

The Community, the Public Library and Literacy Services

Sue Emson

For more than 15 years, I have worked as Saskatoon Public Library's literacy librarian. The city is just the right size, large enough to maintain some cultural amenities and small enough to avoid some of the problems associated with larger Canadian centres. Saskatoon supports a first-class arts community, a highly regarded university and community college, a handful of good restaurants and a repertory film theatre. With all this and no rush hour to speak of, it is very easy to live comfortably in Saskatoon and remain largely unaware of the serious problems facing this city.

Complacency about our community is becoming more difficult to maintain. In 2001, the Canadian Council on Social Development reported that Saskatoon has the greatest rate of change in economic segregation of any urban centre in Canada. A November 3, 2001, article in *The Globe and Mail* characterized Saskatoon as the "Harlem of the Prairies" and a November 2002 study by Campaign 2000 put the child poverty rate in Saskatchewan at a horrifying 18.1 per cent of the province's population.

Like most public libraries in Canada, we see ample evidence of the social problems facing our

communities. Many of our patrons have personal hygiene problems because they are unable to bathe or wash their clothes. We frequently deal with patrons who have mental health or behavioural problems. One of my earliest experiences working the reference desk in the Saskatoon Public Library involved assisting an unkempt man who said, "Can you get me a book on this? My doctor says I have it." He then gave me a piece of paper with *leukemia* written on it. These experiences are disturbing but not unusual. It is heartening that so many of Saskatoon's marginalized citizens use the public library.

When I am not working the reference desk, my efforts are focused on the people who are not using the library. Much of my time is spent organizing collections of library materials for adult literacy and English as a second language learners. A large part of time is also spent trying to generate the money required for library literacy outreach programs from an already heavily committed public library budget.

Partnerships and outreach

The Saskatoon Public Library is very fortunate to enjoy strong and long-term partnerships with local literacy organizations. Part of my job involves sitting on the

Board of Directors of a local literacy organization, READ Saskatoon. READ and the public library have maintained a cooperative relationship for 24 years. READ was established in 1979 when forward-thinking representatives from the public library, the community college, the university, the local newspaper, a church group and government departments gathered to discuss their concern over literacy services in Saskatoon. READ's relationship with the library has developed over the past five years. We have evolved from simply providing free meeting rooms and literacy materials to a model of cooperative programming that incorporates family literacy, adult literacy and library orientation.

The Saskatoon Public Library does have outreach programs. Staff from Children's Services go to local schools to promote reading, and the library runs programs for seniors in residences. Literacy programming, however, is primarily done in cooperation with outside agencies.

The Family Literacy/Library Outreach program was one of our most successful efforts. The program ran for two years with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat in 2000 and the Saskatchewan Associated Entities fund in 2001.

READ and the Saskatoon Public Library worked with “at risk” teen and adult parents involved in parenting programs at community agencies. These included a stay-in-school program at an inner city high school, a parenting class at a high school, a drop-in centre for street kids and a Salvation Army women’s shelter. Parents were introduced to family literacy activities and given a tour of the library. They brought their children to a special story-time and were introduced to the library’s computer lab. Outstanding fines on any existing library cards were waived. The parents were offered the choice of using a fine-free card with limited borrowing or a new library card that would accrue fines with the regular borrowing limit of 50 items.

Another ongoing library literacy program involves introducing recently paroled inmates to the library system with a tour and simplified process for acquiring library cards. As most of these parolees are released into halfway houses, they frequently lack the identification normally required to use our library services.

Achieving a comfort level

The success of these programs depends upon two elements – personalized service and flexibility. It is essential that non-users of the library be introduced to its services in an environment in which they are comfortable. With many literacy learners, this means leaving the library and introducing yourself as a

personal contact. These families need convincing that public library services have something to offer them and their children. Telling a teen mother on social assistance that the local public library has copies of the Department of Social Services policy manual makes a clear connection between public library services


The success of these programs depends upon two elements, — personalized service and flexibility.

and some of the problems that may exist in her life. Introducing these parents and their children to family literacy through a story-time can make them aware of the public library as a physical institution in a non-threatening manner.

The largest barrier to public library use for parents such as these is inherent in the nature of libraries themselves. Like other urban public library systems in Canada, the Saskatoon Public Library is a large institution. Sophisticated knowledge and skills are needed to use it effectively. Many people with low literacy skills have had negative experiences in similar institutions when they attended school. Barriers in the form of fines and the identification required in order to borrow from libraries are the norm, and library

staff are not generally distinguished by their flexibility. We are seen as large, impersonal, rules-oriented institutions – the antithesis of the type of service that could provide a comfort level for marginalized groups in Canadian society.

The Saskatoon Public Library has tried to address this problem through

a values-based philosophy of service, literacy awareness training for staff and a flexible approach to obvious barriers such as overdue fines and borrowing limits. Just as important, we are beginning to recognize that through true cooperation with existing community agencies we can offer the kind of services their clientele requires. Partnerships like the one between READ Saskatoon and the public library are crucial to the success of library-based literacy programs. It is through the public library’s involvement with community agencies that we can reach people with literacy problems who do not typically use our services. 

Sue Emson is the literacy librarian at Saskatoon Public Library.