



## Libraries, Literacy, and Social Inclusion

October is Canadian Library Month. This year's theme is "libraries connect" and across the country, people are celebrating the roles that libraries play in connecting people and communities. This is the first of two *Stories from the Field* articles exploring how libraries connect with people and with literacy—in Canada and abroad.

*It was a dark and stormy night.* I took refuge in the Calgary Central Library, one of my favourite places. And I was not alone.

Libraries are sanctuaries for many of us. As I browsed through the new books section on the main floor, I noticed other people had the same idea. People of all ages were using the library —sitting in the big comfy chairs reading magazines, having a cup of coffee at the in-house café, or surfing the net at a computer station.

At the turn of the last century, people saw libraries as crucial for "that self-education which all citizens should add to the education obtained in schools" (F.H. Hutchins qtd. in Hadley 1910, 26). Libraries were a moral imperative for citizenship. But they have evolved from those early beginnings into a place that is about much more than books. Today, most libraries offer computer courses, career programs for job searchers, services for newcomers, literacy support for adult learners, and much, much more.

Many libraries have become neighbourhood hubs helping people feel included in their communities. Young mothers and their infants attending "Books for Babies" sessions, children working on school projects, seniors learning to use computers — on the surface, it seems that everyone feels welcome at their community library. But scratch a little deeper, and we may find that the story reads differently.

As literacy practitioners, we all know learners who are intimidated by libraries for different reasons.

For every person who finds the library safe and pleasant, there is another person who feels uncomfortable and unwelcome. This is a hard truth to accept, especially for people who see their library as one of society's truly accessible and equitable institutions. Identifying the barriers that keep socially excluded groups from using the library, understanding why the barriers exist, and finding ways to overcome the barriers is an iterative [ongoing] process. (DeFaveri, Community-Led Libraries Toolkit 2008, 20)

Why don't people feel welcome? What are the barriers? A unique community-development project involving four libraries in four cities (Vancouver, Halifax, Toronto, and Regina) set out to answer these questions. The "Working Together: Libraries and Communities Project" worked in urban neighbourhoods with communities that are traditionally socially excluded (Williment 2009).

The Vancouver Public Library and Halifax Public Library worked in culturally diverse, low-income neighbourhoods populated by a mix of families, seniors, and adults on disability pensions. Toronto Public Libraries worked in neighbourhoods with many new immigrants, high poverty rates, and overcrowding. The Regina Public Library worked in a community with a high Aboriginal population. Poverty, unemployment, and isolation of youth and seniors were issues in this area.

The project started with conversations about the meaning of social exclusion.

Social exclusion should be understood in broad terms. It can affect any stratum of our society, including people who are poor or live in poverty, people who are unemployed or underemployed, and people who are members of ethnic or cultural minorities. Being excluded can mean being alienated from the political, social, economic, and cultural life of the community because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or class. Excluded communities can include new immigrants, refugees, the working poor, and groups that have been historically isolated such as African Nova Scotians and First Nations people. For some people, being excluded can stem from, or bring about, drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness. The conditions that define social exclusion can often be multiple. (DeFaveri, Community-Led Libraries Toolkit 2008, 10)

Next, they asked people in the communities in each city how exclusion affected their lives and their library use. Project workers were surprised to hear that people were critical of libraries and felt that library workers viewed them as problems. "They felt 'their kind' was not welcome. This response was verified by many discussions within libraries concerning smelly users, inappropriately dressed patrons and people sleeping in cubicles and with their heads on tables." (Community-Led Libraries Toolkit 2008, 5). Library fines and charges were also identified as a barrier for many people on low incomes.

The Working Together Project developed a new community-led service-planning model that brought together library staff and local citizens who experienced exclusion from the library to identify needs and barriers and to plan services accordingly. "For someone doing this work, it is important to be able to let go of one's identification as an expert and embrace the role of the facilitator," explains Randy Gatley, a community development librarian with the project. (Community-Led Libraries Toolkit 2008, 130)

The community-led service-planning model changes the role of library staff to learners and facilitators as opposed to experts and authorities. It uses a community-development approach to move "beyond receiving feedback or hearing from the community (consultation or 'information in') and extends to meaningful and active community engagement in service prioritization and planning" (Community-Led Libraries Toolkit 2008, 15).

Over four years, the project identified six key lessons learned:

- Library culture, along with rules and procedures, created significant barriers to inclusion.
- Libraries must recognise that *same* or *consistent* customer service, which does not take into account socio-economic disparity, results in inequitable services that further disadvantage socially excluded people.
- Planning relevant and effective library services for socially excluded community members requires a collaboration of equals between community members and the library.
- Relationship building is at the core of effective service planning.
- Staff “soft skills” such as empathy, interpersonal competence, and open-mindedness are essential.
- People want to see themselves represented in the library and to have an opportunity to participate. (Community-Led Libraries Toolkit 2008, 8)

An additional outcome of the project was the development of a community-led service-planning toolkit designed to help libraries engage with their communities. The [Community-Led Libraries Toolkit](#) includes sections on community entry, community mapping, relationship building, partnerships, program planning, computer training, collection development, and customer service. The Working Together Project’s success and its *Toolkit* provide an exciting and useful blueprint for libraries interested in better serving their diverse communities.

### **In our own backyard**

Some libraries in Alberta have taken a page from the Working Together Project to initiate programs designed to make their libraries more socially inclusive.

For example, Manisha Khetarpal, head of library services at Maskwachees Cultural College in Hobbema, Alberta was working as a librarian at the Wetaskiwin Public Library in 2009 when she noticed that many agencies were bringing clients with disabilities to the library. (Khetarpal 2013, COPIAN). She also noticed that there were many immigrants working with these individuals. She saw an opportunity for the library to build connections with community members and agencies and strengthen the library’s capacity to be socially inclusive.

The library created a plan to target community agencies, day programs, home care, community connections services, the Twilighters’ Group (a service provider for persons with vision problems), and the First Nations community living in the city and nearby reserve.

One particularly effective activity was a series of workshops entitled “Say Yes to Community Inclusion,” an initiative of the Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability. The aim of the workshops was to promote greater inclusion of Canadians with a disability in community physical-activity programs. The library assisted in creating a network to connect recreation service providers with clients who have disabilities.

The library's relationship-building initiatives included professional development for staff on diversity issues. As a result of the library's efforts, more people with disabilities, immigrants, and the First Nations community came to the library and used the services (Khetarpal 2013).

On a larger scale, the Edmonton Public Library received a grant in 2011 from the provincial government to fund a four-year community safety and outreach project. The library partnered with Boyle Street Community Services (an inner-city agency that provides programs and support to people living in poverty) to launch the "Building a Safer Community through Inclusive Learning" project. The project was a response to the increasing number of low-income people who were homeless and seeking sanctuary in the library. The library saw an opportunity to connect with these individuals and offer help.

Collaborating with library staff, outreach workers work both inside and outside the library to assist at-risk Edmontonians through literacy, education, social support, and referrals. The "Building a Safer Community through Inclusive Learning" project builds upon the Working Together community-development model that believes "libraries act as community cornerstones that can help prevent and resolve societal challenges that marginalize segments of the population" (Edmonton Public Libraries 2011).

In early 2013, the Calgary Public Library conducted a number of community consultations as part of planning a new central library system and building. Helen Humphries, Interim CEO of the Calgary Public Library, described the new location as "an inspiring destination for Calgarians of every age and ability, providing rich resources for every interest, and spaces for community."

She went on to say "citizens told us they desire a place that is welcoming, inclusive and accessible, where they can experience the joys of reading, learn new skills, have fun with their families, and connect with each other and with a world of information and ideas. For Calgarians the new Central Library will also act as an agent for community building, social inclusion and engagement. As heart and hub of a growing network across the city, it will help shape service delivery in every library location" (CPL 2013).

The Calgary Public Library is already engaged in several initiatives aimed at reducing barriers and increasing accessibility for vulnerable people. Since June 2012, the library has been working with the Calgary Poverty Reduction Initiative (CPRI), participating as a stakeholder in the community consultation process. As Heather Robertson, manager of community services, explains, the process "made us take a closer look at what we do and how we do it. What did we see happening? What are the gaps? How can we leverage our expertise?" (Heather Robertson, in discussion with the author, October 2013). The library responded in support of poverty reduction, identifying the ways it works to reduce barriers and improve access to life-long learning resources for Calgarians who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless, or living in low-income situations.

Currently, library staff sit on two implementation teams (asset building and services) to help drive forward the recommendations made in the CPRI report *Enough for All*. A large focus of the asset-building team is to develop financial literacy services and provide financial literacy education, advice, and services. The services-implementation team concentrates on developing a "client-based and integrated service access platform with common assessment, intake, referral, and case management components" (CPRI 2013, 15).

This work dovetails with the library's involvement in another exciting community partnership, the new Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre [SORCe](#).<sup>1</sup>

Seven months ago, two representatives from Calgary Police Services (tasked with leading the implementation of SORCe) approached the library to share the idea and explore a potential partnership. "It's exactly the sort of collaboration we are trying to build, a community hub concept" Robertson told me. The library is now one of fourteen agencies located in the new SORCe. The SORCe's mission is "to work together as a community to ensure vulnerable people will be connected to services, supports, and solutions" (SORCe website).

As we've seen from these examples, a strong library system can position itself as a collaborative community partner, a welcoming accessible space, and a place for life-long learning.

### **What does all this mean for adult literacy practitioners?**

"Low literacy, poverty and exclusion are all part of the same problem" (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network 2012). Literacy is about engagement, participation, expression, and connection. It's about learning. Adult literacy practitioners can expand their awareness of the role social exclusion plays in literacy work. As well, many literacy programs have existing relationships with local libraries. We encourage you to start a conversation about the meaning of social exclusion in your communities. Who knows where it might lead?

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of SORCe was developed by a Community Leadership Group (CLG) made up of the United Way; Calgary Homeless Foundation; Alpha House; Drop-In Centre; The Alex; Neighbourlink; Office of the Chief Crown Prosecutor; Chief Probation Officer Calgary; The City of Calgary's Community and Neighbourhood Services and Animal and Bylaw Services; Calgary Police Services, and Alberta Health Services.

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