



## World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004  
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

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**Code Number:** 021-E  
**Meeting:** 144. School Libraries and Resources Centres with Libraries  
for Children and Young Adults  
Part I.  
**Simultaneous Interpretation:** -

Session: *Empowering Literacy from babies to teens*

### **Children are a worthwhile investment**

**Summary of the session:** *Empowering Literacy from Babies to Teens*

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#### **Abstract:**

*Literacy has been an important factor in building societies based on welfare, democracy and human rights throughout the world. Knowledge is increasingly important in our modern society – a society much more complex and varied than ever before. Society needs well-educated citizens meaning learning becomes a lifelong activity. The challenges for all public and school libraries are immense, and library services aimed at children and young people especially become an essential task.*

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*“ What happens when we are reading? The eye traces black letters on white paper from left to right, again and again. And characters, nature or thoughts somebody else has thought, recently or a thousand years ago appear in our imagination. That is a miracle greater than making a seed from a Pharaoh's tomb blossom in our time. Nevertheless, this happens every single moment.”  
(Olof Lagerkrantz : About the Art of Reading and Writing).*

Being able to read is a necessity in our enlightened society, and children's libraries play a vital role. Books provide knowledge, experience and emotional involvement - issues that are important to stress in an age where Internet and new ways of communication are perhaps the preferred channels for the younger generations. Still, reading is the answer when it comes to obtaining good reading skills, all in one package with its creation of inner adventures, stories, fairytales and other mind blowing experiences and thrills of the imagination. The latter being important issues for people involved in the promotion of good children's libraries. Kids of all ages need to be offered high quality library services both in their spare time and while in school. Good relations between public and school libraries are therefore a must.

### **The importance of UNESCO's Children's Rights and IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto**

In many countries around the world children and young adults is the fastest growing part of the population, and 1/5 of the population in the entire world is between the ages of 15 and 24. The gap between rich and developing countries increases. But so does self-respect. And democracy is manifesting itself throughout the world. However, new media and ways of communication develop more and more rapidly and we need to not only keep up the pace, but adjust our ways to the new world. Librarians need to be experts in searching, accessing and evaluating electronic information, a long side passing on the more traditional formats of information.

### **The IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto about Library Services to Children:**

The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. All age groups must find material relevant to their needs.

The following key missions that relate to information, literacy, education and culture should be at the core of public library services to children and young people:

- Creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age;
- Supporting both individual and self conducted education as well as formal education at all levels;
- Stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people;
- Supporting and participating in literacy activities and programs for all age groups, and initiating such activities if necessary

### **What is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 is a fantastic document signed by all countries in the world except USA and Somalia. This makes it the most popular human rights treaty in the world!

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international human rights treaty that applies to all children and young people under the age of 18. It gives children and young people a set of comprehensive rights, including the right to express themselves and have their views taken into account on all matters that affect them; the right to play, rest and leisure and the right to be free from all forms of violence.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires first of all that we change our views on children. Adults shall listen to children and respect their integrity. Adults shall respect that all children have common value and common rights.

## **Summing up**

Summing up these two documents, they both amount to one key issue: The right to be a child with all that it involves! Also, cultural activities for children are no less important than those aimed towards adults, and participation is just as important as consuming.

All countries are responsible for making sure their children get a basic education. The UN Convention has a long list of measurements to ensure that the education offered is at approximately the same level of quality. Creativity is a key issue. To understand others and being able to establish good relations with fellow men, it is essential to develop and nourish creative abilities. Subjects such as music, dance, drawing and literature need to be well integrated in children's lives, in schools and kindergartens. It is difficult to predict what kind of knowledge and skills children have to possess in the future given the nature of our constantly changing world. What we do know, is that all children need to be able to communicate. They need to develop skills in handling tools of knowledge so that they are able to question and explain, and try to understand their everyday life. And to be able to make use of their rights as they are described in the UN Convention, they need to be able to read them and communicate them.

We have to start listening to what children of all ages are telling us! Being heard and taken into consideration is important for every human being. Furthermore, it is important to sometimes be part of the decision making process, especially when it comes to matters concerning oneself. As an example maybe children should be able to influence their own schooling, for it should be joyful and meaningful to go to school and perhaps the children themselves are a valuable asset as to what an ordinary day at school should consist of? Reading and writing is the basis for all communication. And in the information society reading is a necessity! To stimulate the joy of reading, and obtain good reading skills, access to a vast amount of books is a must. All kinds of books! And they must be easily reached both in schools and children's libraries, accessible everywhere! The UN Convention encourages the spreading of children's books. What better place to do so than in the libraries! For many children the library offers breathing space. Often the only place where they are welcomed and where there is no admittance fee or regulations. All over the world children's libraries pop up from everywhere and in every shape, from a couple of shelves in a reading room, to a kid's corner or even a separate children's department. Mobile libraries circulate books and adventures in boxes, on donkeys, in cars, boats and busses.

## **How to stimulate reading?**

Around the world reading skills have increased and the difference in reading skills between countries has lessened. The impact of these two major changes on a country's social, economic and cultural level should not be underestimated.

Considering reading as a joyful activity is important both for culture and education. To read is valuable itself, for experience, engagement and identification. Literacy is both being able to take part in the actual reading process, tracing the letters from left to right as Lagerkrantz described, but also, and maybe more importantly, about interpretation, being able to gain insight and understanding, and develop the ability to form own opinions. Literacy empowers the reader not only to understand the content but also making it possible to integrate the text into his or her learning and development as a citizen. Enabling participation in all aspects of society must be the ultimate goal for all humans and literacy is an important means to reach that goal.

### **Literacy and cultural understanding**

Children and young people in today's communities are exposed to an overflow of information. Their everyday life is characterized by fast-developing technology, multi-cultural influences and ever-changing cultural references. To maneuver in such a landscape a number of different competences are a must to possess. On one hand competences in language and the ability to read a text, on the other hand the ability to put that text into context. Languages and symbols are often cultural phenomena and in different ways they relate to each other and to a global, national and local community. To be able to interpret these different contexts you also have to have a cultural competence.

Stimulating children's cultural competences is almost the exact parallel to that of stimulating reading competences. Competences in languages, communication, symbols and esthetics are only some of the components included in a broad cultural understanding. Both in the labor market and in community elsewhere, text, sound, design, interactivity and information technology become more and more integrated and important.

Internationally, the term "information literacy" is used to illustrate the need for a basic competence besides being able to read, write and understand mathematics. To be able to collect information from a wide selection of sources, information literacy is needed when it comes to selection, evaluation, interpretation and critical analysis. Processing information to knowledge is a part of this competence. Especially information retrieved from the web where the quality control is somewhat random, it will be very important to make children and young people being able to handle every aspect of this retrieval process.

### **Investing in children and young people**

Reading is one of several tools for self-development and learning, and it is important that we see books in a positive interplay with other media. The essence of the modern library concept is that libraries give access to information content, whatever the media. Still, we must maintain that reading and consequently books should be given first priority in the library – and the challenges facing us is to persuade children and young people to share this point of view. Because reading skills are imperative for our ability to develop, both as people and in a professional sense. Besides, reading skills are essential for our educational advancement. However, prosperity and a proper educational system do not always guarantee a reading population. The link between attitude towards reading and obtaining good reading skills are well documented. To encourage children's joyful exploration in books and maintain this ability throughout an entire course of schooling is a major task for parents, teachers and librarians.

The secret is therefore to make sure that the child's first meeting with the library becomes the introduction to a lifelong and enriching relationship. The methods for creating such a valuable first meeting are basically a question of integrating access to the library and its materials as simply as possible in children and other users' daily lives.

To empowering literacy the libraries have to cooperate crossover the borders between school and culture. The public library must cooperate with the school library system to get a common plan and strategies for good reading habits, to introduce the children to the library and the joy of reading. The society must coordinate their activities for children from kindergarten to high school, to use the common resources the right way.

The parents are the best advisers to stimulate reading, and the libraries have to support and empower the parents to be able to meet this task. It is necessary to give the parents constructive information about the school and the library's work with literature and reading so they actively can support their children and make an effort in influencing on their children's choices.

To promote what the library has to offer children and young people, it is important to develop a network around the children and youngsters through all the adults who are in contact with them. Teachers, pre-school teachers, health care workers and parents are obvious choices. There are plenty of leisure activities, establishments and societies to choose from. The future for public libraries whether they deal with children, adults or families lies in co-operation. Without real co-operation with other governmental and private institutions it is impossible for us to attract new customers and promote reading and the use of libraries. Good co-operations with others will enable us to stand a better chance in the fight for more resources. Our most important supporters will be everyone who could be found "between the book and the child"

### **Final words**

This workshop is a result of a co-operation between the Section for School Libraries and Resource Centres and the Section for Libraries for Children and Young Adults. Both sections will take this theme further at the next IFLA congress, taking place in Oslo in 2005. And the satellite meetings:

**The Decade of Literacy – Roles for Stakeholders**  
**Oslo University College, probably August 11-12, 2005**  
**School Libraries and Resource Centres and Reading Sections**

and

**Public Libraries from Public Education to what? – Designing the New Strategies for Public Paradises to Adults, Children and Young**  
**Stavanger, Norway, August 10-11, 2005**  
**Libraries for Children and Young Adults and Public Libraries Sections**

**Welcome to the IFLA Congress 2005 Oslo August 14-18, 2005**  
**Libraries - A voyage of discovery!**

### **References:**

UNESCO Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989  
IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994 1994  
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Guidelines for Young Adults 1997

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