



Evidence Summary

'Quick Reads' May Promote Literacy without Stigma: Findings from Eight UK Public Libraries

A review of:

McLoughlin, Carla, and Anne Morris. "UK Public Libraries: Roles in Adult Literacy Provision." Journal of Librarianship and Information Science 36.1 (March 2004): 37-46.

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the role of public libraries in the provision of adult literacy services, with a detailed look at both the successes and concerns of the libraries under study; to provide recommendations for best practice in establishing or reviewing adult literacy services.

Design – A series of case studies using written reports and semi-structured interviews.

Setting – Eight public libraries in the UK involved in literacy service provision or reader development services.

Subjects – Eight senior staff members in charge of library literacy programming.

Method – A written report of literacy service initiatives was solicited from each participating library. A single interview was conducted with a staff member in charge of literacy service at each of the eight participating libraries. Fact-checking telephone interviews were conducted at three locations where adult literacy programs were in early stages. More in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted at the five libraries with better established programs. Each type of interview consisted of a set of scripted questions supplemented by individualized questions based on the written reports.

Main results – There are four key areas of results to be summarized from this study:

- *Adult Literacy Collections* – The authors observed three main approaches to branding literacy collections:
 - Emphasis on reading for pleasure (with collections entitled ‘Quick Reads’ or ‘First Choice’);
 - Emphasis on reading for skills development;
 - Discreet labelling enabling stock recognition without advertising that the reader is borrowing literacy materials.

The authors conclude that the ‘Quick Reads’ approach was the most successful in highlighting the collection without stigmatizing it and in promoting the pleasure of reading. The importance of maintaining relevant, attractive books was highlighted, with collections targeting both entry level readers and emergent readers.

- *Approaches for Supporting Adult Literacy* – The libraries used reader development extensively as a strategy to support adult literacy efforts. Staff tied literacy offerings to other programs or services of interest (for example, promoting adult literacy services alongside audio-visual collections and Internet access). Adult learners were also targeted for library tours, reading groups, and assistance with book selection for the literacy collection. Some of the libraries hired new staff from outside the library profession, choosing candidates with prior experience in basic skills development or community work.
- *Methods of Attracting Adults with Poor Literacy* -- Partnership was identified as a key strategy for the libraries studied. Partnerships were formed with numerous agencies, including the probationary service, a community

centre (where the library’s ‘reader in residence’ was installed), a college, and a Peugeot factory. Networking with other literacy service providers and coalitions was also an important strategy, particularly as a way to increase the library’s profile as a literacy service provider. Perhaps the simplest strategy for attracting adults with poor literacy was to identify areas of the library districts where literacy skills were lowest and then to target literacy service to those regions.

- *Sustainability and Mainstreaming* -- Early planning for sustainability was crucial. Incorporating funding for literacy staffing and collections into the core budget and annual library plan was also an important step. While some libraries hired new staff, and one library staffed the literacy project with volunteers, using existing staff for adult literacy work proved to be more efficient and sustainable. Instilling a sense of ownership in the project for both staff and users of the literacy services by involving them in the development and promotion of literacy service and collections was another strategy employed to ensure longevity of the service.

Conclusions – The most successful form of library literacy service provision was found to be the reader development approach (promoting reading for enjoyment and building reading activities around existing interests). The libraries studied showed an understanding of the wide range of reading levels and interests among adult learners. Potential barriers for libraries in the provision of adult literacy service “include restrictive funding criteria, limited staff capacity, and a bidding culture that remains unsympathetic to public library circumstances” (44). The authors make five recommendations for best practices in adult literacy service provision:

- *Eclectic adult literacy collections:* Collections should be fresh and appealing and should incorporate engaging non-fiction.
- *Standardized criteria for adult literacy stock:* Standardized criteria should be developed by a basic skills agency, preferably at a national level.
- *Equality for adult readers:* Approach adult readers as people who read for enjoyment or who are 'getting back to reading', rather than as those needing to 'improve' their reading.
- *Maximum access:* Ensure a diverse and well-stocked collection of books that is easy for adult learners to locate.
- *Community profiling:* Optimize service delivery by profiling your community's literacy levels.

Commentary

The study successfully consolidates past research and the wealth of detail generated by the eight case studies. As this was a student project, limited resources may explain several weaknesses in the study's design. However, these weaknesses do limit the reliability of the findings. Only one informant (in each case a literacy program director) was interviewed at each location, removing the opportunity for cross-validation. Since directors were asked to evaluate the success of their own programs, a significant potential for bias must be assumed. Because interviews were varied in length and format, the study cannot be replicated, and the opportunity for formal cross-case comparison is minimized.

The authors specify that this research is intended to redress a perceived lack in the "identification of best practice and recommendations for library authorities intending to establish or review their adult literacy provision" (39), rather than to

replicate existing research. Nonetheless, it would have been interesting to see in more detail how quantitative data (where available from the subject libraries) support or detract from the conclusions reached in the study. For example, although the authors determine that a 'Quick Reads' approach was the most successful, it is unclear how this was measured. Were there higher circulation counts on those literacy materials?

Although some of the recommendations may seem unsurprising (for example, the admonition to develop appealing collections), the attempt to crystallize the experiences of the agencies under review into concrete recommendations is eminently worthwhile. Furthermore, the authors' suggestion that standardized criteria for adult literacy materials be developed at the national level could save valuable time for local institutions. Another useful item would be a standardized toolkit for literacy program evaluation, and some work has already begun in this area (for example, in the Laser Foundation's Libraries Impact Project, and in the National Literacy Trust's Mapping the Territory and Vital Link initiatives).

This research will be of interest to public librarians establishing or reviewing adult literacy services.

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