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International Reading Survey: presentation of findings

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The International Reading Survey was a scoping survey of reader-centred service provision in public libraries. It was never intended as a widescale attempt to map provision in all countries, but instead as a short-term piece of research, and the aim of this was:

‘To provide a representative international overview of the extent to which public libraries provide a reader-centred service, in order to inform future service provision.’
(from my original project proposal to IFLA Reading Section, August 2001)

At last year’s IFLA conference in Boston I gave a brief paper on current trends in reading research in the UK. I focused on two areas in particular – literacy and reader development, suggesting that recent literacy-based research in the UK had been influenced by the introduction of the Government’s National Literacy Strategy, and by subsequent initiatives such as the National Year of Reading and the National Reading Campaign.

Reader-centred activity – or ‘reader development’, as it is now frequently referred to in the UK – has become a key UK Government concern in recent years, to the extent that the Government allocated two years of funding specifically to projects in this area, and to ongoing research to investigate the outcome of these projects. Some of you will have seen this definition of reader development before, but just as a reminder, it is:

‘...[an] active intervention to open up reading choices, increase readers’ enjoyment and offer opportunities for people to share their reading experiences.’ (Van Riel, 1998)

As a result of these funded projects, public library staff in the UK are now expected not only to acquire the relevant skills to promote reading as a leisure activity to current readers, but also to encourage the non-users and non-readers to enjoy books.

The IFLA reading survey, therefore, was intended to investigate the extent to which other countries were conducting such activities, and their perceived value and impact on staff and readers. At one of our Section meetings last year the proposal was

passed, and a working group appointed to help me conduct the research more effectively. I would like to thank the other members of this group, Thomas Quigley of Canada, Gertrude Kayaga Mulindwa of Uganda and Shirley Fitzgibbon of the United States, for their help and support.

What were the **objectives** of our research? Earlier I stated the aim - *'To provide a representative international overview of the extent to which public libraries provide a reader-centred service, in order to inform future service provision'* – and within this aim we had three objectives:

- ❖ To conduct an initial scoping survey of current reader-centred activity in public library authorities in a wide range of countries.
- ❖ To use the data collected in order to illustrate staff perceptions of the impact of reader-centred work on their service, and to share examples of good practice.
- ❖ To disseminate the information to all countries via the Internet.

So how did we attempt to achieve these objectives? There were three phases to the **methodology**:

- ❖ **Phase 1:** To devise a questionnaire survey that members of the Reading Section Committee could send to colleagues in a wide range of library authorities (or the national equivalent) in his/her country. Nine countries are represented on the committee, so it was hoped that we would receive an equally wide response.
- ❖ **Phase 2:** To select small case studies from the questionnaire data, of a sample of public libraries to be contacted and questioned further regarding their original responses.
- ❖ **Phase 3:** To analyse the data and produce a paper reporting the findings that could be available on the Internet and, where necessary, in printed format.

The questionnaire survey

When devising the reading survey we wanted to make it clear to our respondents that the focus was not on the educational development of literacy skills, but on reading for pleasure. We were looking at those promotional activities organised in libraries (and elsewhere, as appropriate) in order to promote reading, to enhance the reading experience of both adults and young people. We wanted to hear about the promotional activities taking place in respondents' regions, and what they felt to be their value and impact on their organization, and on their readers. We hoped to obtain examples of good practice that could be shared internationally.

Following various additions and amendments, we arrived at four key areas for our survey:

1. Reading policy
2. Partnerships to promote reading
3. Reading activities
4. Staff skills and training needs.

We were fortunate to receive the support of the University of Central England in Birmingham, and of Anjlee Bhatt, also at UCE, who put the survey on the website, either for online completion or as a PDF file to download: www.cie.uce.ac.uk/cirt/projects/rsindex.htm. It's still online if you would like to have a look at it at some point. Respondents were able to choose whether to complete the survey in English, French or Spanish – we had hoped for other languages, but unfortunately we had difficulty obtaining translations. Grateful thanks to those who worked on the French and Spanish versions.

How was the survey distributed?

Members of the Reading Section sent the website address to selected colleagues and other members of the public library profession in their country, or neighbouring countries, and the survey was also promoted on the Reading Section page of the IFLA website.

The second phase

For the second phase of the project, ten respondents were selected to answer a number of further questions, both concerning their individual responses and a series of more general questions addressed to each of the ten, but still falling within the original four subject areas, reading policy, partnerships to promote reading, reading activities and staff skills and training needs.

Phase 1: findings

We received 50 very detailed responses, which was an excellent return to a survey that had been distributed in this way. It was also encouraging that we achieved our objective of obtaining information from a wide range of posts, in a wide range of countries, as we received responses from public librarians of varying levels of seniority in eighteen different countries.

Unfortunately I don't have time today to go through all the findings, but I have selected a sample that you will hopefully find interesting. I have also chosen brief case studies from the main areas of the survey, to give you more detailed information from some of the participating countries.

1. Reading policy

If we begin with the first section of the questionnaire, that which looked at the reading policies of respondents' public libraries. When asked 'Does your organisation have a written policy to promote reading as a leisure activity?', 29 replied that they had.

When asked to give further information for example in terms of specific policy documents or URLs to a relevant website, it was clear that five of the eighteen people who completed this question had interpreted reading policies as relevant only to children and young people, despite the lack of explicit instruction to focus only on the promotion of reading to children and young people at the beginning of the questionnaire:

‘We would like to find out more about how you promote reading in public libraries. We are not asking you how you promote literacy skills, but about ways in which you promote reading as a leisure activity.’

The children’s library service has undoubtedly promoted and encouraged reading for pleasure for many years, using a wide range of activities and programmes, and highly trained, specialist staff.

However, it would be unreasonable not to take into account the significant recent increase of reader development activities for both adults and young people that have taken place not only in libraries but also in all educational and social centres. This increase could be viewed not as a threat to the funding and status of children’s librarianship, but as a means of bridging the gap between adult and young people’s reading, of ensuring that promoting reading is now the concern and interest of many agencies.

The first of the mini case studies is England.

Three English respondents referred to a specific reader development strategy that was either already developed or was in the process of being adopted by the Management Team. One also mentioned that reader development featured in the County Library service plan, and a fourth referred to a ‘readers’ group strategy’ and a ‘readers’ strategy’ that had both been implemented within her local authority.

The development of a reader development strategy was part of the exit strategy for the Branching Out project, a national initiative funded by the Arts Council of England, that between 1998-2001 trained staff in 33 English library authorities in the techniques of reader development. In order to embed the training of the project in the culture of the organisation, each participating library authority was required to develop a three-year reader development strategy during the third and final year.

In the second questionnaire, one respondent from Gateshead Libraries explained how the document had worked in practice, and how effective it had been:

‘It has focused our minds so we can see where we are going. We are now into Year Two of a three-year strategy. It’s sometimes difficult to keep to the timescale but at least it gives us real targets. It has shown Management and the rest of the staff that we mean business and that reader development is important. Our reader development strategy is now...included in the Annual Library Plan.’

An extract from this Annual Library Plan reads as follows:

‘With a three year action plan, the strategy will create an integrated approach to stock promotion, training and events.’¹

When asked whether the existence of this document had facilitated the development of partnerships with other agencies, the Gateshead respondent gave the following answer:

‘...Others have asked for our help [because of our involvement in Branching Out]. It means that lots of us are doing the same thing, so it’s easier to cooperate.’

2. Partnerships to promote reading

It was encouraging to read that the 37 people who responded to this question provided a wide range of partnerships they had used or had specifically developed in order to promote reading, within and beyond their local community.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, more than three-quarters of respondents worked with other libraries. For example, a librarian from the Czech Republic said:

‘The District library is [the] center of a public library cooperative system...Some of [the authorities] are provided in cooperation with public libraries.’ (Czech Republic)

Approximately half of respondents had worked with publishers and/or booksellers, and approximately one third with other regions and/or promotional agencies.

Interestingly, three-quarters of respondents (37) gave ‘other’ examples of partnerships they had developed. These were extremely wide-ranging, so for ease of reference I have divided them according to a youth or adult focus.

Youth

Educational partnerships had been developed with kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, not only via teaching staff but also with other educational workers and parents’ associations. I’ll give you an example of how these partnerships work from Canada, and then from Norway:

‘We have always encouraged teachers to book visits for classes of all ages. If necessary, we go to the schools, too. In this way we reach many children whose parents don’t bring them to the library.’ (Canada)

‘We have always cooperated with the schools (6-16 year old pupils)...we have a team that started in 1997...making a plan about how the public libraries should be for the students...We have a person who works both in the library and in a...team for the school...[she] is paid by the public library...the organisation working with the public library for the students has made an agreement that nobody in the region has to pay to obtain resources from each other.’ (Norway)

Recreational partnerships for young people included vacation reading clubs to bridge the gap between the school terms, excursions, workshops and youth clubs.

Adults

The adult Educational focus was both on further and higher education, with partnerships with universities, adult education colleges and literacy outreach groups. A librarian from Botswana said:

‘We cooperate with [the] department of non-formal education, and vocational centres’ (Botswana)

Adult Recreational/cultural partnerships were varied, with museums, friends of the library organisations, literacy councils, local authors and celebrities, non-library based reading groups, and even the local government cultural department. This response came from a librarian in Germany:

‘[we are in] cooperation with the ‘Kulturamt’, the local authority for cultural affairs: there are two or three meetings per year in order to organise the reading events over the whole year.’ (Germany)

Professional links included the national library association (as in the case of Micronesia), foreign embassies (for example, in the Republic of Belarus), and national projects (for example with the UK Branching Out initiative).

The second mini case-study is for **France and French-speaking countries**, and it’s an agency called the Centres de Lecture et d’Animation Culturelle (Centres for Reading and Cultural Activities), also known as the CLAC.

The CLAC programme is a programme to encourage reading for all in rural areas. It uses as its resource the networks of reading-related and cultural activities whose management and funding is shared between the Agency for French-speaking communities and the host nations.

The CLAC is a resources centre aiming to increase knowledge, access to information, leisure activities and personal development, through which a geographically restricted community can have access to the benefits of cultural and socio-cultural activities.

By the end of 2001, the Agency for French-speaking communities had installed a network of 213 centres in rural areas in 17 countries, largely in Africa and the Indian Ocean. Situated in areas with between 5,000 and 25,000 inhabitants, they provide a rural community with access to the book, to audio-visual materials and to a wide range of cultural activities.

So what have these CLAC achieved since 1986?

The only place for public entertainment in their area, the centres are visited by thousands of people who choose to read, to play educational or board games, to join in competitions, to watch documentary or fiction-based films, or to join in a wide range of other cultural activities.

Over 80% of readers are young people aged less than 18 years who each borrow on average 1.4 books per month.

Now as this is an international conference and this case study is a French-speaking organisation, I will repeat the previous case study in its original version, as it seems only fair, and I know that some people in the audience will find it easier.

Et maintenant, voici la version française:

‘Le programme CLAC est un programme de lecture publique en milieu rural qui s’appuie sur des réseaux de Centres de Lecture et d’Animation Culturelle (CLAC) dont la gestion et les charges financières sont partagées entre l’agence et les pays d’accueil. Le CLAC est un centre de ressources à la connaissance, l’information, les loisirs et le développement où une population géographiquement délimitée peut avoir accès à des biens culturels et à des activités socioculturelles.’ⁱⁱ

À la fin de l’année dernière, L’Agence de la Francophonie avait mis en place un réseau de 213 Centres de lecture et d’animation culturelle en milieu rural dans 17 pays, développés principalement en Afrique et dans l’Océan indien.

Ces Centres sont des lieux de lecture, d’information et de loisirs. Situés dans des localités de 5,000 à 25,000 habitants, ils permettent au public rural l’accès au livre, à l’audiovisuel ainsi qu’à diverses activités socioculturelles.

Quelles sont les réalisations des Clac depuis leur création en 1986?

Seuls lieux d’animation dans leurs localités, ces centres sont fréquentés par des milliers de lecteurs, d’utilisateurs des jouets éducatifs et des jeux de société, de participants à des concours et de spectateurs pour les projections de films documentaires ou de fiction ou autres activités socioculturelles.

Plus de 80% du lectorat est composé de jeunes de moins de 18 ans qui empruntent une moyenne de 1,4 livres par mois.

3. Reading activities

I'll now move on to the third section of the questionnaire, that which focused on the reading activities organised to promote reading for pleasure. Forty-six respondents stated that they promoted reading in their library(ies), and forty-five said that they organised special projects, activities or programmes via which to do so.

Although the original survey did not differentiate between promotion to adults and young people, the second questionnaire included the question '*Do you organise reading activities for adults as well as children? Please give examples.*'

One respondent explained that the focus of reading promotion within his organisation was on the young reader:

'We are especially promoting activities for children: creating a very special...environment at the Young People's Library, where children and teenagers enjoy the freedom to make...choices.' (Bulgaria)

A second felt that there was no local demand for adult-centred activity:

'Activities for adults are not regular...There is no such need [for] these types of activities...there are many cultural events in the city and inhabitants are [able] to choose according to their taste and mood.' (Czech Republic)

However, other respondents provided a wide range of information concerning ways in which the promotion of reading for pleasure included an adult audience. A particularly detailed response was provided by a Norwegian librarian, in which she described three separate events to target an adult audience:

'For adults we have literary conversations about books and author visits. The Adult Education Center takes care of most...of them, we provide the place, service and advertising.

'We organise literary evenings perhaps once or [twice] a year...

'...and then we have...every November a Scandinavian literary event (now, I think, in seven or eight countries), which is called *Candle Night*. In libraries of all partaking countries we read the same text at the same time (in our own languages) and then discuss it, tell stories, sing or listen to music. The themes are different each year...'
(Norway)

The perceived value of the activities to the readers

This was undoubtedly one of the more difficult areas of the survey. We are all aware how it is to have a 'feeling' for success, that something we have organised has effectively reached the target audience. Yet how can this feeling be quantified? How can the evidence be found to convince senior managers and funding bodies that an initiative is worth continuing for a further period?

These are the sort of questions frequently raised in times of financial difficulty, and in today's project culture, it seems more important than ever to provide evidence of value and impact in order to obtain further funding.

The solution would seem to be that library-based project work needs the following two things:

- **mainstreaming** – i.e. making project work a part of everyday library work, with sufficient time, staff, resources, and commitment.
- **sustainability** – i.e. ensuring that projects do not end after nine months or a year, but are continued in the daily work of the library.

These two points are not easy to achieve, but without them, our library projects, however excellent for a time, will never become part of our standard service provision.

Despite these difficulties, it is extremely positive that forty respondents were able to supply evidence of the impact on participants of their reading activities. A large proportion of the evidence that respondents felt able to provide was quantitative, for example in terms of stock circulation, membership and event attendance figures:

Three Canadian respondents noted that **circulation figures** altered according to the number of promotions on display at a given time:

‘We find that circulation dramatically increases during the Reading Challenge and the Summer Reading Club’ (Canada)

‘Circulation decreases when we don’t offer programmes and don’t have displays set up’ (Canada)

‘There is a direct relation between successful promotion and use of collection and services.’ (Canada)

Membership

Three respondents reported increased membership of the library service in general or of reading groups as evidence of the value of the reading activities they had organised. One referred to the ‘increased use of the library’ (Canada), a second to ‘new family members’ (UK), and a third observed:

‘When new people come to hear authors, if they are not library members, they take out membership.’ (Canada)

A fourth commented that promotional events organised in her library had resulted in a ‘take-up of reading group membership’ (UK).

Evaluation

Many respondents referred to ‘evaluation’ or listed specific evaluative activities that they had conducted in order to formally monitor the impact of promotional events on the audiences:

Collecting data. A US respondent gave the following response:

‘our early childhood literacy program...last year gathered baseline information on incoming kindergarteners’ reading readiness levels, and will now continue to assess those levels. We have also engaged an outside evaluator for that program.’ (US)

Others felt that collecting anecdotal data was also a useful way to obtain evidence:

‘positive feedback from parents’ (Canada)

‘teens enjoying the library and saying so’ (US)

‘...every year teenagers tell us they have read books they would not have read’ (UK)

‘[the reading activity] gets customers speaking about reading and its importance in our lives’ (US)

4. Staff skills and training needs

Almost three-quarters of respondents (34) had members of staff within their organisation with specific responsibilities to promote reading as part of their job description, and a slightly higher number of respondents (37) stated that reading promotion was an aspect of the work of all staff.

Skills required to promote reading

Respondents were asked to list firstly those skills they felt were required to promote reading to current readers, and secondly those skills they felt would help to encourage non-readers to enjoy books and reading.

Before discussing the data, it would be useful to ask ‘Who is the non-reader?’

- a person with low literacy skills?
- a non-library user, someone who possesses the skills to read but chooses not to?

Both persons could legitimately be described as ‘non-readers’, yet both evidently have very different needs, and face very different potential problems when considering the public library service.

It is interesting that some respondents approached the questions regarding the skills required to promote reading to the reader and the non-reader from the point of view of encouraging children to develop the reading habit from an early age, whereas others directly addressed the reading or non-reading adult, having adopted strategies to introduce the target groups to the pleasures of reading. Examples of such strategies include the following:

The reading child:

‘...if training can be provided on children’s library services this can help because if children learn how to be habitual readers at an early age, this problem of reading will be solved.’ (Botswana)

The non-reading child:

‘Storytelling, story hours, knowledge of books and picture book slides, very good sense for children’s needs, patience...’ (Germany)

The reading adult:

‘The members of departments for adult readers [to] have reading promotion as a part of [their] work’ (Czech Republic)

The non-reading adult:

‘...some understanding of why not everyone wants to use the library, being able to work with those that are socially excluded.’ (UK)

Participants’ responses to both questions can be divided into the following themes:

- Personal skills
- Professional skills.

Personal skills

For many respondents, the skills required to encourage both the reader and the non-reader to read would not be found in a job description, but could instead be described as ‘personal skills’, personality traits that, if possessed by a librarian, would perhaps be more likely to provide such encouragement, such as enthusiasm, empathy, and a ‘sens de l’ecoute et de l’accueil’, or ‘good listening skills and a welcoming approach’.

One librarian gave the following full response to the question, a response which illustrated her strong belief that empathy and respect are two vital skills required in order to effectively reach the non-readers:

‘You have to respect them, and find out [what] kind of subject or themes they are interested in. Maybe a movie built on a book can help them to get through a book? People who have [a] problem learning to read are not stupid, it is important that people working in the libraries know that. If you have this kind of problem it is important that people encourage you and show that you are great when you have managed to read something, even if for most of us this is no problem.’ (Norway)

Professional skills

Respondents to both questions clearly felt that marketing and promotion were critical ways of developing and encouraging the reading habit.

They also recognised the importance of **outreach work**, particularly when promoting the library service to non-readers, many of whom would not be regular users. They referred to the importance of:

‘[A] frequent *outdoor* presence of the library’ (Italy)

‘...knowing who your readers or potential readers are or the different groups in your community that need attention’ (Namibia)

Communication skills

A further skill that would be useful when conducting outreach work or any work to encourage non-library users is the ability to communicate effectively. For some respondents, this was described as ‘communication skills’, for others the definition was more complex, for example:

‘...librarians with knowledge about how children think and feel’ (Norway)

‘Some level of psychological knowledge’ (Bulgaria)

Book knowledge

For some respondents, a skill that is frequently overlooked is book knowledge, having an awareness of all resources that are available to encourage the current reader and the non-reader. From the responses they gave, however, it would seem that almost all librarians felt that to have knowledge of the materials was insufficient to encourage the non-reader to read. Although the word ‘knowledge’ was used several times, equally frequently cited were terms such as ‘interest’, ‘love’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘passion’, ‘appreciation’. As a respondent from Micronesia stated:

‘Read, read, read and read more books!’ (Micronesia)

Although the International Reading Survey was small in scale, it revealed a large amount of interesting data from eighteen different countries, pertaining to reading policies, partnerships, promotional activities and staff skills and training. Activity to promote reading for pleasure is wide-ranging and far-reaching.

All of the above data are a valuable indicator of the international status of the promotion of reading for pleasure, and could be used as a critical starting point for future research.

ⁱ Gateshead Council Annual Library Plan 2001, <http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/libraries/Annual%20Plan.doc> [accessed 14.07.02]

ⁱⁱ Francophonie (2001) ‘Presentation du Programme CLAC: Concept du Programme’. France: Francophonie.