

## **Literacy and Libraries**

### **Notes of a talk given on International Literacy Day, 8 September 2004, in the Christchurch Cathedral by Sue Sutherland, Libraries and Information Manager.**

If a person never acquires the skills of reading a whole world of imagination, ideas and interactions is closed to that person. For those of us who can read it is sometimes hard to imagine what it must be like NOT to – I guess it is like when we go to a foreign country and the marks on paper, or on signs, or in the guidebook mean absolutely nothing to us because we don't speak that language. So a day which focuses on literacy, which allows us to emphasise this crucial need is a good day indeed. For there are many needs, but there are also many ways to meet these needs.

How then does your public library fit into this landscape? Surely it is only a place for those who can read – after all our currency is predominately the printed and digital word. Well that is true but it so much more. When you or someone you know needs support for their literacy we want you to “think Library”.

One of the 5 goals in the library's strategic plan is “Supporting your learning to grow knowledge together”. Last year we developed our Lifelong learning strategy which provides a framework for understanding what libraries contribute to literacy and learning throughout our lifetime. We have thought this so important that we have recently appointed a Lifelong Learning Manager whose job it is to co-ordinate the activities and to extend the opportunities for learning and literacy that libraries offer. Jane Spears comes to us from the Whitireia Community Polytechnic and is widely experienced in the literacy and community education fields.

So what is your public library doing in this area? It starts at birth with the Books for Babies project – supplying a black and white board book with information about the importance of reading and libraries. We have one of the highest rates of membership in the 0-5 years as a result of this project which has been running for 12 years now. Story telling sessions, visits and supply of books to preschools, Headstart and many other programmes which support children and parents in finding reading fun.

Providing easy reading materials to support the work of literacy tutors and their clients – and supporting ARAS by providing them with materials for use in their place as well. Support for the ESOL programmes – again with resources and places for people to study.

Having acquired the basics of functional literacy, one of the most important things we can do is to stretch our ability to read more widely. “The practice of reading creates readers”. To get to grips with more complex ideas requires practice and sustained effort. Librarians can introduce you to new books, different authors through flyers such as “if you like this author then you might like...” Or the new books list on our website or in paper format. Some libraries like New Brighton have Reading groups for adults. Reader development, then, is a follow on once you have acquired the basic skills of reading.

In recent years we have begun to hear the terms Digital literacy and information literacy. Digital literacy refers to the skills needed to find your way around a computer in order to access electronic information; information literacy refers to the ability to identify the information a person needs, find that information, predominantly in an electronic medium, and then assess the quality and validity of the information found. Increasingly the information and content we need to do our jobs, or participate in society, or base our personal decision making on, is available in an electronic format rather than a paper format.

So libraries can help you acquire these skills. In the year since the South Learning Centre opened we have provided opportunities for people to find their way round computers and to find information useful to them. A session for Quilters was held in association with the Quilters conference and one of the delights of that was to see a 90 year old woman using a computer for the first time to find quilting patterns on the internet.

Your libraries have places for meeting, for individual and group study. We have computers for public use allowing free access to much of the internet or to email for a small fee. Some libraries provide formal programmes to support learning and literacy – often computer based.

Most importantly, however, we don't do these things on our own. Libraries are there to support individuals, but also those who are working directly in the field of literacy and community education. We can supply resources, spaces, technology and expertise in working with you to ensure everyone can experience the pleasure that reading can bring.