THE ROLE OF CHILDREN’S LIBRARIES IN DEVELOPING A MULTICULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Internationale Jugendbibliothek München – International Youth Library in Munich has been collecting books for children and youth in all languages since its foundation in 1949 and it is the biggest library of this kind in the world. The intercultural dialogue encourages a number of different activities: lending children’s and youth literature in...
14 different languages, early literacy programmes for pre-school children in nationally mixed groups and programmes for school children and youth, English language courses, wide programme of exhibitions and scholarships for authors and publishers of children’s and youth literature as well as for educators. The library publishes the annual catalogue »The White Ravens«, bringing the selection of the best children’s and youth literature in the world. It has turned out to be a reference tool for all dealing with literature for these two age groups.

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### 1 International Youth Library

The International Youth Library develops the multicultural dialogue in many ways i.e. in large and small projects as well as in the library’s everyday work.

Being the largest library for international children’s and youth literature in the world, the International Youth Library has the mission, from its foundation in 1949 to the present, to build a bridge among children all over the world. The Library’s founder Jella Lepman was convinced that books for children and young adults would bring people – especially children – together. In Germany destroyed by the Nazi dictatorship and war, she considered children’s literature to be a means for more justice and peace in the world. In 1945 she requested for books from other countries, exhibited them in 1946 and opened the International Youth Library as early as in 1949 with a collection of 8000 international books. Books open the minds to tolerance, mutual understanding and peaceful interaction of people, and books in international languages give the children and young people the opportunity to learn and train different languages, being again a device for communication and cultural interchange.

At present, the International Youth Library’s collection consists of about 600,000 international children’s and young adult books in over 130 languages published within the past 400 years, including 80,000 historical books. In addition, there are nearly 30,000 titles of international secondary literature, approximately 250 professional periodicals, and 40,000 documents. About 1,000 publishers from all around the world kindly donate sample copies of their newly published titles to the library each year.

Nowadays Library’s main tasks are collection management, cataloguing, access to and promotion of books. The library also maintains the international study library, international children’s library and the reading museums.
Basically all of these activities support the idea of building bridges between children and adults. On the basis of international collections, all of the mediation activities of the IYL contribute to the intercultural dialogue. An overview of International Youth Library’s various activities in developing multicultural dialogue is described.

2 “Early literacy” reading promotion programme for mixed pre-school groups of immigrant and German children

The model project of early literacy promotion is initiated by the International Youth Library and financed by Ellis-Kaut-Foundation for a period of one year at first. It is in line with the Bavarian educational plan for pre-schools and it is based on the consensus that besides the general media competency reading is one of the most important cultural techniques that can be taught even in a pre-school period either by parents or by libraries. In cooperation with the International Youth Library a freelance pedagogue offers courses for pre-school children. Three preschool classes from different parts of Munich attended by pupils of different nationalities, i.e. immigrant children with and language problems participate in this project.

The work in these groups is the following: children are first led into the book store of the International Youth Library located under the castle’s courtyard. They are asked to stand in line in front of a book shelf just to see how many children would take to make one meter of a shelf. Children can also touch the books, which they find very exciting.

After the first contact they make excursions to the reading museums displaying books illustrated by Binette Schroeder and written by Erich Kästner, James Kruess and Michael Ende. After having discovered i.e. the tortoise “Tranquilla Trampelotreu”, a figure out of Michael Ende’s books, the group visited the zoo to watch tortoises. Inspired by a book illustrated by Binette Schroeder, they danced a thunderbird dance.

Another important part of the project consists of inviting parents of pre school children to the library. The aim is to inspire the parents, especially those with different cultural or religious backgrounds, to talk with their children about their excursions and the books they have discovered, and to read to them. It is important to adapt the programmes to the needs of the children so they can discover and feel their environment. Thus, children are being trained for a still and quiet
reading process. This joyful experience will be associated to books when children learn to read.

3 Activities of the public children’s library

The children’s lending library offers 25,000 books in thirteen languages and a media collection for children and teenagers. The use of the children’s lending library is public and free of charge. In addition to about 12,000 books in German, users can browse books in the following languages: Dutch, English, French, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swedish, Spanish, and Turkish. Moreover, the library offers an interesting and varied programme of activities for children – naturally focusing on books and stories from around the world:

In English courses children learn the English language in a playful way in a context different from school.

The Children’s Library regularly invites a story teller who in a lively and dramatical way tells fairy tales and other stories. In her interactive concept she inspires children to participate in recalling the tales.

We have just started to bring to life a reading club for small children. The librarian suggests some titles for reading at home, and once every second week children can talk about their books and recommend them to the others.

For Easter, Christmas, Santa Lucia, family feasts and other occasions, children make handicrafts, for example lighthouses with candles that they let swim on the lake in front of the castle of Santa Lucia. This non verbal way of communication brings together children of different nationalities.

Together with an Australian public Children’s library, we participate in a project called “travelling pants”. The idea is derived from Ann Brashares girl’s book “The sisterhood of the travelling pants”, in which three girls who are friends travel to different places during their holidays and send a pair of jeans to each other to tell the story of their holidays. In our case of cooperation, the Australian library sends a pair of jeans all over the world and to the International Youth Library, too. Thus, children may reveal their own life experience by writing or sticking on the jeans. This intercultural dialogue joins the continents and consists not only of language but also of all sorts of signs.
4 Exhitions in the International Youth Library

Drawing upon its unique collection, the International Youth Library mounts a variety of exhibitions on a wide range of themes every year in the halls of Blutenburg Castle including original works of illustrators, representative surveys of the children’s literature of different countries or cultures, and current or historical aspects of children’s literature. The exhibitions, which are designed both for adults and children, are usually accompanied by a list of recommended books or a catalogue. For most of them, the library also offers a special programme of activities for school classes.

In the range of International Youth Library’s exhibitions there are book exhibitions presenting its international collections and international illustrators’ exhibitions. Illustrations are the expression of a specific culture on one hand and on the other hand a pictural “language” which can be understood by any culture in the world.

One of this year’s exhibitions was called “Paradiesische Aussichten” - “Visions of Paradise”. Its aim was to present children’s and young adult’s books dealing with religious conflicts resulting from the coexistence of Muslim and Christian children, young adults and families in multicultural Germany occurring especially in the cities and at school.

On the occasion of this exhibition we invited a writer and a politician Azouz Begag and a writer Aigen Sibel Celik. Azouz Begag, singing and acting, told the story of his family who had emigrated from Algeria to Paris where he was born in an immigrants’ suburb. Thanks to his father he learned reading, went to school, studied and even became the minister of equality of chances some years ago.

Aigen Sibel Celik read out of her novel “Seidenhaar”. Its main topic is wearing the veil. We invited an elementary school class at the age of about 14. Some of the listeners were wearing the veil themselves, and afterwards a lively and animated discussion started about wearing the veil for religious reasons in a German school. The direct intercultural discussion was provoked and we have the impression that it will be continued not only at school but at home, too.

In 2002 there was an exhibition presenting children’s literature from Canada in English, French and translations to make German readers acquainted with the wide variety of the lively Canadian children’s literature scene. Books by Brian Doyle, Richard Van Camp or Polly Horvath and illustrations by Pierre Pratt or Michèle Lemieux were presented. Canada’s landscape and children’s everyday life were presented, too.
Annual exhibitions focus on themes and topics of interest to many countries and parts of the world i.e. fairy tales of the Grimm brothers in the year 2007 or Robinson Crusoe and Robinson stories this year. Robinson Crusoe is the epitome of a travelling and cosmopolitan character exploring new parts of the world and making contact with representatives of other cultures.

5 Travelling Exhibitions touring the world

Some of the International Youth Library’s exhibitions are also available as travelling exhibitions for presentations in public libraries, schools, and other institutions all over the world. One of its most successful travelling exhibitions to date is “Hello, Dear Enemy!” a selection of international picture books on peace and tolerance. It has been travelling around India, Japan, Europe, and the USA. The updated exhibition, the new catalogue was published in 2006, presents 80 titles from 20 countries accompanied by 20 annotations and picture panels. In 1998 it went to the IBBY congress on peace and tolerance in New Delhi. Peace is one of the main messages of these exhibitions, going again back to Jella Lepmans ideas:

“Why were human beings still not capable of carrying on their affairs of state intelligently? I wondered. Here this beautiful planet called earth belonged to them, and what did they do? War! Again and again children were in danger of being killed in wars. Maybe it would be better to let the animals of the world have a stab at governing, matching their instinct against human reason.” (Jella Lepman: Die Kinderbuchbrücke)

The exhibition project “Hello, dear Enemy” has been pursuing this idea since 2006 to support parents, teachers, and librarians in their mediating efforts. Most of the books in this selection deal with the pre conditions of war: intolerance, xenophobia, prejudice, abuse of power, oppression, and violence against people and property. Many of the stories convey the message that tolerance is the basis for peaceful coexistence with the worldwide community of people and cultures and that solution to conflicts can be found through reason and reflection. Tolerance is far more than a frame of mind: it is social behaviour that must be learned, trained and embedded in social reality.

Another successful travelling exhibition is entitled “Children between Worlds”: In a world divided between the poor and the rich, between north and south, between those who live in totalitarian states, and those who live in democracies, between those who have work, and those who do not, books can serve as mediators, because they are themselves part of the dialogue among cultures.
Most of these exhibitions are accompanied by publications in English and German. The exhibition catalogues outline the contents and the aims of the exhibitions and offer bibliographic data combined with picture panels of the presented books and inform about their language, contents and didactical value.

### 6 Programmes for School Classes

Since the beginning of the 1990ies, the International Youth Library has introduced programmes for school classes to build a third place for children (besides family and schools). They can explore books and acquire reading competence+. Seven freelance pedagogues from the fields of didactics of arts, graphics, museums and literature offer guided tours, workshops and reading events with authors.

In the guided tours school classes are lead through the library and the castle where they learn about the history, the collections and the aims of the International Youth Library. As an accompanying effect, children get the nonverbal message that a library can be a place full of ideas of adventures, history and creativity.

At each workshop one author or illustrator is presented: The pupils get to know his or her books and create an own work of art or text inspired by their perception. Smaller children and children with language difficulties are guided to learn in a playful way to discover books and pictures. One example of a playful approach can be a card game accompanying an illustration’s exhibition: Children draw a card illustrating the text and they paint the illustration or the other way round: they draw a picture card and write a text associated with this picture.

In addition, our pedagogues visit schools to present a selection of books out of our travelling exhibitions. They may be accompanied by international book illustrators who participate in art workshops. A third offer for schools is a workshop on the topic of children’s rights.

A very special school class programme has been developed for young adults from the secondary school in cooperation with the memorial institution of the concentration camp Dachau (in the neighbourhood of International Youth Library’s “book castle”): Guided by pedagogues school classes visit the concentration camp memorial and talk and write about this experience.

The German history of the Nazi-regime is of great interest to generations who are not able to understand this period of dictatorship unless their grandparents are still alive. They have to be introduced didactically. The groups start in the Dachau memorial where they are introduced to the site of the concentration camp, the
buildings, the documents like diaries written by the prisoners, photographs, personal objects that remained of the victims. In the afternoon, the group returns to the International Youth Library to attend a workshop led by a pedagogue. The pupils are asked to write their own texts about their thoughts and experiences. One way of dealing with the topic is the following: young people are proposed to write a fictive letter home from the perspective of a concentration camp prisoner. So the library becomes an important place for creative learning.

Last year, a group of American university teachers and students participated in this programme. In addition, Mirjam Pressler read them parts of her novel “Mal-ka Mai”, dealing with a Jewish girl’s fate during the Second World War in Poland. This workshop also contributes to the intercultural dialogue, not only between present and past, but also between different countries.

### 7 International Fellowship Programmes

Researchers, authors, illustrators, publishers, editors, teachers, pedagogues from all around the world can apply to the International Youth Library’s fellowship programme and work for in the research library up to three months, prepare their publications and their curricula, find foreign books to translate them into their mother tongue or to publish them in their countries of origin etc. Every year about 15 guests from all around the world are offered a research fellowship for a period of up to three months. They visit the International Youth Library to work on and/or complete their own specific scientific research project or study more general questions on international children’s literature, especially projects that would be difficult to tackle anywhere else. With their special knowledge and language skills, these visitors also assist the library in developing the children’s literature collections from their home countries and help making new contacts in the field of children’s literature all over the world.

In round tables they present their working fields like for instance children’s books dealing with death, the aesthetics and function of playbooks, the image of childhood in children’s books etc., so the library staff is always informed about international research topics and literature in this field.

The fellowship programme is financed by the Auswärtiges Amt der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany).

A similar form of cooperation is the fellowship programme financed by the Japanese editing house Kodansha in order to find international children’s books to be translated into Japanese and published in Japan. In 2008 a lector of Kodansha
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worked on the selection of international goodnight stories for children that could be published in Japan.

There is another fellowship cooperation with an US Library School. In the United Stated there is a faculty of children’s and young adult’s literature in almost every college or university teaching teachers or librarians. For three years, groups of library science students came from the Appalachian State University in North Carolina for four week research courses. They took the opportunity to learn about international Cinderella stories, about Dutch painters in the fiction for children aged from 9 to 18 years, about international picture books on environmental protection. At no place in the USA or no other place in the world they can find such an international collection of children’s literature to work on various research projects. The International Youth Library’s study library is an ideal working place for fellows, scholars and other patrons. The reference collection comprises nearly 30,000 volumes of international secondary literature and about 250 current professional periodicals. It offers its visitors access both to the reference collection and to the extensive collections of international children’s and youth literature, which also includes approximately 60,000 historical volumes published between the years 1574 and 1950.

8 Annual publication of the “White Ravens”

Each year, the language specialists (Lektoren) at the International Youth Library select recently published books considered to be especially noteworthy. This »premium label« is given to books of international interest that deserve a wider reception on account of their universal theme and/or their exceptional and often innovative artistic and literary style and design. The result of this selection is the annual catalogue “The White Ravens” featuring 250 titles from 40 countries with annotations in English. This selection has gained international recognition because it highlights the trends of contemporary children’s and young adult literature on an international scale. It serves internationally as a list of recommendations for parents, teachers, and librarians, and inspires publishing houses to acquire translation rights. Public and school libraries or international bookstores use the catalogue as a basis for making their purchases. Since 1996, the White Ravens selections have been accessible on the website of the International Youth Library at www.ijb.de. It is also available in the International Children’s Digital Library.
9 Participation in Congresses, in the Bologna and Frankfurt book fairs and other international contacts

Since it is one of the International Youth Library’s most important tasks to reach a great part of professional audience from many different countries, attending the International Children’s Book Fair in Bologna (Italy) every spring and the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany every autumn is a top priority. On one hand the library’s language specialists inform Book Fair visitors about their work and introduce them to the library’s activities and its unique collection; on the other hand, they seize the opportunity to learn about the most recent trends and developments within their language areas and make and renew contact with children’s literature professionals. Quite frequently, these conversations lead to first ideas for new exhibitions and projects.

Whenever there is an opportunity, the International Youth Library participates in the IBBY-Congress. The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) is a non-profit organization which represents an international network of people from all over the world who are committed to bringing books and children together. IBBY was founded in 1953 in Zürich, soon after the International Youth Library, by Jella Lepman.

10 Activities of the language specialists

The language sections serve as a link between the International Youth Library and publishers and other book people worldwide.

The work of the “Lektoren” (language specialists) ensures that the library’s unique archival collection is continuously expanded and improved. It is their task to get in touch and keep contact with the publishers and institutions of “their” countries, to closely follow the development and recent trends of the children’s book production of the respective language areas, and to request books for the collection of the International Youth Library.

The language specialists access the incoming book titles, provide subject headings, compile bibliographies for exhibitions, and write articles and reviews for the library’s recommendation lists and other publications. At present, the International Youth Library has language specialists for Dutch, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Persian, Romanian, Turkish and the Iberian, Scandinavian and Slavic languages.
11 Database Projects

Last but not least our librarian projects contribute to the intercultural dialogue on the basis of library’s unique collections:

As not all of the International Youth Library’s catalogues are searchable online, conversion projects are planned starting with the conversion of catalogues from before the year 1993. The aim is to make all of the International Youth Library’s collections accessible to the worldwide community of people interested in children’s and young adult’s literature.

Most of International Youth Library’s books catalogued since 1993 are provided with subject headings, so our collections can be searched worldwide. So far, the subject headings have been given only in German. Now we are making first steps towards the creation of English subject heading lists with the idea to include them into the national subject headings authority file. The aim is to eliminate the language barrier to achieve a multicultural dialogue between international researchers and the Online Catalogue of the International Youth Library.

Literature

3. The International Youth Library’s website. Dostopno na spletni strani http://www.ijb.de

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