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Library Services to children and urgent international cooperation

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Abstract:

Children's libraries are the heart of the principle and the reality "LIBRARY". Where children's libraries are existing, childhood becomes dignity, children receive appreciation. In children's libraries not only children but also librarians are learning for the future. The worldwide net of digital transfer of information and the increasing gap between the Poor and the Rich in a global acting economy obligate children's libraries to strengthen and to reform their cooperation.

In children's libraries the guiding principle "Local access to global information" undergoes a special reading and reality: childhood isn't "global", but local, both in an individual biography and a formal education-system. Libraries have to share the benefits of the local and global society to their children, but to emancipate them from its deficits at the same time.

Looking at the present structures of international cooperation between children's libraries, for which several examples are given, there seems to be an urgent need of cooperation, which follows other values than common professional standards, best-practice-exchange and half-commercial promoting of an internationally accepted code of literature and other media. The new cooperation-system has to follow the ideas of peace terms, chance of survival, intercultural participation and harmony of natural resources and intellectual freedom.

Full Text

Children's libraries are the heart of the principle and reality "LIBRARY". Where children's libraries are existing, childhood becomes dignity, children receive appreciation. In children's libraries not only children but also librarians are learning for the future. In the context of IFLA/FAIFE's efforts for freed access and expression of information, there are two phenomena, which have to be answered by the professional world of librarianship.

I. In children's libraries the recent guiding principle "Local access to global information" undergoes a special reading and reality: childhood isn't "global", but "local", both in an individual biography and a formal education-system. Libraries have to share the benefits of the local and global society to their children, but to emancipate them from its deficits at the same time. There are huge and on its face unbridgeable contrasts between international High-Tech-Data-Transfer and poor living conditions in the near surrounding or – at the same time- between high social standards of every-day live and an absolutely uncontrolled but partly well-equipped conflict situations of violence nearby.

Technical standards and social benefits of free access to information are forming no longer an integrated whole.

II. Looking at the world-wide digital net and transfer of information and the increasing gap between Poor and Rich in a global acting economy, which cannot avoid but obviously entail war-like conflicts, the Rights of the Child written down in the UNO-Convention has to be read and realised in a very disillusioned way. The promises of autonomy and individualism, which are given in the UNO Convention on the Rights of the Child for the biggest part of world's population mean not a consequence of protection by responsible grown-ups, but living conditions and benefits children have to fight for by themselves or are given as a programme, which primarily try to overcome deficits. Social harshness and unlimited participation in all sorts and contents of printed, audiovisual and digital material which walks not along with responsibility, protecting and competence are very double-faced preconditions for autonomy. Childhood and its right of free access and expression of information gets new needs and values.

The EU PULMAN (Public Libraries Mobilising Advanced Networks)-project developed new visions for future library services in a society, which is determined both by social conflicts and advanced information technology services. In February 2003 the project passed guidelines together with best-practice examples, which include Public Library Services for children and schools:

"Public Libraries can provide

- *a meeting point for local communities with a natural relationship with schools, families and other community groups, enabling the development of partnership to achieve a coherent approach to services for children and their parents or carers;*
- *a network learning environment to stimulate and provide skills for lifelong reading and learning and IST (Information Society Technologies) skills. This learning environment can be extended to schools, individuals, homes and virtually everywhere through web based services for children, parents and carers;*
- *enhanced homework facilities such as homework clubs, and links to specially designed homework help web sites for those in remote areas or unable to visit the library;*
- *models for share enjoyment between adults and children involving books, story reading, computers and IST, games, music, theatre and cinema and other cultural activities –*

increasing the potential for more constructive use of leisure time. The library environment should be designed jointly to make children safe and happy;

- *an important contribution to the development of all forms of literacy including:*
- *functional literacy – through books and the reading of electronic formats such as stories from the web, summer reading schemes, etc.;*
- *digital literacy – by introducing IST-based services for children, for example Web orientation to empower children in browsing and search skills, including the very important skill of evaluating website content and relevance, and games technology to teach IST skills in a fun way...;*
- *visual literacy – through posters, adverts and computer images;*
- *media literacy – newspapers, TV and radio including access via the web;*
- *learning resource packaging in partnership with educational organisations - libraries offer co-operative networks and www directories of necessary resources as well as local educational/training packages in order to support national and/or local curricula;*
- *support for social inclusion by focusing on multicultural and multilingual content as well as services for children with disabilities;*
- *strengthened cultural awareness, creating a sense of citizenship and cultural identity by promoting children' cultural roots... ” (PULMAN, P. 50/51)*

The most important recommendation and the red threat in the PULMAN-Paper is the urgent need for cooperation, which means binding commitments both in political agreements and private contracts. As future agenda cooperation among the following partners are mentioned:

“Policy makers, professional bodies, public libraries, museums, archives, schools, and other cultural and educational institutions.” (PULMAN, P.49).

Planning for the future, we have to ask, if our recent local, regional and international cooperation is able to answer the challenges of the Information Society Technologies combined with the human rights for children and the principles of IFLA/FAIFE. The following survey of various international cooperation-systems in the field of children's libraries doesn't strive for completeness. It rather shows which structure, regularities, possibilities and limits international cooperation present and how far it can be from the needs of children.

- A. UNI/UNESCO in cooperation with IFLA has passed and publish several declarations concerning children's human rights, library services for children in public and school libraries. UNESCO and IFLA offer professional help, standards and exchange. The UNESCO-website includes library portals. Expression and orientation of political intention and professional capacity are combined in this cooperation.
- B. IFLA itself has a special sector and several programmes/services concerning children's librarianship (IFLA-Section for Children and young Adults; IRAYLS, Books for all). The International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) is to provide in international and promoting forum for all aspects of school librarianship. IFLA and IASL are professional groups qualifying their members and lobbying the profession. It's the meta-level of promoting children's rights of free expression and access to information.
- C. Projects like the “International Children's Digital Library” (ICDL, e-mail:

icd@archive.org), founded and developed by the Internet Archive and the University of Maryland, USA provides via internet a huge collection of international literature for children around the world. It has special portals for children ages 3-13, for professionals like librarians, teachers, parents and other caregivers. It offers interactive communication between individuals and institutions. It gains from the high US-standard in information technology and prestige of library work for children in the USA. Perhaps it could become an experiment for create a real international and intercultural digital library, which can be used in other regions, languages, social surroundings with inputs from everywhere.

- D. As a part of the EU-Programme TELEMATICS for libraries, the CHILIAS-project was a model improving multimedia virtual library access and information skills. It worked very successful 1996-1998 in a cooperation of six European countries and languages (UK, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Finland, Germany). It was used by children themselves, has found follow-up-projects and is an example for international cooperation between libraries and their users.

Regarding all these efforts, from the professional point of view we have to consider:

- (a) the international cooperation concerning library services for children is able to implement the needs of the Information Society Technologies in special parts like
- providing hard and soft-ware and contents all over the world;
 - sharing knowledge, professional material, guide-lines, standards in exchange-programmes and projects of international working political organisations;
- (b) We haven't problems to analyse the situation and the needs for library services following the children's rights, but we have problems of transformation and realization. We haven't yet found the rules of harmonizing recent action fields of change and development: the social and the technological agenda for the future. We can rule single models, but we don't find the political mechanism, which makes a singular project in Berlin, Rio de Janeiro and Kairo a motor for general progress. Our system of cooperation therefore has to change.
- (c) A new quality of cooperation has to follow new qualities of library services for children beside the until now accepted standards of professionalism. We have to ask:
- which library service and which cooperation help children to survive?
 - which library service and which cooperation help to overcome deficits in children's everyday-life?
 - which library service and which cooperation make children independent from a violent surrounding?
 - which library services and cooperation support intercultural values?
 - which library services and cooperation guarantee most environmental and cultural protection?
- (d) We have to share in the decisions of the future task handling information technologies in rich parts of the world as well as in surroundings of economic, social and cultural deficits.

When librarians asked the German philosopher and scientist of cybernetics Heinz von Foerster fifteen years ago for ethic rules working with digital transfer of information, he answered: "In all management decisions choose and guarantee always the broadest access." Looking at the slogan "The power of the web is its universality" this ethic maxim seems to be redundant. But at the second glance librarians noticed, that the "universality of the web" is a hard piece of work and a professional challenge, if you really want to guarantee this universality as a human right for children.

In all parts of the world information scientists and librarians are working against the barriers, which information technology and its feigned substantial difficulties are constructing against free access to information in case of non-educated specialists (for example look at the German project www.digitale-chancen.de) . Ulrike Peters, a young German scientist working at the research-project "Websites without barriers", University Bremen, named five principles of quality, which can stand for a general evaluation of Human intercourse with information technology.

Not only web-design, but also information technology in children's libraries has to observe

- possibility of perception (can children precept this information?)
- possibility of attendance (can children attend this information?)
- navigation and orientation (offers this digital programme a suitable navigation-system, are there special orientation tools for the needs - not only capacity - of children?)
- intelligibility (is the language, the intellectual level, the section of facts, examples, pictures etc. understandable; for example look at the German project www.einfachfüralle.de)
- sustained development (has this soft-ware a future, leads this data-base to serious knowledge?).

These are some goals of further cooperation, if the IFLA/FAIFE-principles will become part of future library services for children.

IFLA/FAIFE's principles always are to be seen in a concrete historical and political context. Just at the place of this year's IFLA-Conference (Berlin, Germany) it should be not forgotten, that after the Second World War since 1945 many children's libraries in the English and American Sector of Berlin and Germany became places of so-called re-education and as a part of it practice in free information and democracy.

The new founded International Youth Library in Munich with its international children books for communication and understanding, the America-Memorial-Library in Berlin with its free accessible departments for children and young adults, the manifold services for children by the British Council branches in the northern part of Germany surely offered children primarily warm, bright and friendly rooms in an not destructed or rebuilt environment. But above all it guaranteed an atmosphere of self-determined options.

The new library spirit for children wasn't only a matter of access to during the Nazi-regime forbidden books and other materials . And it wasn't only a matter of the well organised professional anglo-saxon library. It was a matter of practising free and self-responsible access to information, documents and cultural assets.

An individual free opinion is formed by a dialogue of different argumentation's and by the ascertain of serious information. For German children this was the highest value of the shelter and challenge "children's library". It was responded by the cultural officers of the Allied Forces and supported by Scandinavian aid programmes.

This is no political legend. Born 1944 it's the experience of many Germans of my generation. But history doesn't repeat itself. I don't believe, that "western" library work at the beginning of the 21th century can assimilate cultural an social life conditions at the Hindukush and in Basra. If there are no links between the values of native ideas concerning childhood, the visions of native responded future and the IFLA/FAIFE-orientated principles of free access and expression of information.

Cooperation in the field of library services for children have to follow six professional approvals:

1. Children's libraries support multimedia literacy following the local needs together with international standards. They are open for evaluation and innovation.
2. Children's libraries – protected by legal regulations and private contracts – belong to the obligatory offers in each nation. The existence of children's libraries serve as an indicator for the national level of children's human rights. At the same time, the full-filling of children's rights is an indicator for the quality of library work.
3. Children's libraries are places of unhampered access to media and cultural diversity without discrimination of race, gender, nation, ethnic origin, health condition. Free access has to be defined in this sense too – not only in the definitions of copy right an avoiding censorship.
4. Children's libraries guarantee quality, continuity, esteem and sustainable development beyond commercial rules of all sorts of media and beyond the non-structured flood of information. "Global information" has to be defined in this sense too – not only in the definition of worldwide availability of everything to any time and anywhere.
5. Children's libraries define international and intercultural Childhood considering the welfare and necessity of its local target group.
6. Children's libraries give way to local culture and transmit it to the international exchange. Free access therefore has to be defined as an interactive freedom. In any case, the cultural and information gate has to be open in two directions.

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