



Building a Culture for Reading in a Multicultural, Multilingual World

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Abstract

Drawing on the research linking literacy and libraries, this paper provides a conceptual framework for promoting and encouraging children's reading for librarians working in multilingual and multicultural communities. We use the voices of multilingual library users and we explore successful examples of reading promotion in multicultural library contexts in order to demonstrate how different types of libraries can take the lead in promoting literacy and building a culture for reading in their communities.

Introduction

A well-known African proverb teaches that "It takes a village to raise a child". This reminds us that everyone in a community plays an important role in the welfare and development of children. This proverb could also apply as we explore the complexity of developing children's reading habits by suggesting "It takes a village to raise a reader". This implies that educators, parents, community leaders and librarians all play a vital role in the development of children who not only *can* read, but who *do* read. Magara (2005) describes a reading culture as one where reading is highly valued and appreciated in the society and where reading is regarded not simply as something developed for school purposes but something practiced in all aspects of our lives. What then can be done to nurture this "culture for reading" and how do various members of multicultural and multilingual communities contribute to the development of positive reading habits?

To set some context and to provide some background for this discussion, we begin this paper with voices of readers from diverse cultures, and with examples of innovative programs for supporting reading. These voices and programs introduce key principles for designing library programs that build a culture for reading in a multicultural, multilingual world.

A Selection of Voices from Around the World

1) Nassar, a young man from Iran, reflects on gaining access to books

In Iran, especially during the Islamic Revolution, there were bans on many books. We had to quietly exchange books with others who had access to them (like one of my friends) and hide them within our homes. There were no libraries in schools and so I did not even have the opportunity to engage with such spaces. Institutions that were most helpful to my development as a reader and learner were public libraries.

2) Anna, a mother from Malta, reflects on the influence of family members.

When I was about 8 years old, my elder brother organised a lending library for my sister, me, our cousins, and children in our neighbourhood. It was on the landing that led to the roof (roofs are flat in Malta). We used to go up to our library once a week and borrow a book from there. My brother would give us a little card with a rubber stamp on it and we would have to return it the next week. We were fined 1 pence if we did not return it on time! Both my mother and father were avid readers and encouraged us on. I remember us visiting the public library once a week from a very young age.

3) Gabriela, an early childhood educator, grew up reading in Argentina.

I remember my mother's voice reading to me during "the siesta time". I was still too young, but my parents had already bought me many big books, with hard covers and with beautiful pictures. I particularly remember the water color pictures of my favorite one, a book called *Corazon...* When I grew up and I was able to read by myself, I remember reading those same big books, even late at night, under the covers of my bed.

4) Jessie, a senior adult from Scotland explores how reading changes/develops throughout our lives.

I was an only child for whom reading was a wonderful companionship. Stories fascinated me and I read everything I could find with no concern about whether it was "suitable" so my vocabulary grew and I came to love the musical sound of words. Now, my grandchildren and I read together. Their books are lovely: brightly illustrated and specially written for young people. For them, as for me, the public library is a rich resource.

Innovative Programs for Supporting Reading

1) Uganda: Tapping into local knowledge and language

A community library in Uganda uses these two strategies to support a reading culture:

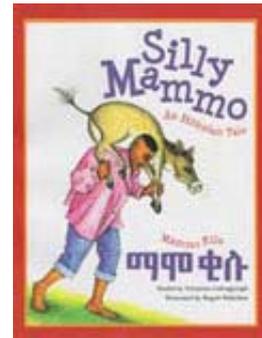
a) Ask children to get stories from adults at home. They come and relate the stories in the library. They draw pictures to match the stories. The stories are written out and simplified. Learning activities are developed to further improve children literacy skills.

b) Adult learners discuss topics of their interest and choose a secretary among them to keep a record. The notes are then simplified. Pictures relating to the discussion are taken with the community and matched with the final piece of work. Learning activities are developed for adults to take ideas further. A simple booklet has been produced called 'Farming in Kabubbu.'



2) Ethiopia: Local publishing for local libraries

Ethiopia Reads publishes high-quality, multilingual books for children in English as well as several Ethiopian languages. Highlighting original texts and illustrations as well as traditional folk tales that derive from Ethiopia's rich culture, these books allow Ethiopian children to see their lives and languages reflected in the pages of books for the first time. The books are placed in the network of school and donkey libraries across the country. <http://www.ethiopiareads.org/programs/publishing>.



Throughout the countryside in Ethiopia, large signs encourage reading and promote the importance of literacy and staying in school, especially for girls.

Code Ethiopia with the support of CODE Canada has built over 65 reading rooms throughout the countryside. These reading rooms provide access to books for students and community members and they distribute books donated by international book agencies and many that are produced by Code Ethiopia.



3) **Canada: Modelling book reading in local languages**

Libraries in major urban areas of North America offer children and their families story times in languages of the community. In Vancouver, Canada, for example, story times are regularly scheduled in Mandarin, Cantonese and Tagalog. (See http://www.vpl.ca/cgi-bin/api/calendar.cgi?audience_idx=9)

4) **Switzerland: Developing multilingual public library collections**

In Basel, one community-based public library has developed a comprehensive collection of books in over a dozen languages in order to meet the demands of the immigrant population moving into their city. Community groups support the collection development, help select the books and eagerly borrow and share materials in the multilingual collection.



These insights from readers and innovative libraries show us that supporting a love of reading and lifelong readers is highly valued and is most often successful when community-driven. The challenges facing communities to reach their goals in creating a culture for reading vary depending on past successes, emerging influences, and political and social expectations. In many developed countries, the influence of new digital technologies on traditional reading habits (Rich, 2008) has caused librarians concern about “the future of reading” (Peters, 2009). Challenges to supporting reading that are most often cited are: 1) an increasing “resistance to reading” (Hartness, 2006) as children move through the school years; 2) competition from multimedia and rich-text formats (Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jonsson, 2006); and 3) the tension felt by educators to improve tests of reading achievement, often sacrificing activities which promote reading habits (Leppänen, Aunola & Nurmi, 2005).

At the same time, librarians in developing countries face more fundamental challenges as they struggle: a) to build collections of culturally appropriate literature through local publishing industries (Sisuli, 2004); b) to build an adequate quantity of resources for lending and learning (Heale, 2003); and, c) to find support for reading as a lifelong learning and leisure activity (Clark & Rumbold, 2008).

Drawing on the research linking literacy and libraries (Doiron, 2007; Asselin, 2005; *APLIS*, 1995), we first provide a conceptual framework for promoting and encouraging children’s reading for librarians working in various library settings around the world. We then turn to successful examples of reading promotion programs from several countries to illustrate how different types of libraries can take the lead in promoting literacy and building a culture for reading in their communities.

Conceptual Framework: Cornerstones of Promoting Reading and Sociocultural Perspectives

There is a well established literature that identifies the major factors in promoting reading. While this literature tends to focus on individuals rather than communities, much can be scaled up from these principles. Sanders-ten Holte (1998) and Cruz (2003) suggest that to create a culture for reading within a given society, it is necessary to improve the reading environment in the home, the school and the community at the same time, while improving the image of reading so it is more than simply school-focused. Building access to good quality, local literature is also seen as a basic principle in establishing and nurturing reading interests and habits (UN Resolution 54/122, 2002, p.6). This includes books in local languages, award-winning books by regional authors/illustrators and access to authentic texts which reflect local interests and needs. Coupled with this are expectations that readers need to feel they have choice in their reading; when readers feel they have that choice and are not made to feel they must read prescribed school-based texts only, then they are more likely to be motivated to continue reading (Agrinoni, 2005; Worthy, 1996). This gives parents, educators and librarians a major responsibility to balance reading choices that match reader interests and their reading levels (Kanade & Chudamani, 2006).



While important in our understanding of how literacy develops, sociocultural perspectives of learning and literacy are not typically part of the reading promotion literature. However, this perspective provides a powerful lens for extending knowledge of reading promotion at the individual level to include the broader community level. A sociocultural perspective posits that all learning and literacy development occurs within social and cultural contexts (Bakhtin, 1986; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). Within this larger frame, individuals engage in social interaction, and in that process, appropriate the values, beliefs, patterns of behavior, and abilities practiced by the members of their cultural group. Thus, children, and indeed all community members to various degrees, actively strive to become insiders with whom they live and interact with. Consequently, it is not surprising that in Uganda, as everywhere in the world, “children from homes where parents were literate were more likely to enjoy reading and to be encouraged to read than in homes where parents were illiterate (Obua-otua, 1997). The community, on the other hand, supports or *scaffolds*, apprentices into shared practices, values, and attitudes about literacy (Heath, 1983). In this way, the library, as a cultural institution, has a critical role to play in shaping attitudes towards and practices of reading. For example, providing access to and choice of reading materials is not just about serving individuals but about influencing community expectations and standards for membership in a reading culture.

From Theory to Practice: Examples of Library Leadership from Around the World

To illustrate these principles, we explore four different types of promotional activities from four different regions of the world in order to highlight effective applications of the principles arising from the literature on reading promotion. Examples of these activities include: 1) several reading room projects in East Africa where community-based libraries work with local villagers to promote reading (Ahimbisibwe & Parry, 2009; Asselin & Doiron, 2009); 2) online innovations such as the social network [WorldReaders](#) where youth from different countries connect over the Internet to share and discuss reading interests (Doiron, 2009; Abram, 2008); 3) a collection development and library training program in Yunnan Province of China (Henri et al, 2009; Lui & Li, 2008); and 4) multicultural reading promotions in school and public libraries in North America (Bates & Webster, 2009; Bernadowski, 2008; Steiner, 2001).



A Community Library in Uganda (submitted by Augustine Napagi – librarian)

Kabubbu Community Library is located in rural Uganda, 25 km north of Kampala, in the Wakiso district. Kabubbu village has an estimated 7000 people, mostly large families with eight or more children. With the literacy rate below 40%, literacy education is a priority. The predominant economic activity is subsistence farming.

The library is a member of the newly formed, vital Ugandan Library Association (<http://www.ugcla.org/>) and has some support from several western organizations.

The library provides access to a rich variety of resources. To become embedded in the fabric of the community, the library's resources support and extend important interests and needs in the community. Resources include traditional types such as text books (over 600) and local and English language newspapers (*The Monitor*, *The New Vision*, *Bukedde*). Responding to policies for literacy development, resources also include materials for adult and children's literacy programs, such as local and English language fiction and nonfiction. Video learning equipment is available to inspire community members of all ages to explore a critical new literacy media. Educational board games bring youth and adults together to acquire new knowledge and practice language and literacy skills. Finally, the unusual additions of demonstration gardens and sports facilities respond to the need to improve agricultural practices and the intense desire to engage in sports. Reading materials from the library's collection are fully integrated into these active learning spaces.

Beyond providing resources, the library offers an impressive range of programs and services for adults, youth, and children that connect them in meaningful ways to the collection to improve reading and learning. For example, individual learning plans are developed for the needs and interests of new learners and library users are challenged to read a book and write a sentence about the most interesting thing they found in the book.

Library events are planned to coordinate with important community events (e.g., adult learners' week and community award celebrations). Programs for children are particularly extensive and include:

- Collaboration with primary schools to support students' independent reading and research projects.
- Literacy remedial classes for students in lower primary grades.
- Hosting professional development days for primary school staff on topics such as family learning and adult literacy, intergenerational impact of poor literacy skills, and how teachers can encourage parents into adult learning programs to best support their child in school.
- Inviting parents to a performance by children based on the children's ideas, story books, puppets made by children. Children write, draw and colour invitations which they then take to their parents. At the performance invite interested parents to adult literacy class the following week for a specific session.

The library also works closely with the community institutions including partnering with the Kabubbu Health Centre to promote family health, hosting a public event for all at the library with a health display, and organizing a performance by children showing health food and disease control. Additionally, the library re-writes popular articles from newspapers to accord with the interests and the reading ability of the library users.

Recognizing the critical place of local literacy materials production in reading, the library has a number of innovative initiatives, one of which is described at the beginning of this paper. Other examples of this way of promoting reading are:

- Creating a simple book, 'Essanyu Ly' abato', for children and everyone who reads it writes another simple story. Some children read the book by themselves and others will ask their friends to read it for them.
- Adult learners discuss topics of their interest and choose a secretary among them to keep a record. The notes are then simplified. Pictures relating to discussion are taken with the community and matched with the final piece of work. Learning activities are developed for adults to take ideas further. A simple booklet has been produced and it is called 'Farming in Kabubbu.'

Access to the library resources is not restricted to the actual library facility. A library book bike is used in creative ways to reach those community members who reside outside the village. Examples are:

- A selection of library books is taken out on a bicycle to the trading post, health centre and homes. The books are lent out to families. The books are discussed and families are encouraged to read and discuss the books at home, then return them and borrow another book.
- Visit individual homes where learners have agreed to meet to read and discuss books of their interest. Show the group how to use the library to solve identified problem.

- Conduct home visits to carry out family mapping, develop family mobile and problem trees and connect these to utilization of library resources.

Online with Young Readers

The goal of the *WorldReaders* project is to harness the intrinsic interest young people have in using online social networks and develop an engaging and motivating virtual environment for readers around the



world to share and discuss their reading interests. An online social network called *WorldReaders* (worldreaders.ning.com) and a supporting website for educators and librarians (www.WorldReaders.org) has been created, where young readers from around the world are able to join a virtual community of young people with similar/diverse reading interests and to engage in a social networking initiative with their peers and teachers. The research focuses on identifying effective tools for encouraging participation, factors which influence reading interests, the most popular reading choices made by participants, the reactions of participants to their involvement with the network, and how the social networking phenomena influences and supports young readers.

Over 100 people have joined the *WorldReaders* social network (SN) and users have made major contributions not only to the content and resources available at the SN, but to various discussions and forum interactions. Several early themes have emerged from the researchers' observations, SN administrators and discussions with teacher and teacher-librarian participants.

- 1) *The Technology Learning Curve*. Everyone who joined the SN needed some initial time to learn how to navigate the site, learn what tools are available and how they work, and the site-based facilitator needed to plan time for adjusting to using a SN.
- 2) *Videos Rule!* Without a doubt, the videos posted and/or linked to at the SN site proved to be the most useful (and popular) resources. They were reported as high interest resources, “fun” to watch, and very powerful tools to spark new thinking and expanded discussions.
- 3) *Key Role of the Site Facilitator*. Close monitoring by the site facilitator was crucial in the success and level of activity at the sites. Lurking and observing, commenting (but just in the right amount), dropping in new resources at key points, responding quickly to technical difficulties, and challenging users to do something new were all roles that the facilitator played.
- 4) *Being Part of a Group*. Many users reported how they really liked being part of a group of people drawn from different schools, communities and parts of the world. “We were all in it together” learning not only about new ideas about teaching, but learning how to use these new technologies and “getting into the swing” of what our students are doing outside of school.

This project also provided teachers and school librarians with a successful example of how we can take the power of social networking and make it work to achieve our traditional literacy/library goals. It combines images, music, video, and student input through interactive tools in a secure online environment, allowing students to develop and share their reading interests while also using the multimedia environments of social networks. One of the main ideas that has emerged from the work with the WorldReaders social network is that building community is difficult and it takes time. It requires leaders who work with the community members and who respond to interests and local activities. One event, one contest, one celebration or one promotional activity will not create a culture for reading; many people working together on a diverse set of activities is what will move a community to become one where reading is valued, resources for reading are readily available and a community-based, community-wide approach is encouraged.

Building a Public Library Collection in Yunnan Province, China (Submitted by James Henri – IASL)

Conclusion

The research reviewed here and the examples drawn from communities around the world challenge librarians to re-think what it means to read for pleasure and to re-assess what counts as reading in today's world. The reading promotion programs we examined suggest successful programs are built around meaningful and responsive community partnerships, are responsive to readers' interests and personal choices, and use diverse resources. Also recognized was the value of sustained programs over time, rather than one-off "reading events" which may help raise awareness, but which need to be part of a comprehensive/collaborative strategy for building a culture for reading. In many places in the world, access to and choice of traditional print books are key resources to achieving a reading culture. However, successful reading programs must also consider the impact of new technologies on literacy which "has now come to mean a rapid and continuous process of changes in the ways in which we read, write, view, listen, compose and communicate information" (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). These changes are taking place in different degrees throughout the world. Programs such as *WorldReaders* harness popular digital literacy practices to encourage reading, building global communities based on shared values and preferences. It is this ability to navigate changes and support communities of readers across diverse language and literacy landscape that will continue to challenge contemporary library programs. We would argue that the principles of reading promotion identified in this article and that underlie the programs we describe, can inform development of reading promotion programs in the changing literacy contexts within multi-lingual, multicultural communities.

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