

Reading AdVentures
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Reading Promotion and Educational Policy in Past and Present

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The objectives and methods of any cultural activity that is promoted by a group of professionals must be subject to permanent checks in order to evaluate its appropriateness. In my eyes the knowledge of the own history presents an inevitable part in this process of self-evaluation. In Germany reading promoters reflect only seldom upon their objectives, a fact which is probably due to the alleged self-evidence of the matter. The fact that the large majority of all reading promotion measures is addressed to the younger generation but mostly conceived and implemented by adults leads to a situation where the adults tend to go back to their own experiences alone and to neglect the needs of the proper target group. Further on reading promotion objectives cannot be deduced from empirical studies about today's reading and media consumption habits of the youth. Objectives are generally based upon fundamental values and norms, which means in our context that reading promotion objectives are backed by basic educational concepts, which on their part are related to a specific culture or a social class.

Reading promotion means the promotion of reading learning and the advanced perfection of reading skills, namely the capacity to decode written messages and to grasp their meaning. If we look at this aspect of reading promotion the connections with different educational concepts are hardly recognizable which is why I am not going to talk about this in the following. But reading promotion includes also the favouring of reading books, newspapers and magazines. Here as well grasping the meaning of a text is paramount although the attention is only drawn to texts that are disseminated via print media. In this case reading promotion takes the form of the promotion of books, newspapers and magazines. A particularly narrow comprehension of the term is given when reading promotion does not refer to all book genres but to belletrist literature alone. Reading promotion is then nothing else but fine literature promo-

tion, a matter of gaining a larger audience for a specific genre of art. Historically seen the above mentioned narrow understanding of reading promotion dominated for a considerable time.

The Age of Enlightenment and the German “Kunsterziehungsbewegung” as historical origins of reading promotion

Although the very term came up not until the recent past reading promotion is not something which was invented in the last decades, at least not in Germany. Some very early forms of it have their origin already in the late 18th century. The educational aim of the Age of Enlightenment was the reasonable and extensively educated man. As a matter of fact all knowledge is at that time preserved by word, namely in encyclopaedias and factual books of different kinds. As a consequence access to this rich and indispensable fund of knowledge can gain only those who know reading. Hence reading promotion became the crucial measure of an educational policy aiming at a broadminded and rational civilized society. Childhood and adolescence were considered the most favourable time to acquire knowledge, which is why books matching the intellectual capacities of the young were greatly appreciated. Thus reading promotion in the 18th century made particularly use of the new children’s literature genre.

This form of reading promotion, which was completely committed to the educational concept of the Age of Enlightenment and focused the reading of encyclopaedias and factual books was in the course of the 19th century marginalized by another manifestation of reading promotion. The advocates of this change referred - more or less explicitly - to Wilhelm von Humboldt’s neo-classical educational concept (neuhumanistisches Bildungskonzept) the central conclusion of which reads that only through the enjoyment of “true” art and “great” literature the individual may reach its proper determination, namely that of becoming a whole human being. The knowledge of facts lost much of its reputation of being the key to a comprehensive education whereas the enjoyment of (antique) art and poetry became highly respected. For a considerable period of time, however, this educational concept was solely directed at the social and intellectual elites who to a certain extent disposed already over the required skills so that it was not necessary to take more elaborated reading promotion measures.

Not until the 19th century reading promotion campaigners declared this objective not only relevant for the elite but for all social classes. They considered the reception of high-ranking poetry as obligatory element for any education. Strictly speaking we face a kind of democratic or liberal turn. At the same time this view took it for granted that modern high schools and universities, i.e. inside the social and intellectual elitist circles and their higher educational institutions, already pursued this educational ideal. From this followed that in particular with respect to middle and lower class children special measures had to be taken. Since the large majority of the parents of those children and young adults failed in promoting their children in educational matters, this task fell to the schools: primary schools, modern secondary schools and further education colleges. It was actually the staff of those institutions as well as the instructors in the teacher training colleges who at that time initiated and supported reading promotion campaigns. Their actions also included the other arts, i. e. music, fine arts, sculpture and dance. Humboldt's educational concept covers all forms of art and so reading promotion became part of the more comprehensive art education movement in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Due to technical printing improvements the market for books and newspapers expanded in the second half of the 19th century and included from then on also readers from lower social classes. Actually, reading and in particular reading much became a mass phenomenon. So it is not astonishing that at this time reading promotion took the form of warnings against excessive reading. Unrestricted book reading was unwanted and there were admonitions not to read all books that were publicly available. Belletrist literature alone was recommended and from within this category only those titles which were widely accepted and considered first-rate literary works. Reading promotion campaigns started in the second half of the 19th century pursuing a twofold strategy: on the one hand they took actions to put a stop to the reading of third-rate literature (what is later called the campaign against filth and trash resp. „Schmutz und Schund“) and on the other hand they tried to make the readership familiar with first-rate poetry and fiction. The target group consisted basically of all adolescents but with a special attention to the members of the lower classes who were particularly receptive to third-rate literature and to whom canonized poetry was mostly a closed book.

The art education movement in the late 19th and early 20th century was a powerful and impressive movement, which combined educational, philosophical and social-political elements. Reading classes got reformed and school libraries were opened. Outside school a public li-

brary network was built up – what I consider the most important achievement. At that time the first public libraries were founded, the precursors of today's municipal libraries. It is not least thanks to this movement that modern children's literature was 'rediscovered' and more appreciated. In the early and middle 19th century the educational elites had turned away from children's literature but from then on they considered it again as relevant medium for educational purposes.

The last mentioned aspect deserves a further explanation. Modern children's literature was not right from the start in the centre of interest. In the beginning children's literature was considered entertaining reading material without any educational significance and readers were admonished not to buy this material. Then, however, it became clear that canonized literature very often was of no interest to those who attended the above-mentioned schools. These groups were obviously not in a position to develop any reading motivation for so-called 'high' literature. In view of this situation these audiences had to be offered reading material, which on the one hand were attractive and stimulating and on the other hand represented an appropriate means to allow them a smooth transition to canonized literature. Above all this material should not have a lasting negative effect on the reader's literary taste

According to the reading promoters it was exactly this effect, which was achieved through mass-produced light fiction, sold to the members of the lower social classes who in addition ran thereby the risk to be corrupted. In this dilemma modern children's literature could be of help. It was, however, indispensable to make a rigorous selection from the abundant market offer. In the years between 1950 and the end of the 1960s the selected titles were labelled "das gute Jugendbuch" (good literature for the youth). This term made clear that high-quality children's literature was not yet 'first-rate poetry' but after all 'good literature' which could be recommended without any concern and as a sort of literary and esthetical introduction into and preparation for high literature. So since 1900 reading promotions meant also the promotion of selected high-quality children's books. From then on reading promotion and the promotion of children's literature were two sides of the same coin.

In Germany reading promotion measures up to the 1970s and 1980s adhered to the educational concept of the late 19th and early 20th century the main elements of which read as follows:

- Reading promotion is basically founded on a more or less elaborated educational concept, which assigns art a prominent part. Thus reading promotion actually means the promotion of literature or otherwise said: preparing the youth for 'true' poetry. Reading promotion is perceived as part of a more comprehensive art education, which is considered crucial for the development of a whole human being.
- Non-fiction and technical literature are not excluded from the selection but only worth a little.
- Reading promotion means not to promote reading as such but aims at the dissemination of selected literary works of high quality. The reception of third-rate literature is regarded to have negative effects and appropriate means have to be taken to stop people reading this 'stuff'.
- Finally reading promotion continues to be a social-politically oriented action. The campaigns aim primarily at children from the middle and lower classes whose parents are not in a position to offer their children an education in the spirit of the neo-classical educational concept since most of them are normally not familiar with canonized literature or art. Due to this situation reading promotion remains to take mostly place in primary and modern secondary schools and also in further education colleges whereas in senior secondary schools, at least to my knowledge, not even the term is known.

Can reading promotion in media societies be more than book promotion?

Today reading promotion measures have changed a lot. In the general view reading promotion means nowadays the stimulation of a specific media use, namely the reading of whatever books in one's leisure time. As largely known the number of books read by children and young adults has declined with the emergence of the electronic media – television, computer and Internet. Reading promotion strives for stopping this trend. It thus adopts the role of the defender of book reading and competes with the growing 'new' and apparently more attractive electronic media offers. The fact that the number of books read is decreasing – seen more proportionally than absolutely – applies not only to the lower but to all social classes whereby today genderhood seems to gain more importance than social differences. So the number of books read by girls is much higher than that read by boys. The changed social-cultural conditions entail still further changes: As far as I know it is for the time in the history of reading promotion that a significant number of senior secondary schools is involved in reading pro-

motion campaigns. If in all social classes the number of books read decreases, then reading promotion actions have to be implemented in all types of schools.

Today's reading promotion activities basically differ from former reading promotion forms insofar as nowadays reading books as such is considered worthy to be promoted. The question whether or not a single book is of high quality and usable for educational purposes is of minor importance. So it happens that reading a trivial youth novel is considered more desirable than looking a good TV-movie or playing a sophisticated computer game. By this view a cultural hierarchy of media genres as such is established. Notwithstanding the actual quality of a specific book the book as such is assigned a certain value since it belongs to a culturally highly esteemed media genre. What is of importance is no longer the quality of the book but the fact that people read books at all. And all too often reading promotion campaigners make allowances for their target group's predilections and select those titles, which are highly marketable.

To a large part of the people involved in reading promotion the culturally very important position of the book as such seems to be a matter of course. Whereas the book industry has the right to promote its products, reading promotion campaigns which – traditionally – are run in the cause of a general education get into serious credibility difficulties when they turn into pure book promotion campaigns. Their agents have to prove the educational importance of book reading as such, in particular when a book is relatively worthless.

Today a sort of minimal justification of reading promotion in the form of book promotion seems to be most common. According to this view it is socially not only desirable but even a must to promote leisure time reading since it entails highly positive side effects. So leisure time reading helps to train reading in the sense of grasping the meaning of a text what is regarded to be a social key competence. So a recently published study affirms: „In our educational system actually outside school reading practiced from late childhood to puberty accomplishes the lion's share in acquiring reading competences. Many capacities indispensable to get the message of a text are not trained in class but achieved at random through extensive reading in the late childhood.” (Cornelia Rosebrock 2005, 35) Outside school reading helps to train the elementary reading competence. Due to the fact that this side-effect is apparently always achieved and not bound to the quality of the titles read, reading promoters declare reading whatever books as being the main objective.

However, put into practice this understanding of reading promotion entails serious negative effects. Actually this concept reveals to be unable to provide any strategy for readers to develop a proper motivation for reading. Normally we don't talk to each other in order to primarily improve our communicative skills. From this can be concluded that probably only a very small part of those readers who practice book reading in their leisure time do this because they are eager to improve their reading competence. It is of course indisputable that regular reading during one's leisure time positively influences the capacity to read. In spite of this I think this is too weak a reason to stimulate a desire to read. Finally such a constricted understanding of reading promotion gives rise to the question whether we have to rely on side-effects and to go such a long way round in order improve and stabilize the younger generation's reading skills. Wouldn't it be better and more honest to look for instruments, which refer directly, and explicitly to the target group's reading competence?

Reading promotion in line with democratic principles

Notwithstanding my aforementioned remarks there are no objections to the practical measures taken today. What distinguishes modern reading promotion campaigns practically from former actions is first of all the fact that no steps are taken to prevent children and young adolescents from reading books considered to have no educational effect or to be even corruptive. Although this practise has to be welcomed, its usual justification lacks insight. Actually reading such titles has not to be tolerated because it is an act of book reading and thus positively influences the reader's reading competence. The reason why even such book reading has to be accepted is the free will of the reader and the respect we owe to his choice, however problematic it occasionally may be. Today we are concerned with a basic change in the perception of the target group of reading promotion. The young readers are now respected as individual beings who are free to chose what they want to read in their leisure time. This means that a democratic principle, namely the right to self-determination, applies also to young hobby readers.

In former times it was of prime importance to read the 'right' books, i.e. books of high quality and usable for educational purposes. As a consequence children and young readers were deprived of their right to choose their individual reading material whenever they did or could not realize the educational importance of a book. In these cases adult reading promoters took their

place and decided on what to read. At the same time they not only had the right to withhold trivial literature from the target group but even to take it away whenever it had already come into the young readers' possession. Despite this we should take to their credit that they tried to be as little authoritarian as possible. On the one hand their aim was to get young readers to realize good literature and to choose it of their free will. On the other hand they understood themselves as preserver of the target group's well-understood self-interests whenever they felt they had to ignore the target group's actual reading wishes in order to ensure its future. It is thus comprehensible that the traditional reading promotion movement did not perceive itself as authoritarian. It is, however, true that its advocates took the view that it was in principle a permissible mean to restrict the young readers' right to decide themselves what they want to read.

Any reading promotion, however, that adheres to democratic principles has to deny such proceeding. Any free choice of books made by the younger readers has to be respected under all circumstances, even then when the selection seems to be doubtful in the eyes of reading promoters. In consequence reading promoters are not permitted to refer to the well-understood self-interest of the target group, which they feel obliged to look after. The top principle of a democratic reading promotion is the free will of the young reader in his present state, whereas the principle of the right and educationally pertinent book can only be of secondary importance. Any reading promotion in line with democratic principles has to rank the principle of free selection of reading material before the question of quality. The fact that the reading material has been chosen under no pressure counts more than the question whether the material chosen is worth to be read - in whatever regard.

I have got the impression that the factual liberalisation of reading promotion is, however, more due to external pressure than to personal insight. In view of the general change of reading habits in many countries there was simply no other alternative. I think that not only adult but also young readers freed themselves of external claims. So readers nowadays listen less to authorities – in particular to guardians of the literary canon and advocates of first-rate poetry – but defend with great self-confidence their personal reading habits and predilections. Apart from this reading canonized literature and enjoying art and classical music represent no longer essential statutes features and are less important for getting to the top. Generally the act of enjoying literature, art or music has lost much of its distinguishing character. Today the personal gratuity, i.e. the personal gain and pleasure of enjoying art and literature is more impor-

tant than social distinction. Outside the educational institutions canonized literature and art are mostly no longer considered to be socially obligatory and their advocates have to campaign for these cultural achievement as for any other leisure time product.

The above-mentioned emancipation goes along with another crucial feature. Now readers feel entitled to choose from the broad range of different media genres whatever they like best. Especially the younger generation has got accustomed to put together a kind of personal media menu consisting of their favourite books, films, games etc. While doing so they largely break with the traditional media hierarchy what also means that they disregard the traditional esteem of the middle-class for book reading as such. After all any reading promotion which still today, i.e. in the era of free media choice, relies on an alleged supremacy of book reading and literature runs the risk of being considered as anachronistic.

Action guiding norms

In closing I would like to point out some possible practical forms of a reading promotion, which is in line with democratic principles. I' m going to restrain my considerations upon elder children and young adolescents leaving thus aside the picture book and reading education for smaller children in nursery schools. Normally the independent use of different media in one's leisure time, a characteristic feature of liberal societies, can be found at children aged six. From this age on children represent a real challenge for reading promoters. Children and young readers should no longer be treated as seduced, misguided or manipulated individuals who, if necessary against their own will, have to be led back to the straight and narrow. On the contrary they should be perceived as self-confident consumers who act according to their personal needs. Any liberal reading promotion has to accept without any reservation not only the target group's choice of leisure time reading material but also its personal media genre choice however weak the position of the book may be therein.

Put in into practice this means that municipal and school libraries must also offer to their users the latter's favourite books and those media which are strongly in demand. Comics, manga, audio books, film cassettes and DVDs, multimedia system offers and computer games have also to rank among the offers of modern youth libraries as the much beloved tie-in novelizations. In view of the fact that a broad range of media offers meets at best the reading and

media wishes of their young users some libraries have already begun to leave it to them to decide upon a part of their media acquisitions. It fits in that in Germany it has in the meantime become a common practice to include the target group's book reading and media habits in class lessons, for instance by letting young volunteers give presentations of their favourite books, comics or films. It is, however, still difficult for the teachers involved to abstain from any negative and discriminating remarks.

The acceptance of the target group's self-chosen media menus is an absolute must for any successful reading promotion. Whoever feels itself acknowledged, as an autonomous subject is normally ready to accept further going offers which lead beyond the already known. The less the target group is subject to acts of humiliation and degradation the more it will declare itself open for recommendations. Actually it remains to be an essential function of reading promotion to broaden the target group's range of intellectual and media interests. Properly speaking reading promotion means, as in former times, to make offers which go beyond what is already accepted by the target group. The objective is to make young library and media users familiar with more demanding literary texts, films or comics that often treat serious matters. It is for this reason that every youth library, in addition to the already popular media products, has to make more ambitious propositions. In contrast to traditional reading promotion campaigns modern concepts can no longer aim at exchanging the total reading material in use but its aim should be to broaden the range of (media) products chosen. The indispensable esteem for the target group alone should interdict to discredit or suppress its reading choice what means, if put into practice, that reading promotion has to refrain from discrediting entertaining (media) products. Unfortunately many reading promoters have still great difficulties to keep to this line.

In addition reading promotion has to aim at changing the media habits of this target group – especially wherever the individually chosen media menu does contain no or only a few books. So still today reading promotion can and must be, at least to a certain extent, book promotion, but it must fulfil this function without disparaging or discrediting other media genres. Their advocates have to drop the idea that the book as such has a higher cultural value than other media and they have also to abandon the attempt to retransform the young media users into absolute book readers. Today we live in a multimedia society in which the book is just one of several culturally esteemed media genres. The educational objective of reading promotion can no longer be to educate excessive reading bibliophiles. What is of importance today is training

young people how to effectively use the different existing media, what includes also reading books. I think that reading promoters should understand their activities as part of a more comprehensive media training, which aims at developing not only reading but also multimedia skills. This means that in addition to books other media, as for instance films, audio books or comics, should also be taken into account.

Above all reading promotion has to be designed as a free offer for free consumers and without any threat of punishment. Although it may be true that non-readers will probably encounter more difficulties on their way to the top than great readers reading promotion cannot use this argument since it is too weak to give way to a deeper going willingness to read. It would just serve to stimulate a purely tactical and short-term readiness to read books. In order to have a lasting effect reading promotion has to make attractive propositions and to persuade its target group that the reading material offered is highly fascinating. Especially those kids and adolescents who are unfamiliar with books and read only seldom must get the impression that they miss something extraordinary in case they disregard books.