Lyon Declaration – 'Literacy Matters'

A Statement from the Literacy & Reading Section, International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)

The IFLA Literacy & Reading Section has a very strong connection to the Lyon Declaration in that its focus is on literacy and reading. The LiR Section recognises that literacy & reading are essential for access to information for personal growth and for the development of communities within society and that libraries have a unique role in the promotion of literacy and reading.

> *'We believe that libraries are uniquely situated to promote literacy and reading. It is part of their mission and it is a mission of all types of libraries, from school and public to special, research, university and national. They may do so directly, but especially in partnership with other organisations, through projects, publications and other co-operative endeavours' (Farmer & Stricevic 2011)*

What is literacy?

'Literacy is more essential than ever before. In societies dominated by the written word, it is a fundamental requirement for citizens of all ages in modern Europe. Literacy empowers the individual to develop capacities of reflection, critique and empathy, leading to a sense of self-efficacy, identity and full participation in society. Literacy skills are crucial to parenting, finding and keeping a job, participating as a citizen, being an active consumer, managing one's health and taking advantage of digital developments, both socially and at work'. (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012)

In recent times the word literacy has been linked to all areas of society including information (information literacy, transliteracy, metaliteracy, media and information literacy), technology (computer, ICT, network, multimedia, digital literacies), education (academic, critical literacy, adult and aliteracy), health (health literacy) politics (political literacy), ethnic and cultural understanding (cultural literacy) and economics (economic, workplace, business literacy). In this context the word literacy has been interpreted as 'good at' and is associated with a range of skills, competencies or specific knowledge. However, at the most fundamental level the term literacy is the learned ability to communicate and acquire knowledge through the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking/understanding. To possess these skills enables a speaker, writer or reader to use appropriate language to acquire knowledge through the analysis of information from a variety of sources and formats, and to enhance an individual's capacity to question, problem-solve, think and create in order to participate effectively in society. The UNESCO Decade of Literacy 2003 – 2012 recognised that 'Literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills.' Being literate is the first step towards being a lifelong learner. Literacy is a fundamental human right. According to UNESCO (2009-2014):

> *a literate community is a dynamic community, one that exchanges ideas and engages in debate. Illiteracy, however, is an obstacle to a better quality of life, and can even breed exclusion and violence.*

Literacy enables citizens to be informed, productive and part of community life, which in turn leads to lifelong learning and sustainable futures. While the delivery format may be print, audio, visual or electronic or a combination of these, a major component of any of the literacies above is the ability to read and decode symbolic language and to think critically. To be active participants in community life individuals need to be able to read first. They need be literate and have access to necessary infrastructure to maintain and develop their literacy levels.

Reading and literacy

While oral literacy is thought to be hard-wired for humans, the ability to decode the symbols which represent spoken language and assign meaning, is a learned ability which moves through two stages, the mechanical or learning to read stage and the cognitive or reading to learn phase (Bhattacharya & Han 2001; Huitt & Hummel, 2003; Atherton, 2009). Research has shown that developing a reading circuit where the brain makes meaning from

symbolic language is not a natural activity (Wolf, 2008. 2009) and like all learned activities reading must be practiced and the reader challenged by increasingly complex reading, in language, context and content. Hence, literacy levels continue to fall even while students are at school when reading outside the assessable curriculum falls off, as indicated by national testing (NAPLAN) results in Australia (NAP, 2013). Recent statistics from the US also indicate that once students leave school they do not maintain their literacy levels (Statistic Brain, 2014).

Effects of low literacy

Being in a developed country does not mean the community has access to resources or expertise that will enable citizens to be lifelong learners or pro-active participants in society. In both developing and developed countries inequity and a lack of information lead to poverty, crime, poor health and inactivity in public/community life. Poor literacy also has a negative economic impact and leads to less access to work, poor workplace safety and an overall drag on GDP per capita (OECD, 2002; Bailey, 2010). In Australia, 44% of the adult population continues to operate at level 2 literacy (level 3 is the minimum level required for high school graduation) or below (ABS, 2013). Numeric literacy follows a similar pattern, but the levels of competency are much lower, since language literacy (reading and understanding) is usually required before numeric literacy can occur. The flow-on of low literacy levels affects all levels of society and has a major impact on the ability of ordinary citizens to create futures which are environmentally and economically sustainable.

Technology and reading

Research over the last 15 years has discovered the following:
- Technology is complementary, not compensatory. Very good traditional literacy skills (reading, viewing and listening) are needed to be able to use all forms of technology effectively and efficiently (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Corio, 2003; Corio, 2009) for both finding and using information.
- There is no such person as a digital native and information-seeking using digital and electronic resources is superficial and poorly performed by all age groups (Combes 2012; Shenton, 2007; Nicholas, Rowlands, & Huntington, 2008).
- There are major issues when reading and making meaning from text on screen including:
  o fatigue and a preference for print (Jeong, 2010);
  o navigating digital landscapes (Mangen, 2013; Jabr, 2013);
  o disruption/distraction and poor ability to focus (Liu, 2005), and poor metacognitive learning recognition (Ackerman & Goldsmith, 2011);
  o poor comprehension and negative effects on long term memory (Wästlund et al, 2005; Noyes & Garland, 2003; Bauerline, 2009); and
  o a different mindset and culture of technology use which does not facilitate information retrieval and deep learning/understanding (Combes, 2012, 2009; Ackerman & Goldsmith 2011).

However, it also has to be acknowledged that digital access to books and information enables people to access reading and information who would not otherwise do so, either because of preference, disability or a lack of printed published books within a country. Access to reading through technology can enhance literacy development, have a positive impact on the acquisition of language, provide greater access to information, support learning, motivate students, and enhance personal health, well- being and self- esteem. The UK National Literacy Trust in partnership with RM Books is currently undertaking a joint study to explore the impact of eBooks on the reading motivation and reading skills of children and young people in primary and secondary schools across the UK, with final conclusions being published in October 2015. In preparation for this, a rapid literature review explores some of the research currently available on the role that technology plays in the literacy lives of young people (Picton, 2014)

Reading and Health

Poor literacy skills can have a negative effect on health because of the impact on the educational, economic, environmental and social factors affecting a person's health. Health literacy skills are those needed to gain access to, understand, and use information to promote and maintain health. At a basic level this includes functional literacy, numeracy, and ICT skills for understanding health information, but also includes the skills needed to evaluate and apply health information in changing contexts. Libraries can also have a positive role in supporting emotional health and well-being. The Reading Well Books on Prescription (England) scheme helps people understand and manage their health and wellbeing using self-help reading. It is endorsed by health professionals and supported by public libraries. Books can be recommended to patients by GPs or other health professionals from the relevant Reading Well Books on Prescription reading list. People can also self-refer to the scheme and use it without a professional recommendation. All the books are available in almost all English public libraries where they can be borrowed free of charge. The books have been recommended by experts and been tried and tested and found to be useful. Evaluation of the first year of the scheme has been very positive (Reading Agency 2014)

Literacy, libraries and building sustainable communities

...with more than 230,000 public libraries in developing countries around the world - institutions historically devoted to access to reading materials - it's confounding that libraries are usually left out of systematic literacy efforts (Katz, 2014).

Libraries also exist in schools, educational institutions and private organisations. They contain an extensive range of resources to cater for all literacy levels and information needs, and many are staffed by information professionals who can assist citizens with information seeking, interpretation and understanding. Libraries are community spaces based on an underlying philosophy of equity of access to information and public service. They provide opportunities for access to technology, community spaces for meetings and opportunities for education and further learning. As mentioned by Katz above, libraries are often overlooked by organisations and initiatives to improve literacy and educational opportunities for citizens.

Examples where libraries have made a difference to literacy levels, ongoing educational opportunities, changing cultural values and in the building of stronger in communities include:
- the **Ganokendra or People's Centres in Bangladesh**, noted for providing educational opportunities and resources which are sustainable and community owned and managed (Alam, 2014);
- the work done by CODE Ethiopia to establish and stock rural community libraries to support literacy, education and sustainable agriculture (Asselin, Abebe & Doiron, 2014); and
- the **Trust programs** which work with marginalized groups in Palestinian society, especially in villages located in the northwest of Jerusalem. These programs use the libraries as community places to combat illiteracy, provide educational opportunities and community spaces to learn and acquire knowledge through dialogue. These libraries have been particularly important for women who are now change agents in their communities (Mohammed & Awad, 2014).

Libraries also provide important infrastructure and expertise to build community and sustainable futures in developing countries as demonstrated by the following examples:
- the **Better Beginnings program** by the State Library in Western Australia, a family literacy program which includes a cross sector approach with WA Corrective Services to help incarcerated parents to learn age appropriate activities to share with their children while developing their own literacy skills (70% of adult prisoners in WA have literacy issues and poor literacy is generational) (Jones, 2014); and
- the **Turku City Library** which works with the Turku City Women's Centre to develop Finnish language and reading skills using creativity, particularly amongst immigrants (Hernalahti & Kolehmainen, 2014).
- the work of **READ Nepal**, providing effective community development centres with a strong focus on social empowerment, economic development and lifelong learning, based on a library concept which is needs-based, community owned and sustainable

Creative partnerships between university libraries, schools and hospitals can create opportunities for sustainable futures through the flow-on effects of increased levels of literacy.

- The **Book Buddy program** provided by the Hamdan Tahir Library Universiti Sains Malaysia for paediatric patients and their guardians (Engku Chik & Hassan et al., 2014). The program works with terminally ill children and their guardians to build literacy and support through bibliotherapy.
- The **Monitor in the Library at School project**, which charts the impact of the collaboration between elementary schools and libraries on literacy levels in the Netherlands. This is a collaborative project between the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Sardes Educational Services and school libraries throughout the Netherlands (Broekhof & Bon, 2014).

Not-for-profit and volunteer groups also provide access to library resources for the disenfranchised and the poor.

- The **Footpath Library** which operates in capital cities in Australia 'aims to enrich the quality of life for homeless people, encourage literacy and promote a society that is well informed about homelessness' (The Footpath Library, 2013). This is a mobile library that provides library services to hostels, clinics and hospitals in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney.

Most of these examples were showcased in the Literacy & Reading Section programme 'Literacy, Community, Responsibility' held in Lyon 2014. The LiR Section has also produced *Guidelines for Library Based Literacy Programs* which presents some practical suggestions for library staff to help our society become more literate and to sustain community development.

Sustainable futures and libraries

Research over the last 50 years has clearly shown that reading and literacy are extremely important elements when building sustainable futures for communities across both developed and developing countries (OECD, 2002; UNESCO, 2009-2014). Higher levels of literacy in communities have flow-on effects that can influence cultural and political change, economic opportunity and environmental sustainability. Informed citizens who have opportunities for lifelong learning, will build strong, sustainable and environmentally sound communities. Libraries in the public, private and school sectors already provide an extensive global information network staffed by information professionals; community spaces (physical and virtual); and a resource base to build literate and information literate communities. Librarians should act as reflective practitioners of research and effective promoters of literacy and reading and Libraries need to be an integral component of any initiative to build a global sustainable future.

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