Combes, B. (2006). *LIS@ECU Seminar: Making Libraries Count! Literature, Literacy and Learning*, Edith Cowan University, 21 April, 2006

The rationale: Talking up literacy outcomes

This section of a program is often overlooked. It answers the fundamental question: "Why are we doing this?" To make learning transparent you should be able to answer this question, particularly when working with older children, young adults and adults. It includes two sections: the global perspective and the local perspective.

Literacy and the global perspective

Literacy is:

"... the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking. It includes a cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society."
The National Secretariat for the International Year of Literacy, 1990.

Literacy is:

... the making of meaning and its clear communication to others. Truly literate people not only read and write, but regularly do so in order to sort out their ideas and put them in words, to fit them together and test hypotheses - ie. to make sense and meaning out of our world. Truly literate people acknowledge that they need to write things down, to talk them out, to read widely, to listen critically and to respond articulately. Truly literate people are thinkers and learners."

Brown & Mathie, 1990

Literacy is:

"... the foundation of effective citizenship, human communication and social integration in a literate society. Therefore it is important to foster the lifetime habit of purposeful and critical reading for information, education and recreation. Literacy is the foundation of learning in all areas of the curriculum."

Holdaway, 1979.

Note the inclusion of the words understanding (comprehension), critical reading, thinking and learning in the definitions for literacy above. Literacy is more than the mechanics of reading. In third world countries, a major issue is the maintenance of literacy skills. All children need to continue to read widely to consolidate, maintain and expand their literacy skills. With the demise of professionally staffed libraries in schools and the move away from reading fiction for pleasure, is it any wonder that national test scores are showing a decrease in literacy levels between Years Three and Seven.

There are two parts to an elementary classroom instructional reading program - the learning-to-read phase and the reading-to-learn phase. The instructional program develops readers who learn to read independently for pleasure and learning which, in turn, is supported by both instruction and the collection in the school library. A literate society is built of citizens who read for pleasure and knowledge, in contrast to "aliterates" - those who can read and choose not to read.

The library is part of the learning continuum that assists diverse learners seeking to expand skills and knowledge. In our increasingly diverse community, a fully staffed and functioning school library encourages reading and learning for all students by offering a variety of materials to match interests and reading abilities. Reduction of services to children has serious implications for their literacy. Access to books supports children reading for enjoyment and information: Children increase their skills by reading, which has a direct impact on student achievement (Webb, 2007)

What does the research tell us?

Recent research does show that students who read often and widely, particularly fiction, are more successful academically than those who do not (OECD, 2002). When this reading habit is a part of the culture of the school, students' literacy skills have been shown to improve significantly and even overcome social disadvantage.

The importance of basic literacy skills (reading writing, viewing and listening) cannot be overrated, as testified by the national literacy testing regime that has been implemented by the Australian Commonwealth Government (DEST, 2003). Students who use technology, particularly the World Wide Web (WWW) and computers need to be able to read well. Technology is not compensatory. Before students and adults can become proficient in the array of new literacies, they must be proficient in the basic literacy skills set as defined above. This skills set inlcudes the ability to make sense of what they are reading and to think critically.

To create a rationale that supports the acquisition and use of the fiction collection by the whole school we need to relate it directly to educational pedagogy and the development of literacy outcomes for students. In your School Library Collection Development Policy the rationale for the fiction collection should include references to the research and statements that make the connections between literacy skills development and fiction.

UNESCO's Decade of Literacy (2003-2012)

The ability to function effectively in todays' information society requires a high degree of literacy and a complexity of skills which is leaving some people behind.

OECD - Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement across Countries, PISA 2000
Results from PISA 2000: 25% of respondents did not have the necessary literacy skills to manage in today's world (ALIA, 2004)

Literacy and the local perspective
Adapted from Connected Conversations: Integrating Information Literacy into Online Literature Circles. Paper presented at *Meeting the challenge: ASLA XIX Biennial Conference 2005.*

A well-stocked fiction collection that is used frequently by staff and students will encourage the development of strong literacy skills across the school.

- Staff who use the school library fiction collection provide strong role models for students and validation for acquiring a reading habit.
- Students who read widely are exposed to a variety of text forms, vocabulary, concepts, understandings and ideas. They have opportunities to:
    - practise, further develop and maintain their reading literacy skills (vocabulary, complex sentence and text structure).
    - make meaning of their world through real and imaginary experiences (prediction, sequencing, deconstruction).
    - develop higher order thinking skills (problem-solving, analysis, critical thinking and evaluation).
- Students who have strong literacy skills will be able to expand their basic skills set and be able to work towards the development of lifelong learning skills - being able to locate, evaluate, analyse, deconstruct and synthesise information (information literacy), mathematical literacy, media literacy, computer or technological literacy, ICT literacy, visual literacy and others (Lepani, 1998).
- Fiction texts also provide students with opportunities to:
    - encounter and relate personally to a range of vicarious experiences.
    - extend their understanding of different cultures and ethnic groups.
    - extend their knowledge of history.
    - develop understandings about personal interactions, conflict resolution and individual growth.
    - deconstruct text for greater and deeper understanding (Combes, 2004).
- Strong use of the fiction collection by all staff and students helps to promote a reading culture across the school.

Literacy is so much more than the mechanics of reading. To develop a reading habit teachers and librarians need to nurture, develop and maintain students/adults' literacy skills. We do this through literature promotion, reading programs and the provision of quality resources, utilising a range of formats

(print, big books, charts, CD-ROMs, CDs, audiocassettes, DVDs, videos, i-pods and ebooks).

Fiction resources should be actively promoted and wherever possible, integrated into curriculum programs to provide students with the opportunities to develop the skills and experiences listed above. A wide range of fiction resources, of varying depth and breadth and using different formats will ensure that all students have opportunities to achieve literacy outcomes.

Knowing your target population

The rationale for any program should contain information about your target population. In the case of public libraries a situation analysis of specific population groups within your area should be conducted. This will include specific age groups, English as a second language (ESL) groups and schools. Teacher librarians and teachers should be working collaboratively and using literacy benchmarks, test results and teacher feedback to determine how to design curriculum and literacy programs that will provide all students with opportunities to develop improved literacy outcomes.

We don't do this often enough and therefore, begin our program design and planning without the prior knowledge necessary to meet the needs of our target group. This is an essential component of the planning process. When this is done first, a true picture of whether the program has made a difference to literacy outcomes will emerge.

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Further reading

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