

Literacy and Libraries: Gathering the Evidence

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Literacy begins at birth and continues to grow throughout our lives. Our understanding of literacy, and the literacy demands society places on us, have changed dramatically as global economic, technological and political forces continue to influence our daily lives. Unfortunately, not everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve the full potential of her or his literacy – a key challenge for librarians in Canada and throughout the world.

Literacy is an issue central to all library sectors. Librarians have traditionally provided a wide range of services to meet the literacy needs of whatever communities they serve. Today all library sectors have an even more vital role in the education of citizens. The emergence of this stronger literacy role for libraries has given new relevance to libraries and has increased society's need for quality libraries for all citizens at all stages of their lives.

This issue of *Feliciter*, focusing on "Literacy and Libraries," explores how our view of libraries is changing to respond to the growing literacy needs of all Canadians. We have attempted to include as many opinions as possible by inviting

front-line librarians and teacher-librarians to address the issue from the perspective of their specific sector. We've also included insights from researchers and academics, who tackle the issues more globally, with implications for all of us.

Angela Ward and Linda Wason-Ellam, literacy education researchers, share preliminary results from their ethnographic study on the changing role of public libraries in community literacy. Public libraries, once largely limited to providing books for pleasure reading, are now important players in the literacy business.

Martha Whitehead and Catherine Quinlan, of the University of British Columbia Library, outline factors that hinder and help the integration of information literacy into the academic learning environment.

Sue Emson is a literacy librarian who shares some down-to-earth examples of how public libraries can connect their programs and services to the literacy needs of the communities they serve.

Jeff Lilburn, from Mount Allison University, challenges librarians to critically examine their catalogues to ensure all voices and perspectives in Canadian society are represented.

Graduate students Wendy Kysow, Andrea Shrive, Ruby Sihota and Cheriee Weichel summarize the central role teacher-librarians play in developing children's literacy while challenging all library sectors to work together to create a unified vision for the future.

Dr. Ken Haycock outlines the common issues and concerns that face all library sectors as we try to meet the challenges of providing a meaningful role for literacy programs throughout society.

Thomas Quigley, co-convenor of CLA's Action for Literacy Interest Group, demonstrates the very real way public libraries can use their web presence as a powerful connection to literacy programs, activities and agencies in the community.

We talk a good talk when it comes to literacy and libraries. We wave around the slogans and lofty statements about the role libraries play across society in developing literacy, but you will see from this collection of articles that there are real challenges before us.

The challenges reinforce the need for a more comprehensive and collaborative approach in advocating for libraries. We need to show

decision makers clear evidence of the role all librarians play in literacy development. We need to show them the impacts libraries have on people's personal lives and on Canada's New Economy, the value libraries add to our whole quality of life. And we need more research and clear documentation on these impacts. People listen to the facts. CLA and its members have a responsibility to gather that evidence, present it clearly and sound it loudly across and beyond all library sectors. 

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