



## Towards a literate Australia: The role of public libraries in supporting reading.

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### Abstract

The United Nation's Decade of Literacy (2003–2012), presents a golden opportunity for the public library movement to reassert its traditional role of supporting literacy as part of the lifelong learning agenda.

The ability to function effectively in today's Information Society requires a high degree of literacy and a complexity of skills which is leaving some people behind. Yet A 2000 OECD adult literacy survey, including participants in the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, reported that across twenty countries, 25% of respondents did not possess the necessary literacy skills to manage in today's world. In Australia one in five adults do not possess sufficient literacy skills to participate in everyday life. This causes problems for living, working and for survival in virtually every area of life.

The resources, networks and advocacy potential of public libraries make them natural allies of the literacy movement. This is recognised in the USA, where literacy schemes are supported at Federal, State and local level, and the American Library Association co-ordinates family literacy programs. In the UK, the Government's Framework for the Future, which includes basic literacy skills targets, has given rise the Vital Link project, a cross-agency initiative which aims to maximise libraries' contribution to supporting emergent readers.

ALIA, in its Statement on Libraries and Literature (1996) not only endorses the role of public libraries in the supporting literacy but sees it as a core function. It is now an opportune time in Australia to re-examine that role and develop strategies for its future.

### Introduction

The concept of supporting literacy is one of the foundation stones of the public library movement, and one that was seen as a key role for many years. This role has, to some extent, diminished in latter decades until a current resurgence of interest worldwide.

The age in which we are living, is characterised by the developments that have taken place in technology and, in particular, information and communication technologies (ICT). The convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computers, has had a significant impact upon society, comparable with previous major societal changes such as the industrial revolution or the advent of the printing press. The result of the latest revolution is unprecedented globalisation, the impact of which is so great that sociologists and anthropologists are now redefining out notions of *community*, as the geographical definition becomes decreasingly relevant. The net result of the societal changes brought about by this quiet revolution is that inequality in society is growing, amongst nations and amongst individuals. As with the advent of the printing press, the technological age requires the development of higher levels of skills among all echelons of society. The ability to function effectively in the *Information Society* requires a high degree of literacy and a complexity of skills which is leaving some people behind. In fact there are deeper issues. Bonna Jones, in defending the necessity for the ability to construct and understand narrative in order to contribute to and function within society maintains that reading 'plays a central part in our capacity

to construct new narratives (Jones, 2003 p.1). Moreover she contends that it is 'central to librarianship' (p.1).

UNESCO's *Decade of Literacy* (2003–2012) presents a golden opportunity for the public library movement to reassert its traditional role of supporting literacy as part of the lifelong learning agenda. This paper argues the case for rethinking the role of public libraries and acknowledging the importance of fostering literacy in our society.

### The United Nations Decade of Literacy

We are currently operating within the United Nations' *Decade of Literacy*, which under the umbrella concept of *Education for All*, runs from 2003 – 2012, inclusive. The resolution for the proclamation that this decade be devoted to literacy was adopted in 1999 at the General Assembly of the United Nations. The aim of the decade is not only to highlight the existing problems relating to literacy, but also to 'extend the use of literacy to those who do not have access to it' (UNESCO, 2004). Its ultimate goal is to increase worldwide literacy rates by 50% by 2015.

The rationale behind establishing the decade includes some of the following points:

- The numbers of people worldwide who are unable to communicate through literacy (861 million people, two-thirds of which are women)
- The contribution of inequity of literacy to the deprivation and subordination of women
- The fact that literacy is basic human right, declared as

such for its pivotal role in basic education, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights fifty years ago.

- The belief that both national and international literacy efforts have, up to now, proved inadequate.
- The international community deems that the promotion of literacy is beneficial to all

In *The International Plan of Action* six areas of activity are identified:

- **National policies** which provide a framework which includes multilingual approaches and freedom of expression, and link literacy strategies with other social concerns.
- **Flexible programmes** which include flexible modes of delivery and well trained facilitators using interesting materials that reflect racial, gender and language differences.
- **Capacity Building**, including issues such as management and planning, curriculum design, research and documentation.
- **Research** into the impact of literacy and ways to achieve literacy – evidence based practice.
- **Community participation**
- **Monitoring and evaluation** in the form of better literacy standards

## Definition of literacy

The term literacy has been defined and redefined over the last few decades. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) defines it thus:

The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential (OECD, 2001)

Three 'domains of literacy skills' were also identified as follows:

**Prose literacy** – the skills to understand and use information from texts

**Document literacy** – the ability to locate and use information in a variety of formats

**Quantitative literacy** – the ability to apply arithmetic operations and to understand numbers embedded in printed materials (ACAL, 2001)

Current thinking is that there are varying levels of literacy and that 'literate' and 'illiterate' are not two distinct categories (Bundy, 1999). The IALS survey stresses that literacy is no longer thought of as 'a condition that either adults have or have not' (OECD, 2001), and that literacy should no longer be defined as some 'arbitrary test' which separates those who reach a minimum standard from those who fall below it. It is now considered to be a set of proficiency levels ranged along a continuum representing how well adults use information to function in everyday life. Literacy is also dynamic (Eyre, 2003), every individual will vary at different stages according to circumstance and skills acquisition.

## Why literacy is an important issue

The ability to function effectively in what has been dubbed the *Information Society* requires high calibre literacy proficiency and the possession of a wide range of skills

...the movement towards an information based society are factors which suggest, as never before, that literacy is an

essential instrument for effective participation in society (ALIA, 1996).

This overriding importance of literacy acquisition is endorsed by *The International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS), a large-scale collaborative venture undertaken by national statistical organisations, research institutions and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The report's definition of Adult literacy includes a statement goes some way to explaining why:

Differences in levels of literacy matter both economically and socially: literacy affects, inter alia, labour quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society (OECD, 2000)

Many people however are being left behind. The IALS results found that across twenty countries, one in four adults who participated in the study do not possess the necessary literacy skills to manage in today's world. It is a reasonable assumption that the study took place in poorer or less developed countries, but this is not so. The sample included, amongst other nations, the USA, Canada, four Scandinavian countries, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. In confirmation of this statistic Hartman, Draeger and Bernstein (1991 cited in Fisher, 1999 p.56) reported that at least twenty per cent of US adults were functionally illiterate. Between forty and forty-five million people in the United States are unable to understand written materials requiring the most basic reading skills (Fisher, 1999 p.57).

It is difficult to think that this applies to Australia, yet the above survey found that here, one in five adults do not possess sufficient literacy skills to participate in everyday life. (OECD, 2000)

Lack of literacy skills on this scale causes problems for living, working and for survival in in virtually every area of life. Using automatic teller machines, the internet, e-mail, filling in taxation forms or understanding supermarket checkout procedures are just some of the day-to-day tasks that require people to apply literacy and numeracy skills in diverse ways'

Literacy skills are important for employment. The IALS survey results demonstrate close correlation between employment status, earning capacity and literacy levels. (OECD 2000) Higher literacy levels are shown to contribute to increased wealth both individually and collectively. 'A 2 per cent increase in national productivity, through increased literacy could provide a 1.8% increase in revenue' (Australian Council for Adult Literacy, 2001 p.7).

Smith (2000 p.378) identifies that there is already a gap between the skills of workers and the literacy demands of the workplace. Others maintain that this gap will grow wider over the next two decades. Mikulecky (2000 p.380) predicts that an expansion of multiple literacies will be required to navigate higher levels of information presented in a mix of three dimensional and print visuals. The worker of the future will need to acquire ever-growing literacy skills to communicate simultaneously across several different work communities. Throughout the literature there are examples of the need for these skills. Hull (1999) cites a case study in the USA where workers in an electronics factory nearly caused a major and costly mistake because they failed to understand written instructions.

Changes in healthcare also exemplify the need for literacy skills. Fisher (1999) argues that the pressures on the medical

profession mean shorter stays in hospital and patients being discharged earlier. This requires that patients assume more responsibility for increasingly complex procedures and treatments. Increasingly this information is available through electronic means. In order to make informed decisions patients must have the skills to understand demanding information.

## Initiatives in the USA

The *Decade of Literacy* has also had a big impact in the USA and, in fact, was launched in 2003 in the New York Public Library. The resources, networks and advocacy potential of public libraries make them natural allies of the literacy movement. This is recognised in the USA, where literacy schemes are supported at Federal, State and local level, and the American Library Association co-ordinates family literacy programs.

Wedgeworth (2003) maintains that there are many programs around the world that promote and encourage literacy among children, but interestingly there are few for adults. There is now an increasing international hybrid movement that concentrates on family literacy, or fostering a culture of reading and literacy within the home. Family Literacy is seen as an important concept in the USA, with comprehensive schemes supported at Federal, State and local level. The American Library Association wholeheartedly supports family literacy projects:

Through family literacy programs, the home becomes an environment where young minds can grow to their fullest potential, and where parents can play active roles in their children's intellectual development (ALA, 2002)

The ALA also co-ordinates two family literacy programs: the *Bell Atlantic – American Library Association Family Literacy Projects* and the *Cargill Cares* program. The Bell Atlantic Foundation has provided more than \$1m since 1989 to sponsor a variety of projects, including those at Baltimore Pratt Free Library, the District of Columbia Public Library and Marion County Library, Fairmont. Cargill, a Minneapolis based agricultural company have also joined forces with the ALA to sponsor schemes in Hutchinson, Kansas and Molokai in Hawaii. The *Center for the Book* at the Library of Congress also boasts involvement in and support for Family literacy. One example of their interest is the *Vibernum Family Literacy Project* which promotes the 'planning, training and promotion of family literacy projects' amongst libraries and their community partners.

In New York, a year before the official launch of the United Nations' Decade of Literacy *Proliteracy Worldwide* was formed under the presidency of Robert Wedgeworth, formerly an academic at Rutgers University. The formation of this movement brought together two of the world's largest 'volunteer literacy organisations', with the aim of empowering adults by providing programs and materials to help them achieve adequate literacy skills (Proliteracy, 2003). The organisation claims to have 1200 affiliates with partners in 27 countries (Wedgeworth, 2003). In his workshop at the IFLA 2003 conference, Wedgeworth (2003) remarked that he would like to make more formal links with organisations in Australia.

## UK Initiatives

The Government and other interested parties in the UK are well down the track of fulfilling some of the goals set out by the *Decade of Literacy*. In fact the Government supports it at

the highest level. Many of the policies advocated by UNESCO are already in place in Britain, under the aegis of the UK Government's *Framework for the Future*, published through the Department of Culture Media and Sport, (DCMS) in February 2003. This document sets out the Government's mission of 'focusing on areas where intervention provides lasting benefit to society, and long term strategies for public libraries. Within the listed 'themes', three in particular cover the issues of literacy: Books, Reading and Learning; Digital Citizenship; and Community Values (Re:Source, 2003).

Several of the stated strategic objectives make explicit the support role of public libraries to the development of literacy within the community. A direct example of this is 'Strategic Objective 5' in which promoting 'literacy skills and an appetite for reading and learning' is advocated, and slightly more indirectly 'Strategic Objective 6' in which library professionals are exhorted to 'widen participation and demonstrate the strategic impact of libraries on supporting learning' (Re:Source, 2003).

This is not just pie in the sky policy as there is an infrastructure which is able to facilitate implementation of policy. Re:Source, now the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, for example developed a detailed plan for carrying out the strategies for supporting literacy for both children and adults, and for identifying stakeholders who would be involved in any implementation. Among the 'actions and deliverables' outlined for public library support for adult literacy initiatives are the following:

- Improving quality of stock by developing a [centrally produced, nationally available] toolkit and training package [for libraries]
- Developing and implementing reading partnership strategies
- Embedding national strategies and policies for collaborative practice (eg working with the Learning Skills Council)
- Implementing Best practice models.

The movement has spawned many initiatives in the UK. One of those is an ambitious and so far successful scheme worthy of note. The *Vital Link* project is a 'reader development and basic skills initiative', initially seed-funded by the *DCMS / Wolfston Public Libraries Challenge Fund* in 2001. Nine public library authorities formed a consortium managed by a number of British agencies: The National Literacy Trust; the National Reading Campaign; the Reading Agency and two independents (Train, Usherwood and Brooks, 2003). The overall aim of the project was to link literacy and libraries and the six stated objectives include:

- Establishing a major partnership programme, harnessing libraries' reader development work to support improvement of literacy skills
- Establishing effective links between libraries and the adult basic education sector
- Researching and developing replicable local models
- Providing a range of support strategies

## The Australian perspective

Bundy (1999) highlighted the importance of work to link libraries and literacy in an article in *Incite* in 1999. In this article he referred to the first National Survey on Adult Literacy in Australia *No Single Measure* (DEET, 1989), and noted a flurry of activity in public libraries the following year.

In 2001, the Australian Council for Adult Literacy published its position paper on adult literacy and numeracy (ACAL, 2001).

Some of the key elements of the future policy agenda of the Council are:

- Developing a new national, comprehensive adult literacy policy
- Establishing a national co-ordinating agency
- Holding a national literacy summit

Research for this paper did not reveal the current stage of that agenda, but what is interesting is whilst part of that agenda is to 'embed literacy in an overall framework, implementing a collaborative and consultative process... involving key stakeholders', libraries get no mention.

This does not mean that there is no activity in libraries, but it tends to be piecemeal. Reading programs and promotion in Australia have, until recently, been the province of individual libraries and schools with much of the national impetus through the Australia Council and the book trade. It is interesting that one of the largest initiatives in promoting reading in Australia, the *Books Alive* campaign is part of a \$240 million package, the *Book Industry Assistance Plan* (BIAP), funded and co-ordinated by the Australia Council, the arts funding and advisory body of the Federal Government. Part of this plan is to support the book industry in Australia by offering textbook subsidies to primary schools and grants to primary school libraries, but the 'Books Alive' segment is a four year campaign, concentrating on 'reading for pleasure' aiming to:

promote the intrinsic value of books, reading and literacy (particularly for children) and the books of Australian writers. (Nielsen, 2000)

The objectives of the campaign accord with the principles of good library provision in:

- encouraging participation in, appreciation of and enjoyment of reading
- developing readers amongst non-traditional readers
- promoting the value of literacy, particularly to children and young people
- promoting Australian writers and writing.

The campaign *reference group* comprises representatives from a number of interested parties: publishing, bookselling, the government, schools, authors and also includes librarians – so there is a link with libraries there.

One of the most valuable outputs of the campaign was the results from two important surveys of reading in Australia, used as a starting point for the project. The first of these, *A National Survey of Reading, Buying and Borrowing Books for Pleasure* (Nielsen, 2001) was an extensive survey of reading amongst all ages, covering everything from reading behaviour, attitudes to reading, reading as a leisure activity to patterns of book acquisition and purchasing, trends in book buying and borrowing, library usage and influences on book selection. Some of the findings of the survey are both interesting and informative for providers of library services. For example:

- 78% of the Australian population read for pleasure
- the most avid readers being tertiary educated females over 65 years of age
- non-readers are largely males under 30, not highly educated, and living in rural areas (p.7).

The survey also found that:

- the biggest influence on whether children become enthusiastic readers is the attitudes of the parents (p.8)

- the dominant influence on selection of reading material is word of mouth, followed by the 'blurb' on book covers (p.11)
- the two most common means of acquiring books is purchasing and borrowing from the library (both scoring 20% of the surveyed population)
- 58% of the sample population said that they would like to spend more time reading.

The second influential piece of research was initiated jointly by the Australia Council and the Australian Centre for Youth Literature (ACYL) a section of the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne (Nieuwenhuizen, 2001). To underline the perceived importance of *Young Australian's Reading* study in Australia, it is worth noting that additional support was given to the project by the Australian Publishers Association, the School Library Association of Australia, the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English and Victoria University (Woolcott, 2001 p.1. The research, focused on 10–18 year olds and was designed to:

generate a comprehensive understanding of young people's current reading behaviour and their attitudes towards reading and related issues.

It was envisaged that the findings, based on evidence collected between June and September 2000, would be used to:

inform a national media and promotional campaign which would aim to change attitudes towards ... reading and highlight... literature... for young people (p.4)

It was also predicted that the findings would be used by stakeholders such as libraries, publishers and other such agencies to inform reading programs and promotions

Again the findings are interesting, though many of the findings bear out what has been discovered in previous studies of teenage reading: that girls read more than boys and that teenagers are 'not an homogenous group' (p.6).

## The Role of Public Libraries

Embracing a culture of literacy as the core mission of libraries...could have a liberating effect across the spectrum' (Wedgeworth, 2003).

In some ways it seems superfluous to outline the importance of libraries in the adult literacy movement, though this decade of literacy does provide the impetus to stop and re-examine what is being done in this age of technology, with a great emphasis on *information literacy*.

Wedgeworth (2003) described public libraries as 'natural allies' of the literacy movement. In his address at the 2003 IFLA conference, he gave some extremely good arguments as to why the public library movement should revisit its role in supporting literacy and literacy initiatives. He began his paper by quoting Pierce Butler (1933) who argued that the transmission of culture was 'perhaps the most important obligation of one generation to another'. Wedgeworth further contends that the transmission of culture requires communication and the one essential for effective communication is literacy. Libraries, museums and archives of the repositories of the artefacts of culture, and have an important and central role in facilitating access to the information and knowledge inherent in those artefacts – ergo libraries have a vested interest in fostering literacy. It is not enough either to be mere custodians and these institutions cannot be passive about facilitating access.

This is widely acknowledged by professionals engaged in the three fields and hence current debates about promoting and teaching information literacy skills, digitising collections and linking information seekers with relevant content. It is not such a leap, therefore, to promote the idea that library professionals have 'a common purpose [in]...the obligation to promote a culture of literacy' (Wedgeworth, 2003).

Libraries, with their networks, geographical distribution, facilities, collections and professionalism 'would bring an impressive net worth to the development of a culture of literacy' (Wedgeworth, 2003). Support for adult literacy initiatives draw on the traditional resources provided by libraries.

There is much that can be and is being done at local and regional level in Australia. However, maybe it is timely for a national drive to establish policies and infrastructure, with leadership from the National and State libraries supported by the professional body, which would formalise and facilitate reading development. The importance of policies, strategies and infrastructures, developed and facilitated by national bodies has already been highlighted. Partnerships such as those suggested by the UK Council of Museums, Archives and Libraries and links with educational and other institutions at local level could be fostered in Australia. Perhaps joint projects could be established between ALIA and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy. State libraries could link with Pro-Literacy Worldwide.

The Vital Link project's five-year vision provides pointers to some of the strategies that could be employed in Australian public libraries. This vision advocates:

- all public library authorities in partnership with basic skills providers
- awareness training in libraries' 'distinctive role in supporting emerging readers
- recognition, at government level of that distinctive role
- understanding and involvement by publishers (National Literacy Trust, 2003).

A fitting end for this paper is Wedgeworth's (2003) outline of five things that all libraries can do in the short-term:

- Reassert the public library role as an educational and cultural institution
- Emphasis that role in library education
- Advocate the culture of literacy as a core value
- Contribute library materials, facilities and staffing
- Host meetings of related educational and social organisations

## Conclusion

Much of the literature on literacy reinforces the increased need for individuals to acquire literacy skills as technological developments proceed, Think for example of the work that is currently going into the digitisation of collections and the tools to access these. Unless we are to disenfranchise large sections of society, then we need to keep a weather eye out for opportunities to support basic literacy as well as the more fashionable and 'sexy' preoccupations such as knowledge management and information literacy.

The advent of the decade of literacy presents a major opportunity for public libraries to reassert their educational role, especially for adults. With an estimated 900 million adults in the world who are illiterate and a substantial number of others who lack adequate literacy skills to

cope with the demands of the digital society, the need for libraries to promote and advance a culture of literacy has never been greater. (Wedgeworth, 2003).

ALIA, in its Statement on Libraries and Literature (1996) not only endorses the role of public libraries in the supporting literacy but sees it as a core function. It is now an opportune time in Australia for all librarians, led by the principal libraries and professional bodies, to re-examine that role and develop strategies for its future. The reports emerging from the Books Alive campaign offer valuable insight into the reading behaviour of Australians and in doing this provide a platform on which to build.

Let this *Decade of Literacy* be a time to reflect on what is a traditional and core function of libraries, and to re-examine this role and what it means in today's society.

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**Keywords**

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