German School Libraries – Requirement and Reality

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This article outlines the current situation of German school libraries within the German library system. While on the whole this system functions extremely efficiently, school libraries in particular would seem to suffer from considerable neglect. On the one hand there are too few of them, and on the other a failure to recognize their needs has resulted in wholly inadequate levels of funding, facilities, staffing and resource provision.

Schools and higher education in Germany

Before examining the particular situation of school libraries in Germany it is advisable to take a general look both at Germany’s political and administrative structure, including its school and higher educational system, and at the wide range of different types of academic and public libraries (Seefeldt & Syré, 2017; Plassmann & Seefeldt, 1999).

Initially we should remind ourselves that the Federal Republic of Germany was founded in 1949 as a federal state. Since the reunification of the two German states in 1990 it has consisted of 16 federal states or Länder. The responsibility for all cultural affairs, for science and the arts, as well as for schools and education, lies fundamentally with the Länder. The cities and communities participate in this “cultural sovereignty” according to the principles of “local cultural autonomy”.

The federal political system has been an important factor in shaping the German educational system. The overwhelming majority of schools and higher educational institutions are public institutions. Most schools are subsidized by local authorities or municipal associations, while a comparatively small number are maintained by the church or are privately run. Whilst the funding body is expected to pay the operating costs (building, furnishings and overhead), the federal states are responsible for funding the teaching staff.

In 2016 there were 44,300 schools in Germany with a total of around 474,000 classes, approximately 795,000 teachers and 11 million pupils (nearly 1 million with immigrant background). In 2016 around 705,000 children started primary school, 560,000 young people opted for vocational training, and 505,000 young people (as much as 46% of all school leavers) began a degree course at a university, but 47,000 ended the school without any degree. State schools are free in all the federal states. School attendance is compulsory for all children from the age of 6 to 18.

The following article is based on an overview of the German library system by the authors, which will be published in spring 2017.
The most important element and main characteristic of basic vocational training in almost all areas is the so-called dual system, based on the cooperative combination of two diametrically opposed parties – employers and public vocational training establishments. Whilst local authorities provide the funding for vocational training schools (and their libraries) the federal states are responsible for the teaching staff and instructional content. Most young people who embark on training or apprenticeship do so on leaving one of the secondary schools.

In Germany about 2.9 million students attended approximately 420 institutions of higher education. Among these institutions for research, teaching and study are 80 universities, more than 100 comprehensive universities, technical and medical universities, theological seminaries, fine arts and music conservatories, in addition to 215 universities of applied sciences. They are for the most part state institutions funded by the federal states. Alongside the around 45 state-approved universities affiliated to the Church, an increasing number of private foundations or companies have launched their own universities offering a special range of courses.

While universities and institutions of higher education in the United States receive 1.1 % of the gross domestic product in the form of public expenditure and the equivalent of a further 1.2 % in the form of private donations, in Germany these figures are approximately 1.0 % and 0.1 % respectively. Compared to Sweden and Finland (1.7 %) and other countries Germany ranges below the average of all OECD states.

The multifaceted picture of libraries in Germany

The sheer diversity of German libraries has left its special mark on the librarianship of this country. The individual types of libraries can be classified not only by their funding institutions – public or private – but also by many other factors, such as historical development, collection size and structure or the kind of user they serve. Another important criterion is the range of their objectives and functions.

Unlike many other countries, Germany had no national library for a long period of time due to territorial fragmentation and internal political polarities. But today the German National Library (Deutsche Nationalbibliothek), located in Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig, is the central German archive, the central music archive, as well as the bibliographic center. Alongside the German National Library there are a number of other outstanding large libraries with a crucial role in the library system at the national level - for example the Berlin State Library – Prussian Cultural Heritage, the Bavarian State Library at Munich, and the Central Subject Libraries at Hannover, Kiel/Hamburg, and Cologne/Bonn.

The three-tiered structure of the various institutions of higher education detailed above also determines the library structure of these institutions. There are 80 university libraries and 215 libraries of the universities of applied sciences and other higher educational institutions. Including the departmental libraries, there are almost 3,600 academic libraries of all shapes and sizes. Together they provide the approximately 2.9 million students with about 185 million books, 4.2 million electronic and 230,000 printed current periodicals as well as access to digital resources of all kinds. The acquisition budget totaled well over 278 million Euros in 2016.

The approximately 40 state libraries and other regional libraries are responsible for literature services for a particular region rather than for a particular educational or other institution. In many places, regional or state libraries are also involved in the provision of literature services for study, research, and teaching purposes. Especially in the cities with recently founded universities or other institutions of higher education the state libraries supplement the literature
provision services of the universities in certain subject areas. They are fully integrated into the regional and national structure of the academic and research library system.

The most common kind of library in Germany is the public library. Around 3,600 academic libraries (including special libraries) are registered in the central database of addresses, compared to around 12,000 registered public library locations (including branch libraries), irrespective of type of funding. German towns, municipalities and administrative districts maintain a total of around 5,000 public library locations (including branches) and are also responsible for a further 2,500 school libraries and resource centers. At the level of the parishes and church communities, the Catholic and Protestant churches also maintain public libraries (about 4,100 in all). All these maintain overall holdings of more than 118 million media, with 363 million items borrowed in 2015.

Because of the particular social, educational and political importance of library work for children and young people in key areas such as encouraging children to read, helping them to enjoy good literature and teaching them media literacy skills, all public libraries give this target user group their special attention. For that reason librarians have been developing children’s libraries or children’s departments and school libraries.

Germany as a school library developing country

Libraries and schools have long been closely linked, despite the fact that cooperation between schools and their libraries on the one hand, and public and academic libraries on the other, has been sadly neglected for decades (Kirmse, 2014; Holderried, 2012). The reasons for this neglect are multi-faceted, with both schools and libraries bearing their share of the blame. After the shock of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study in 2000, numerous projects were initiated to alleviate the problems caused by the two sides working both alongside and against each other (Krüger, 2003). It became clear that in many areas schools and libraries, whether public or academic, were often working towards the same educational goals and that both sides could considerably improve their standing by collaborating more closely. As schools gradually became all-day institutions – a nationwide trend that started at the turn of the century – so did the need for attractive multi-media learning spaces suitable for active and independent learning.

The educational and political mandate of the public libraries is at its most obvious in the close relationships they cultivate with schools and school libraries. In spite of the widely recognized educational and political significance of school libraries, afforded additional weight by the UNESCO manifesto “The School Library in Teaching and Learning for All” (International Federation of Library Associations, 1999) the equipment, furnishings and staffing of many school libraries in Germany is still woefully unsatisfactory. Although general awareness of the library’s presence in daily school life is increasing, it is still often tangential in practice. The importance of the school library, or its more modern counterpart the school media center, is not called into question per se, but unfavorable parameters have resulted in a marked regional unevenness of the school library landscape when compared to the efficient and comprehensive systems of the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Great Britain or South Tirol in Italy.

Many specialists compare school libraries in Germany to developing countries despite the fact that the former are experiencing a certain upswing in the wake of the various PISA studies and the introduction of all-day schools. Unfortunately there are very few statistics and studies providing reliable information on the current state and potential of school libraries. The mere existence of a school library does not throw any light on its quality, since the spectrum of performance indicators is extremely broad. Some of the recent modern “lighthouse” libraries co-
exist peacefully alongside ill-equipped and out-of-date school libraries and book corners often dating back to the 1970s and 1980s.

A critical examination of the current German school library landscape reveals its still patchy structure; in federal states with adequately equipped library service centers, motivated working groups or in cities with School Library Offices (Schulbibliothekarische Arbeitsstellen) developments are impressive. In practice there are no binding standards governing the equipment of a school library, but a range of reliable guidelines, reference works and articles has nevertheless attracted considerable attention.

The main problem is that there is no general educational, political or legal framework of binding and comprehensive regulations. A constant impediment is the unclear administrative classification of the school library. If, as has hitherto been the case, libraries are defined as purely administrative entities, then they are seen as the responsibility of the school funding body, i.e. the municipality or the county, as are buildings or maintenance staff. This means that at the federal state level school libraries are assigned to the ministry responsible for culture, in the same way as public libraries. In reality school libraries should be assigned to the Ministry of Education since they also contribute to the educational and didactic work of their schools. Many projects have failed because the two departments kept passing the buck.

The dbv (Deutscher Bibliotheksverband – German Library Association) Commission “Library and School” complements the activities of the regional commissions and working groups by giving library development a welcome boost at the federal level. Its most important achievement is the creation of the web portal Schulmediothek.de (school media center) hosted by the network portal German Education Server of the German Institute for International Educational Research. The portal provides access to comprehensive information and useful guidelines for school libraries. Other promising developments are the School Library Service Models, plans for a curriculum, the editorial column School Libraries Update in the journal kJl&m, formerly Beiträge Jugendliteratur und Medien, and the advent of the first subject-specific training course.

**School libraries in practice**

School libraries can be part of all kinds of organizational structures. If the library is run as an independent unit within the school, then the school itself is responsible for funding the library’s service from its own budget or from donations and grants from a Friends Association or booster club. A frequent alternative is the integration of the school library into an existing public library, utilizing the same building and infrastructure, either as a public library using rooms in the school (model 1) or as a school using a nearby public library (model 2). Apart from the shared premises the main characteristic of the second model (where the school uses the public library) is that the school library is funded by the public library, so that the school is freed from staffing or other costs whilst benefiting from the proximity of the public library. This model also ensures a reasonable degree of compliance with library standards, whereas an independent school library run by teachers tends to develop a certain amount of “individual creativity” and can only offer a limited range of services. Cooperative models are also becoming more important, with teaching methods involving the Internet and digital media encouraging collaboration with district, city and regional media and image centers. The most common type of school library is the independent form, widespread in larger schools and school centers, while the combined school and city public library model is usually found in large cities.

Broad estimates indicate that about 18-20%, or about 8,500 of the approximately 44,300 general and vocational schools in Germany, have a school library or reading corner. Seen
objectively, at the very most 2,500 schools (5%) have well-equipped libraries, and professionally trained librarians and are in short supply nearly everywhere. The situation is particularly critical in the primary, middle and higher secondary schools, hardly any of which have libraries. Only the Gymnasien (secondary schools with emphasis on academic learning) have any kind of adequate library provision. And only in very few cases, mainly in new Gymnasien Gesamtschulen (comprehensive schools, public high schools) and Ganztagsschulen (all-day schools) is there any kind of adequate compliance with space and media provision standards. Part-time teachers and volunteer parents or pupils carry out over 90% of the work involved in managing and maintaining school libraries. Occasionally, job creation schemes or the Federal Volunteer Service may supply staff.

There is general agreement among experts on the most important services school libraries and media centers should be expected to provide. There are various descriptive service models and it is often not easy to distinguish between them. These models describe school libraries as “teaching spaces”, “learning and reading spaces”, “self-learning centers”, “social spaces”, “school-free spaces” or as “local libraries”. With the rise of all-day schools and regular afternoon teaching schedules the idea of the school library as an institution which can be used for learning and for relaxation and supervision has become increasingly popular.

One of the drawbacks is that library staff is often insufficiently qualified. There is a lack of appropriate training at the national level. However, a few federal states have initiated day courses, school library conferences or regional workshops, following suggestions submitted by library service center projects (Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Rhineland-Palatinate), regional working groups at the association level (Hesse, Brandenburg, North Rhine-Westphalia) or school library service centers (Cologne, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg). School library-related subject matter seldom finds its way into teacher training curricula. The dbv Commission “Library and School” has long demanded that basic school library knowledge be integrated into teacher training courses. Teachers responsible for running school libraries should have their teaching hours appropriately reduced, or school librarians should be employed to help during the initial establishment or reorganization of the library.

**Setting of a new task: Media literacy**

In recent years the regional associations of the dbv have signed cooperative agreements with the Ministries of Education in 14 federal states, thus putting collaboration between public libraries and (all-day) schools on a firmer footing. At the regional level this has stimulated political discussion on the significance of library work, reading and media skills, and digital literacy. In 2015 the *dbv* published its latest statement on the contribution libraries make to those areas detailed in the Federal Government’s Digital Agenda. The report *Reading and Learning 3.0: Media Training belongs in the School Library!* (Lesen und Lernen 3.0: Medienbildung in der Schulbibliothek verankern!), also known as the “Frankfurt Statement”, emphasizes the role played by school media centers in particular and makes concrete reference to the resolution adopted by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education in 2012 on Media Training in Schools. The Statement focuses on ways of teaching and improving media literacy, since without the associated knowledge and skills it is impossible to behave in an appropriate, autonomous and responsible manner in a world dominated by digital media. Three principles – the school library as media center, as learning environment and the qualified school librarian as media educator – form the core of this catalogue of educational and political demands.

The constitutional reform envisaged for 2017 by the Federal Government and the Federal States aims at improving the government’s ability to provide funding within the school sector and
may possibly involve extending the scope of hitherto isolated funding measures such as the IZBB program “Education and Support – the Future” (Zukunft Bildung und Betreuung) to include nursery school, libraries and adult education centers. Attention is increasingly focusing on improving reading skills, particularly with the help of digital media.

**Conclusion**

In summary, we can safely say that the decentralized and cooperative library system in Germany enables thousands of libraries of many different types to work successfully together. However, while the libraries at the national, regional, and local levels fulfill the demands of the information society in the 21st century with enviable efficiency, the porous nature of the school library landscape needs vast improvement.

**References**


**Author Notes**

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1 The international PISA studies (Programme for International Student Assessment) have highlighted some deficiencies in the German system. Since the publication of these studies the efforts made by the federal states aimed to improve educational standards in schools.

2 The German Library Association (Deutscher Bibliotheksverband) with its approximately 2,000 institutional members has defined its mission as the promotion of German librarianship and cooperation between libraries and institutions of librarianship.