

IFLA's Section on Literacy and Reading: A History of its First Fifteen Years

By John Y. Cole, director, the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress

Since its creation in 1996, the Section on Reading of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has grown slowly but steadily. Important milestones have been the adding of literacy promotion to its mission in 1999 and the change of its name to the Literacy and Reading Section in 2007. The size of the Section has grown from 28 members in 1996 to 55 members in 2011. Moreover, today it has 14 Standing Committee members and five Corresponding Members.

Chairs of the Section on Reading since 1996 have faced many challenges. In addition to the obvious needs for membership recruitment and continuing cooperation with other organizations (both within and outside of IFLA), each has had to strike a balance among basic Section activities, goals, and projects, each rooted in the Section's history. These include: reading and literacy promotion; encouraging research about reading, literacy, and the relationship of each to libraries; the reading habits and skills of children and young people; governmental literacy and reading policies; the role of books and reading in the electronic age; and the important relationship between excellent research and effective advocacy on behalf of reading, literacy, and libraries.

Fortunately, each of the five Section chairs since 1996 has not only represented a different country (and tradition), but also brought with them different approaches, skills, and experiences, all relevant to the activities and projects in the Section on Reading's ever-expanding strategic plan.

These chairs have been Valeria D. Stelmakh, reading research specialist, Lenin State Library, Russia (1996-97); John Y. Cole, director, Center for the Book, Library of Congress, USA (1997-2001); Catharina Stenberg, researcher and teacher at the Swedish School of Information and Library Services, Boras, Sweden (2001-03), Gwynneth Evans, retired from a 25-year career at the National Library of Canada (2003-07); and Ivanka Stricevic, a LIS faculty member at the University of Zadar in Zadar, Croatia, (2007-11).

IFLA established its Section on Reading in 1996 by bringing together its Round Table on Reading Research (established in 1995) with its Round Table on Children's Literature Documentation Centres. The Section's primary goal was to promote reading and literacy among librarians and to encourage research relating to reading and literacy problems. The executive committees of the two merged round tables endorsed the new arrangement and expressed their hope that the new section would have "close links" with the planning of the work of IFLA's new Working Group on Literacy, which also had been established in 1996. The executive committees also looked to a strong relationship between the new Section on Reading and IFLA's "eventual future Core Programme on Literacy."

Prior to the creation of both the Section on Reading and the IFLA Working Group on Literacy, several forces converged to put reading promotion and literacy on IFLA's agenda.

In 1989, IFLA sponsored a pre-conference in Paris on the topic of

public libraries and the illiteracy problem. To focus world attention on the problem of illiteracy, the United Nations declared 1990 as International Literacy Year. One result was the 1990 Education for All conference in Bangkok, to which IFLA and the American Library Association sent Lucile C. Thomas, an American school library leader. Literacy was the topic of an IFLA pre-conference in India in 1992 prior to the 58th general conference in New Delhi; in 1993 Lucile Thomas published her conference paper, titled "World Literacy and the Role of Libraries," in the *IFLA Journal*. At the IFLA conference in Havana in 1994, a new IFLA core programme for literacy and reading promotion was proposed and discussed. However at a joint meeting in 1995, the IFLA Executive Board and Professional Board rejected the core programme recommendation on financial and organizational grounds. Instead, the IFLA Literacy Working Group was created to study the feasibility of a major IFLA initiative to support literacy programs in libraries. A background paper for working group consideration (PB-DOC-11-95) was prepared by Professional Board member Winston Roberts.

At the Section on Reading meeting on Aug. 24, 1996, at the 62nd annual IFLA conference in Beijing, China, Secretary-Treasurer Shmeul Sever of Haifa University Library reported that the new section had 28 members. Moreover, on June 18-22 in Vologda, Russia, the section had co-sponsored a very successful conference, "Libraries and Reading in Times of Cultural Change." Under the leadership of project directors Valeria Stelmakh, chair of the Reading Section, and Pamela Spence Richards, chair of the IFLA

Round Table on Library History, the event attracted 65 scholars, librarians, and administrators from five countries.

In addition to the report on the Vologda conference, section members (representing Russia, Canada, France, Israel, Sweden, and the United States) also discussed the ongoing work on "Reading and Literacy: 1980-1995: An Annotated Bibliography," a project headed by Irene Sever of Haifa University Library.

On Aug. 28, the section hosted an "open meeting" to introduce itself and its projects to IFLA membership. An audience of approximately 60 attended and listened to presentations about specific areas of potential interest such as reading and literacy development in different countries and specific cultural milieus, the role of reading in child development and research in reading and literacy.

Valeria Stelmakh also chaired the new IFLA Working Group on Literacy; it too met for the first time in Beijing. At its Aug. 30 organizational meeting, the group decided that a survey of current conditions was needed as a first step in its assignment of recommending to IFLA a programme that would "support the promotion of literacy and the development of reading skills through libraries." Members were asked to survey specific areas of the world and if possible to complete their respective reports by the end of the year, sending them to the new Working Group on Literacy Secretariat in Israel.

The task proved to be more complicated than had been anticipated. In 1997, Valeria Stelmakh resigned as Working Group chair. Both the Working Group and its survey were reorganized. The IFLA Professional Board approved additional funding for the survey in 1998.

The final Literacy Working Group report was presented to the Professional Board at the 1999 IFLA annual conference in Bangkok. After discussion the board

decided to turn the report and its recommendations over to the Section on Reading "for whatever action it deemed appropriate."

A summary of the report was published in the December 1999 (no. 9) issue of the Section on Reading *Newsletter*.

Valeria Stelmakh also resigned as chair of the Section on Reading in 1997; with my consent she nominated me as her successor and my duties began at the IFLA conference in Copenhagen the same year.

I had no previous IFLA experience, but had been promoting reading as the director of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress since the Center's creation in 1977. Valeria and I had known each other since late October 1991, when each of us had represented our respective institutions at "The National Library in the Life of the Nation: The Lenin State Library and the Library of Congress," a three-day conference in Moscow. Moreover, the Center for the Book had provided a modest amount of financial support for the June 1996 reading promotion conference in Vologda, Russia hosted by the Section on Reading and the IFLA Round Table on Library History, in which I participated.

Given my past experience, I felt that increased library involvement with literacy was important and would be an appropriate expansion of the Section on Reading's mission. As the new Section chair, I served as IFLA's representative at a UNESCO panel on "Reading for All" held in Aswan, Egypt, on 24-25 November, 1997. For the Section's 1998 workshop at the IFLA conference in Amsterdam, we organized a programme on the theme "Literacy and Reading Services to Cultural and Linguistic Minorities" at which eight papers were presented. At Bangkok in 1999, we welcomed the IFLA Professional Board's decision to turn the Literacy Working Group's report and recommendations over to the Section on Reading for absorption into our mission.

The Section lost no time in moving ahead with literacy-based activities.

Two such events were sponsored at the 2000 annual IFLA conference in Jerusalem: a program, "Literacy and Libraries: An Introduction," and a workshop: "Library-Based Programming to Promote Literacy." Two section members, secretary-treasurer Adele M. Fasick, and Gwynneth Evans, assisted me in the initial program planning. They also began planning a booklet based on the workshop.

The July 2000 issue (no. 10) of the Section's *Newsletter* was devoted to the topic of literacy. It included reports on our forthcoming sessions at the 2000 Jerusalem conference, on UNESCO and OECD literacy activities, and two lengthy articles, "Literacy, Libraries & IFLA: Recent Developments and Look at the Future," and "Major International Studies of Literacy in the 1990s."

The Section on Reading's symposium and publishing program continued as well. With the IFLA Round Table on Library History, on June 11-12, 1998, the Reading Section sponsored "Books, Libraries, Reading & Publishing in the Cold War," a major conference in Paris. A 297-page book based on the conference proceedings was published by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress in 2001.

Catharina Stenberg was elected chair of the Section on Reading at the 2001 annual IFLA conference in Boston; Gwynneth Evans became secretary-treasurer. Their fluency in French helped broaden the section's reach and recruit new French-speaking members. Catharina's interest in national book and literacy policies led directly to the section's principal programme on this topic at the 2002 conference in Glasgow, "National Book and Reading Policies: What, Why, For Whom, and How Are They Implemented? The Section's first programme directly concerning the new electronic world, "The Impact of the Internet on Reading and Libraries" took place at the 2003 IFLA conference in Berlin. Catharina's personal interests as a researcher encouraged and informed the Section's approval of an international research survey of



UNESCO panel "Reading for All" Aswan, Egypt 1977



IFLA Congress Amsterdam 1998 Workshop panelists Antoinette Correa of Senegal, Ivar Haug of Norway and Carlos Aleman Ocampo of Nicaragua.

reader-centered service provision in public libraries.

Gwynneth Evans succeeded Catharina as section chair after the 2003 IFLA Berlin conference. Gwynneth had long taken a special interest in the developing and writing of the Section's brochure, "Guidelines for Library-Based Literacy Programs: Some Practical Suggestions", which was initially published in the *Newsletter* (no. 14, August 2002) before being published separately and then translated into the major IFLA languages. The brochure's introduction summarized the Section's relative cautious approach to library involvement in literacy issues, emphasizing that the "practical suggestions" that followed could help libraries whether they developed or staffed their own literacy programs or "supported literacy projects supported by other organizations."

A literacy and reading consultant since her retirement from the National Library of Canada in 2001, Gwynneth also had taught in Canada, England, and Uganda, bringing to the Section her strong interests in the relationship of literacy and reading promotion around the world.

The Section's ambitious 2004 conference programme in Buenos Aires, "Libraries, Language, and Literacy: Linking Continents Through Reading Promotion Programmes," which featured Argentina, Mali, and Lebanon, was supplemented by reports from Australia, Singapore, and the United States published in the Section's *Newsletter* (no. 18, Aug. 2004).

Other important Section activities initiated by Gwynneth included information-sharing about book donation projects, family reading (the topic of the Section's 2006 conference programme in Seoul, South Korea), and the development of memoranda of understanding between IFLA, IRA, and IBBY (children's books) and IFLA and IRA (a joint research project on the "Cultures of Literacy").

The Section on Reading was

fortunate that an experienced and energetic former IFLA officer, Ivanka Stricevic of the University of Zadar in Croatia, became its chair during the 2007 conference in Durban, South Africa. For the previous four years, she had chaired IFLA's Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section.

In her first "message from the section chair," published in the July 2008 issue (no. 25) of the Section *Newsletter*, Ivanka emphasized that the Section "remains committed to research and the promotion of reading as a source of pleasure, information, and lifelong learning, and to the integration of reading research and reading development activities into library services for all citizens."

She also commented on a significant new development in the Section's history, that in November 2007 its name had been changed to the Literacy and Reading Section. There were several reasons, she noted, for this action, one of them being the increasingly "blurred" line between reading and literacy. The change also pinpointed how the Section could help IFLA fulfill one of its key professional and strategic priorities: "promoting literacy, reading, and lifelong reading." Nevertheless, the name change, she felt, was not as important as the Section's continuing promotion of literacy and of public recognition of how reading and writing contribute to information literacy, "without which the progress of an individual and society as a whole is not achievable."

Ivanka's IFLA experience and contacts launched a new and fruitful period of co-sponsored conference and pre-conference sessions that introduced the Literacy and Reading Section to both new IFLA colleagues and to like-minded organizations around the world.

Examples include: "The Global Literacy and Reading Fair: Sharing Good Library Practices in Support of the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003-2012," in cooperation with the Public Libraries Section and the Multicultural Section at the

2008 annual conference in Durban, South Africa; "Raising a Nation of Readers: Libraries as Partners in National Reading Promotion Projects and Programmes," a 2009 pre-conference in Rome, Italy, co-sponsored with the Libraries for Children and Young Adult Section; "Libraries Promoting Twenty-First Century Literacies, co-sponsored with the Information Literacy Section at the 2009 Milan, Italy annual conference; and, at the 2010 annual conference in Gothenberg, Sweden, a three-hour joint program, "Libraries Promoting Reading in a Multicultural, Multilingual Society," with the Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section.

There were positive developments in the Section's publishing program as well. In 2009 a joint statement, "Internet and Children's Library Services," was published with the Libraries for Children and Young Adult Section. It serves as a recommendation for public library policies on internet access for children in libraries. At the 2009 Milan conference, the Section's newly redesigned, informative, and colorful *Newsletter*, edited by Leikny Haga Indergaard, director general, Norwegian Archive, deservedly won a special award. And the carefully-planned and most ambitious publication in the Section's history, "Using Research To Promote Literacy and Reading in Libraries: Guidelines for Librarians," by Lesley Farmer and Ivanka Stricevic, was published early in 2011 as IFLA Professional Report No. 125.



John Y. Cole, director, the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress