Developing Cultures of Literacy: an International Research Project
Preliminary Report
Summer 2007

Introduction: The Partnership

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the International Reading Association (IRA) and the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) are partners in international research on the factors central to developing cultures of literacy within families, communities and countries. The three organizations all have an interest in identifying and understanding the key factors that contribute to a culture of literacy. Ultimately, the three organizations wish to develop an assessment tool that allows researchers, groups and nations to evaluate their culture of literacy

The common interests of IFLA, IRA and CAL take several forms: the first two membership associations work in all parts of the world and share as primary goals the development and support of literacy and the promotion of reading and writing. The International Reading Association also has primary interest in the teaching of reading and research related to teaching and assessing reading practice. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions is the international voice of the library profession and focuses on developing library and information services for all, and in promoting freedom of access to information, ideas and works of the imagination and in freedom of expression.

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), based in Washington DC, is a private, nonprofit organization working to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture. CAL has earned a national and international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual education, English as a second language, literacy, foreign language education, dialect studies, language policy, refugee orientation, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children.

The Research Question

All three organizations recognize that governments, donors, policy makers, educators and practitioners invest large sums of resources in increasing the literacy rates within their communities and countries. Literacy campaigns, however, in themselves have not proved to be sustainable. A supportive environment in which literacy can be practised and reading and writing encouraged are necessary, not only for students, but also for young children, adults and young people out of school. Donors, governments and policy makers need to understand how they can assess the impact of the programs and campaigns, designed to increase the culture of literacy within a society. While much of the development of literacy and the promotion of reading take place within the formal educational structure, there are

also informal and non-formal programs for adults and young people outside the school system. The programs, whatever their origin, use considerable resources – human, financial and materiel – and evaluation of their impact is important to the progress of a nation and to the development of society.

The research question arose from a thorough review of the international literature on literacy and on the knowledge that governments all over the world are recognizing the importance of literacy and access to information and knowledge for development. In discussions with members of the three associations since 2004, the question became whether there were common factors, across linguistic, cultural and social diversity, that need to be in place to develop and sustain a culture of literacy within a society.

Definition of a Culture of Literacy

The concept of a culture of literacy is not easy to define, because it consists of several parts. The concept includes training in the skills needed to read and write and use information in every day life. But it also includes the motivation, incentives and support to practise literacy skills, learned and encouraged not only within the formal curriculum but also at work, in families, in institutions, on the street and in the community. In a culture of literacy, value is placed on regular reading and writing; positive values and importance are associated with developing and promoting the institutions and activities that allow members of the community to become literate, either as individuals and groups.

A culture of literacy is typically considered within the cycle of the book chain or the publication of the newspaper, in which authors, illustrators, publishers, printers, distributors and readers are seen as interdependent. Increasingly, these same players are using the Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to perform their functions. Interactivity is based on the Internet. Moreover, the Internet has allowed every individual, with access to the technologies, to become an author, designer, publisher and distributor; the nature of a culture of literacy is being expanded and perhaps redefined in light of the interconnected, electronic world.

All societies, including those with long reading and writing traditions, have realized that a culture of literacy can not be taken for granted. The investment in policy, training, and the production of appropriate materials which are culturally and linguistically sensitive to the various members of the community is essential. Literacy and the use of information to conduct everyday life are learned and must be supported. The researchers were interested to know whether the kinds of investment and the indicators of a culture of literacy were similar across linguistic, cultural, geographic and social borders.

To investigate what factors support the development of a culture of literacy, the partners have worked from the outset with a team of volunteers from different parts of the world to define the terms and design the questions that would probe the possibility of identifying key success factors in developing a culture of literacy.

While the term culture is one that eludes concrete definition, literacy is a term that has had many definitions over the decades, as member states of the United Nations worked with and through UNESCO to define the enormity of the problem of illiteracy, as well as to indicate the positive impact of increasing the literacy levels of a population. Increasingly, the term is understood to define a person's ability to access and use information in everyday life. Moreover, researchers and practitioners have now come to use the term in its plural form, literacies, to identify different types of literacy: for example, the basic literacy of using text and numbers; computer or information literacy to define the skills needed to identify, access

and use information in different formats and media, communicated through the information and communications technologies; legal literacy to denote the skills and habits of those familiar with and practising the interpretation of the law.

In this study, the researchers are concentrating on the culture of literacy in print, be the materials formatted in print or in electronic files and different media. This context has been highlighted through the UNESCO campaigns associated with the Literacy Decade (2003-2012), and in the well-publicized programs: Education for All and Reading for All.

In order to stimulate discussion among a group of volunteers working on four continents in quite different economic circumstances, languages and cultures, the partners agreed to limit the first discussion to 'print literacy' - the literacy of text, which is fixed when it is printed or published and which may be enhanced by the graphic or pictorial, as found in newspapers, magazines, comics, books etc. Perhaps we may call this 'traditional print literacy'.

Pilot Phase

Eight volunteers used a variety of means to develop a list of key factors needed to develop a culture of literacy. E-mail, teleconferences and a common website were used over a period of months to identify and describe key factors which contribute to a culture of literacy, as defined as print literacy.

Nine factors were identified by the group. Then a small team worked on questions which would elicit a response on the veracity and relevance of each factor and also give the respondents an opportunity to give examples from experience on the use of this factor.

The volunteers in the pilot phase then agreed to test the draft questionnaire. They reinforced and authenticated all nine factors and did not add any additional ones. This allowed the group to send out the questionnaire to a larger group of potential respondents.

The questionnaire was only sent out in English. This precluded some distributors from sending it to all their partners. However, it was possible to answer the questionnaire in French and/or Spanish. Two respondents took advantage of that possibility for some of their replies.

From the outset, it was recognized that a questionnaire on one language was a limitation. However, the complex and qualitative nature of the subject has enforced a phased approach to the study.

The Nine Factors in Developing and Promoting a Culture of Literacy

In the discussions, through conversation and written dialogue, the following points were made. They are not ranked.

1. Access to materials – getting appropriate books into the hands of children, youth and adults
2. The importance of people owning their own books
3. Alternative agencies that supply books if they are beyond the means of people
4. A national reading policy
5. Advocacy materials for child and adult literacy
6. Training models and materials for teaching literacy and reading
7. Cooperation between agencies and programs
8. The importance of print literacy in contemporary society

9. Government promotion of a culture of literacy

Distribution of the Questionnaire

Having received the feedback on the questions and their reflection of the discussion from the original group of volunteers, the three partner organizations, IRA, IFLA and CAL, distributed the questionnaire through their networks. Because the survey was sent to many individuals, who were in turn were asked to forward it to their network, it is impossible to say how many individuals received the questionnaire.

It is important to mention that the questionnaire was distributed widely in Africa, Asia and Oceania, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and North America via electronic mail. However, as noted above, it was only in English, with a message at the end that individuals could reply in French or Spanish.

By the date of return, the analysts had received 37 responses. Some of these responses represented the response of a group or association, considering both its experience and that of its partners; others were the response of an individual working in a particular institution or association. Since the analysis completed in June, a Russian respondent has sent in a reply based on the experience of a number of specialists in different cities in the Russian Federation. This collective response has now been added to the data based on 38 responses.

Analysis of the Responses

General comments

- Not every respondent answered every question
- No one rejected a factor as being irrelevant, even if the respondent did not have an example or particular experience from which to draw. The nine factors were validated in the responses and appeared to be pertinent to the successful development of a culture of literacy.
- Some of the responses came anonymously
- Other responses were signed or bore the e-mail address of the sender whose agency could be identified
- There was no attempt to ask personal information about the respondent – e.g. education, place of work and type of institution, organization. In that sense all answers were equally-weighted and individual comments were read with interest
- The analysts did keep track of the affiliation of a respondent (e.g. IRA, IFLA, CAL). The respondents of CAL were mostly American; those of IFLA came from Africa, Latin America, Canada and Europe; the original group was made up of IRA members from Asia and Europe. The analysts are American and Canadian.

Specific and Common Comments on Each Factor

Access to Materials – Getting Appropriate Books into the Hands of Children, Youth and Adults

Respondents identified a number of agencies that get books and reading materials into the hands of children, youth and adults. The most common from all respondents were:

- Public/community libraries and resource centres

- School libraries, including those that combine school and public libraries
- Bookmobiles and mobile libraries
- Distribution centres of donated books
- Local means of authoring, publishing, producing and distributing books

The Importance of Owning Books

Three respondents said that it was not important to own one's own books because it was possible to borrow from libraries. However, many respondents underlined the importance of owning at least some books for the following reasons:

- Ownership demonstrates what is important to people: people value what they own; people showcase what is important to them
- Ownership gives legitimacy and pride to being educated and able to read and write
- Ownership allows people to reread, annotate the copy and share it with others
- Ownership instills the reading habit (responses from Africa and Europe)
- Ownership facilitates access to information

Alternative Agencies which Supply Books

If books and reading materials (newspapers, magazines, comics etc) are beyond the means of individual families or persons, the following supply them:

- Public/community libraries
- Book Donation Programs which distribute international and locally-published books. They may come from the private, not-for-profit or public sectors and are sometimes a consortium of partners
- School libraries
- Attendance at programs such as daycare centres, bookstores
- Prizes/coupons offered to participants at a book fair or reading program so they may buy a book

National Reading Policy

The value of having a national reading policy developed and implemented by the government is as follows:

- The policy can lead to funding (for example for libraries, programming, materials and training)
- It normally results in the employment of specialists and persons knowledgeable in the field
- It emphasizes the importance of literacy within the nation and designates an administrator responsible for the policy and program
- It can involve multiple partners in promoting and supporting literacy, reading and writing
- It assists in leveling the playing field between disparate groups within a society (e.g. rural/urban dwellers; dominant culture and minority groups; rich/poor

Samples of Advocacy Materials

The types of materials/channels used most commonly by the respondents were:

- Posters

- Television
- Radio
- Comics and newspapers

The Importance of Training: Models and Materials

All members of the original group and the respondents recognized the importance of training people to develop and promote a culture of literacy. Many of them use the 'train the trainer model' and emphasize the need for well-developed methodologies to demonstrate the promotion and use of reading materials. They also pointed out the importance of evaluating the training to ensure its relevance and effectiveness.

Some of the methodologies mentioned were:
- Guided reading
- Active learning
- Integrating subjects
- Using leisure reading in the classroom
- Using libraries
- Sustained silent reading

Cooperation between and among Agencies and Programs

Partnership is important in developing and promoting a culture of literacy and reading. Literacy and reading are not the single and exclusive responsibility of an individual, family, organization or community. Their development and promotion happen in many spheres – the workplace, the family, the recreational centres, other institutions – outside the formal educational system. Some of the most frequently mentioned partnerships were:

- Local public and school libraries (including combined public/school libraries)
- Governments partnering with not-for-profit and private foundations
- International agencies partnering with local community-based organizations (CBOs) or NGOs or ministries of education and culture/recreation/social development

The Importance of Print Literacy

Using the definition of print literacy - the literacy of text, which may be enhanced by the graphic or pictorial, as found in newspapers, magazines, comics, books etc, the respondents were asked to comment on its importance. Many noted that:

- It was necessary for today's technological literacy
- Necessary for political awareness and civic participation
- Necessary for access to information
- Necessary for empowerment, both economic and social

Government Promotion of a Culture of Literacy

Many respondents considered the support of governments to be vital to developing a culture of literacy and reading. The following reasons were identified:

- Support can lead to the commitment of resources
- Leadership is needed for economic and social/cultural progress
- Leadership is needed to ensure a level –playing field for all citizens
- It is a means of supporting local languages and cultures

Presentation of the Results

The researchers presented their analysis of the survey results on May 16, 2007 to attendees and members of the IRA International Development Committee. The presenters made some general observations, in addition to the results above. From the data, they learned the following.

Partnerships were considered very important in developing and promoting a culture by all the respondents. Outside the North American responses and within international partnerships, the responsibility for advocating for and coordinating the promotion of reading may be taken by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or organization at arms' length from government.

There were respondents who mentioned Internet as an alternative source of reading materials and considered the definition of print literacy and the range of questions too narrow. Other respondents emphasized the 'accessibility' of print materials in communities where there may not be electricity or access to computers and argued that print literacy is the foundation of other literacies, including information or computer literacy.

It is evident that books have different meanings and significance in different cultures. As well, different countries have evolved their educational and cultural policies using different models and means. However, the nine factors rang true for all respondents and no respondent added a further factor to the nine developed by the original group of volunteers. No respondent rejected one of the factors.

From the respondents, the analysts received many examples of references to websites and published documents related to policies, training, materials etc. These references and examples can be used to prepare lists of 'good practice' in the support and development of cultures of literacy.

Feedback from the Audience at the IRA Session

General Reaction

Given the purpose of the research, that is to identify the key factors in developing a culture of literacy and to explore their relevance in an international and multidisciplinary context, it was satisfying to learn that the topic was interesting and timely. The audience generally agreed that the subject was useful and relevant to a number of groups working in the field of literacy and reading promotion.

Specific Comments

The question of definition was a concern to many of the participants. The term 'culture of literacy' is not one that many use. It was not only the question of the definition of literacy – were we discussing the promotion of reading or the use and application of literacy skills? It was also the qualifier 'print literacy'. Were we really interested only in books and printed materials on paper? How could we discuss a culture of literacy without considering the electronic media?

The size and nature of the sample were of concern to some researchers. Given the nature of the distribution of the questionnaire through networks and committees and associations that have listservs etc., it was impossible to keep track of who received the questionnaire.

The use of one language – English - is a limitation for exploratory research in an international setting. If the research is to go further, the questionnaire, revised to take into account these concerns, would need to be translated into a number of languages.

The language of the questionnaire and the presentation must be internally consistent, if work on this project is to continue, so that all involved understand the purpose of the research and the meaning of the term 'culture of literacy'.

Conclusion to the First Phase

The representatives of the three organizations - IRA, IFLA and CAL – have themselves been working voluntarily to initiate and coordinate the research and findings. They believe that the response at the IRA conference and at a subsequent meeting at CAL and with the respondents has been positive. The research now needs to be refined with clearer definitions, more consistent language, some translation etc.

The questions also have to broaden the concept of a culture of literacy specifically to include the Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). The electronic media are here to stay although they may not be prevalent or indeed available at the community level in certain parts of the world.

This preliminary report completes this phase of the research. It will be made available so that respondents, interested parties and the three organizations may be aware of the results.

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The intention is to take the advice given by participants and to continue the research with the expansion and decisions on needed refinements noted above.

Drafted by Gwynneth Evans
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