respecting, letting go of assumptions, discussing, and finding mutually meaningful inquiries" (Asselin, 2011, p. 21). Conducting this type of exchange program provides a chance for teacher librarians to experience school library programs in other countries within their working contexts, gain new perspectives, and to learn and share best practices with one another in order to build a global community of practice where teacher librarians can learn from, share expertise with, and support one another to develop greater knowledge and strengthen the practice of teacher librarianship throughout the world.

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Appendix A. School Visit Observation Questionnaire

School Information

How many students?	
Grades ?	
What kind of social background? Homogenous?	
Teaching methods / Curriculum traditional or modern?	
School library operating hours	

Other observations:

Organizational Model / Finances

Who is maintaining?	
• School	
• City / District / County / State	
• Shared Facility	
• Financial and personnel support from?	

Other Observations:

Personnel/Scheduling

How many people working?		Who is doing what?
• Librarians		
• Clerks/assistants/aids		
• Volunteers (students, parents)		
• Are classes scheduled on a fixed schedule?		

Other Observations:

Collection

How are materials arranged?	
Variety of formats? (print, nonprint, periodicals, software, DVDs, audiobooks)	
Variety of types of materials collection (fiction, nonfiction, biographies)	
Reference collection?	
Reading level indication? (AR, Reading Counts)	
Lending conditions	

Other Observations:

Technology

Number of computers? Networked?	
Internet access?	
Filters?	
Subscription databases?	
Other types of technology? (interactive whiteboard, DVD player, projector, ebook readers, audio book players)	
Computers for checkout? (Laptop carts)	

Other Observations:

Facilities

Room	
Accessible for all?	
Good flow pattern? Including circulation desk?	
Effective signage?	
Displays of student work?	
Available seating for whole class?	
Areas for multiple purposes? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole group instruction • Area for small group instruction • Independent work areas • Quiet informal reading area 	
Technology work area for students? Lab?	

Other Observations:**Services for teachers and students**

Reserve Collections / Media boxes	
Interlibrary loan	
Books about teaching methods	
Textbook/Class set management	

Other Observations:**Usage – What activities are going on?**

Whole group instruction? Who is instructing? What is the topic? Who is the audience? Methods?	
Is this standards based instruction tied to AASL/curriculum standards or storytime?	
Does teacher remain when class is in the library as a co-instructor or leave the librarians as the sole instructor?	
Individual Checkout? Are students in there individually to checkout or only as a whole group class?	
Are students using the computers?	
Are students using the reference section?	
Are there small groups working together with or without supervision?	
Are there independent students just reading for enjoyment?	
Are there teachers using the library?	
Individual support for students	
How often do teachers use the library for their lessons?	
Reading promotion programs	
Media literacy programs	

Other Observations:**Describe the library Instruction observed:****Collaboration with other libraries?****Other Comments or Observations:**

Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Do you have anything you would like to ask me to clarify anything you saw on your visit?
2. What did you think about the library you saw today?
3. What are your reactions to what you saw today?
4. What did you think about what the students were doing? The teachers? The librarian(s), other staff?
5. Of what you saw, what aspects would you like to implement back in school libraries in Germany? What resources would you need to do that? Would you need help? If so, what kind?
6. Of what you saw do you think would not work in Germany? Why not?
7. Comments: