Working Paper 4

Literacy, Social Exclusion and the Public Library

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Abstract

The paper reviews recent research to show the impact of illiteracy on people's lives and its contribution to social exclusion. It considers the background to low basic skills attainment, referring to factors such as class and race. The relationship between literacy and political power is discussed. The paper then considers the situation in the UK, covering the extent of poor basic skills, and their relationship with social class. It describes Government and other initiatives on basic skills issues, such as the National Literacy Strategy. It is argued that lifelong learning and basic skills initiatives could, and should, have an impact on the role of public libraries. However, changes relating to both staff and stock may affect their ability to carry out this role. Children and young people's literacy is considered, and public library initiatives are detailed. The literature review carried out suggests that public libraries are paying less attention to adult literacy. IT literacy is discussed. It is concluded that, although progress has been made in some localities, more work needs to be done. Public libraries are urged to form partnerships with organisations involved in basic skills work, and recommendations for further development are made (April 1999).

Introduction

This paper draws together recent research to illustrate the impact that illiteracy has on people's lives, and demonstrates its contribution to social exclusion. Although the paper focuses on literacy, it is important to recognise the close links between literacy and other basic skills, and the effects on this of factors such as class, race and gender.

Background

Much is currently being made of the low levels of basic skills acquired by many pupils at school, and the devastating effects that this can have on their later employment opportunities, health, involvement in citizenship and other issues of social exclusion.

However, before looking in more detail at some of the recent findings and the initiatives which have been developed to combat these problems, it is worth stepping back to take a longer look at literacy itself. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that basic skills attainment is low, the reasons for this are far more complex than many analysts would have us believe.

A major factor which is still under-recognised is class. Despite considerable analysis by writers such as Harold Rosen [1974]:

> "Much of the language which the working class encounter in their daily lives is transmitted to them through a variety of agencies not under their control, which deploy a language designed to mystify, to intimidate and to create a sense that the present arrangement of society is immutable. Certain strata of the bureaucracy require this language as a vital part of their formation ... I believe that [an examination of the part played by language in class relations would show that] the linguistic capital of the dominant culture is persistently over-valued and that of the dominated culture persistently undervalued." (pp6-7)

class is still often ignored as a key influence on literacy.

This argument has recently been developed and strengthened, for example by Kathleen Rockhill [1994]:

> "The construction of literacy is embedded in the discursive practices and power relationships of everyday life - it is socially constructed, materially produced, morally regulated, and carries a symbolic significance which cannot be captured by its reduction to any one of these." (p247)

and Catherine Stercq [1993] who states that:

> "The illiterate are the product of a new phase of industrialisation" (pp7-8)

and goes on to argue that, whatever the definition of illiteracy, illiterate people are excluded from the "social and occupational integration programmes."

Wider still, Amir Hassanpour [1993] argues that:

> "The unequal spread of literacy among the world's languages is rooted not in their linguistic structure but, rather, in the extra-linguistic, that is economic, social, political and cultural, conditions of the life of each speech community ... Far from being neutral or free, language use ... is closely intertwined with the distribution of social, economic and political power." (p35)

It is also still the case that more attention needs to be paid to the complexities of literacy within its context. For example, in a study of one UK-based Punjabi community, Mukul Saxena identifies that Britain has largely remained a monolingual, monocultural and monoliterate state which fails to recognise the "multiliteracies"[1] which people utilise [Saxena, 1994], and Brian Street [1994] argues that:

> "we need ... to clarify and refine concepts of literacy, to abandon the great divide between 'literacy' and 'illiteracy' and to study instead 'literacy practices' in diverse cultural and ideological contexts." (p149)

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[1] multiliteracies (including the relationship between women and literacy) are explored further in Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic [1994].

We also need to see that gaining literacy is a political act. Yusuf Kassam [1994] movingly defines the power of literacy:

> "To be literate is to become liberated from the constraints of dependency. To be literate is to gain a voice and to participate meaningfully and assertively in decisions that affect one's life. To be literate is to gain self-confidence. To be literate is to become self-assertive. To be literate is to become politically conscious and critically aware, and to demystify social reality. Literacy enables people to read their own world and to write their own history. Literacy makes people aware of their basic human rights and enables them to fight for and protect their rights. Literacy enables people to have a greater degree of control over their own lives. Literacy helps people to become self-reliant and resist exploitation and oppression. Literacy provides access to written knowledge - and knowledge is power. In a nutshell, literacy empowers." (p33)

and goes on to analyse its political power:

> "Illiteracy is a cause, symptom and result of poverty, but the causes, symptoms and results of both illiteracy and poverty go much deeper. In many respects the history of oppression, exploitation and colonialism is linked with the history of illiteracy." (p34)

and:

> "[Literacy] is a struggle between the dominant and oppressed classes, between the haves and the have-nots, between status quo and social change, authoritarianism and democracy, and between oppression and liberation." (p34)

He concludes:

> "Those who benefit from illiteracy in general are those who wield political and economic power - the landlord, the moneylender, the corporate employer, the male head of a household, the village chief and the politician." (p36)

Within this framework, we need to ask some searching questions about literacy and basic skills, particularly why some countries (such as Nicaragua, Tanzania, Cuba and China) have been able to make literacy such a priority and have managed to overcome very high levels of illiteracy, yet here in the UK, even allowing for the complexities illustrated above, levels of illiteracy seem to be shamefully high.

The situation in the UK

Despite efforts (for example by the Government, schools, voluntary and statutory agencies) over a long period (and especially the last 20 years), basic skills, and particularly literacy, still need to be improved dramatically. Drawing on a survey by the Basic Skills Agency released in March 1998, the National Literacy Trust states that:

"Tables compiled from simple reading and writing tests taken by more than 8000 adults across the country show that 16% of the population is functionally illiterate. London boroughs took four of the bottom five places for levels of literacy, with almost a quarter of adults in some areas unable to read parcel labels. The survey was the largest of its kind ever undertaken. It investigated the literacy and numeracy levels of people aged 16-60 in every area of England. The survey did not include those for whom English is not their first language." [National Literacy Trust, 1998a]

Again drawing on the work of the Basic Skills Agency, the National Literacy Trust gives some worrying statistics:

"12% of young adults said they had problems with reading, writing, spelling or basic maths." [National Literacy Trust, 1998a]

Worryingly poor levels of numeracy were reported in a recent survey [Basic Skills Agency, 1997] where respondents had to solve 12 numeracy tasks using only pen and paper:

"Respondents in the UK performed least well. Only 1 in 5 people tested (20%) managed to accurately complete all twelve tasks ... barely half (47%) were able to give the correct answer for 10 or more of the tasks, which compares very unfavourably with the rest of Europe (76% in the Netherlands [etc]) ... Overall, British respondents could only achieve an average of 7.9 correct answers out of the 12. All other nations surveyed achieved an average of 9 or more correct answers."

The National Child Development Study[2] [Bynner and Parsons, 1997] found that men and women with poor basic skills reported more symptoms of poor physical and mental health and were more likely to experience poor self-esteem, and were more likely to be dissatisfied with their lives. Non-participation in public activities, including politics, was significantly higher among people with poor skills, and people with poor basic skills were less likely to vote. Bynner and Parsons also stated that "excluding writing, assessments showed that in literacy 6% had very low skills and 13% low skills" and that:

"Symptoms of poor physical and mental health were reported to a greater degree [amongst people with basic skills needs]: 36% of women with very low literacy, 16% with low literacy, 18% with very low numeracy and 12% with low numeracy had symptoms of depression as compared with 7% of those with good literacy and 5% with good numeracy skills." (p9)

In a follow-up study, Parsons and Bynner [1998] found:

"Poverty and disadvantaged circumstances were more evident in the childhood of the adults with basic skills difficulties and their parents were the least likely to have experienced post-16 education. Books were also less common in their homes when they were children." (p9)

"... at every stage in life educational intervention to enhance basic skills has relevance and can be effective." (p16)

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[2] which followed the progress of a group born in a single week in 1958

It therefore seems clear that class is still a major determinant of skills in later life, and that responses should be directed both at heading off inequalities through early intervention [eg NFER, 1998] and at provision later in life, delivered through community-based projects (such as those funded by the Adult and Community Learning Fund).

Despite some advances in the late 1970s and 1980s, workplace-based basic skills training and day release have not really developed on a scale which would make a significant impact on educationally disadvantaged adults in lower-paid/manual jobs, and there is a real danger that these workers are being left behind in the current technological revolution.

Government and other initiatives

To begin to tackle all these issues, the Government launched the National Literacy Strategy in 1997:

> "The Strategy recognises that standards of literacy in this country have not changed significantly between the end of the war and the early 1990s ... In 1996 only 57% of 11 year olds reached the standard expected for their age in English. This rose to 63% in 1997. The national target for England is that by the year 2002: 80% of 11 year olds will reach the expected standard for their age in English (ie level 4 in the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test for English)." [National Literacy Trust, 1999a]

The Strategy includes greater involvement of parents [see eg *Basic Skills*, 1998]; primary schools drawing up school literacy plans and implementing the structured reading hour; local education authorities giving greater priority to literacy; and a requirement for OFSTED to look for evidence of whole-school strategies for raising literacy standards. In addition, from September 1998, English state primary schools are required to "teach reading in a highly structured manner as laid down by the strategy which insists that phonics comes first." [National Literacy Trust, 1999a]. A "framework for teaching" [DfEE, 1998c] has also been developed - this is essential for libraries to see how they can match support.

To back up this ambitious programme, the 1998/9 school year was designated the "National Year of Reading", and many public libraries have been keen to take the initiative to develop links with other organisations[3] and to find innovative ways of promoting reading and tackling literacy problems. According to very recent figures [Smithers, 1999], as many as one in six adults (ie some 8 million people) are

> "unable to read at a level to enable them to cope with everyday life, through simple tasks such as reading a bus timetable or menu"

and, to combat this, a national network of 800 literacy centres has been launched as part of the National Year - this scheme is backed by Channel 4 TV's *Brookside*, with the centres called "Brookie Basics".

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[3] such as the TUC which promoted the NYR via a Website,
http://www.merseyworld.com/bfs/ie/tucb_reading.html - accessed 13 January 1999

The Government is also currently launching the National Numeracy Strategy [see eg Hackett, 1999].

Through its Lifelong Learning measures, the Government is trying to target adults' needs. For example, it published the Green Paper on developing Lifelong Learning, *The learning age* [DfEE, 1998a], and the results of the consultation are due to be produced shortly (one of the recommendations is to set up University for Industry "enquiry desks" - are these going to be in public libraries?)

There has also been recent consultation on drawing up *Local information, advice and guidance for adults in England - towards a national framework* which proposes that available resources are targeted towards developing local services which could deliver, free of charge: information about learning and employment opportunities locally; a brief discussion with an adviser; and "signposting" advice to further sources of information. It also proposes further definitions of local partnerships to, for example, provide basic information about local learning opportunities, advise clients about links between local learning and employment opportunities, and point clients towards resources for further help and advice[4].

The Adult and Community Learning Fund [DfEE, 1999a] has been established to develop voluntary-led basic adult and general education provision which is innovative and which addresses issues of social exclusion. It runs from 1998 to 2001. Specifically, it aims to:

"- encourage more people and organisations to get involved in community-based learning activities of all kinds

- draw in people unaccustomed to participation in learning activities

- open up access to learning in terms of location, delivery arrangements and content
- improve basic skills among adults who have difficulties with them

- build the capacity of community-based organisations to provide learning opportunities outside conventional educational structures

- promote effective partnerships between community organisations, other voluntary bodies, education providers and other statutory agencies

- add value to activities supported by charities, trusts and private donors".

It is seeking projects which are innovative, sustainable and will build effective partnerships[5]. This is a welcome indication that the Government recognises the importance of an equalities-

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[4] information taken from the DfEE Website: http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk

[5] Examples of projects funded in rounds 1 and 2 are: the National Housing Federation (to research and organise provision to meet basic skills needs of residents); assessment and basic skills tuition for vendors of *The big issue*; Pecan Ltd (to develop numeracy courses for members of the community moving into new accommodation and support for members of credit unions); Oxfordshire Chinese Community (to develop English language courses for older members and young parents).

based approach to provision at grassroots level, given that most of the emphasis in the past few years has been on maximising numbers of young people doing basic skills going through TEC-funded training schemes (and, for example, the emphasis of the New Deal programme is going to be very much on a 'sausage factory' approach) and on accreditation of learning (eg "Wordpower", "Numberpower", NVQs, etc) which requires very structured provision and which may have disadvantaged voluntary literacy providers where a lot of the early innovation in teaching and learning methods (eg student-centred learning) took place.

The DfEE has also established "Learning Towns and Cities"[6] - these are towns, cities or communities which "promote learning widely; develop effective local partnerships between all sectors of the community; and support and motivate individuals and employers to participate in learning". Connected to this, they are also "to support widening participation in lifelong learning; and to harness this learning to promote social and economic regeneration." [DfEE, 1999b]

They have also established Education Action Zones, uniting schools, business, local education authorities and parents. These Zones are all giving priority to literacy and numeracy, with, for example, Birmingham opening family literacy centres, and Grimsby and Newham employing "Advanced Skills Teachers" to raise standards in literacy, numeracy and IT. [DfEE, 1999c; 1999d]

Birmingham (and specifically the public library service) is also one of the authorities involved in the DfEE's "Demonstration Outreach Projects", an initiative to develop best practice in creating access to information and advice on learning for disadvantaged communities [DfEE, 1998b].

Sir Claus Moser is chairing an independent Working Group on Post-school Basic Skills, which reported in March 1999. The findings have reinforced the seriousness of the situation: some 7 million adults in the UK have serious problems with reading and maths, and about 2 million can barely read or add up at all. The report's recommendations include increased funding; a clear national strategy to replace the current piecemeal arrangements; and an increased emphasis on basic skills courses in the workplace [Judd, 1999].

NIACE (National Institute for Adult Continuing Education) carries out research, development work and consultancy activities in all areas of adult learning. At present, they are involved in a number of areas of work of interest to libraries, including employee development, continuing education for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and in promoting Adult Learners Week [NIACE, 1999].

The role of public libraries

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[6] amongst those which have declared themselves "Learning Cities" or "Towns" are Sheffield, Norwich, Retford, Liverpool, Stockton, Hull, Derby, Nottingham and Southampton.

It is clear that many of the current initiatives within basic education could have (and ought to be having) an enormous impact on public libraries' provision; for example:

> "Success with literacy for those who find learning difficult depends on the expectations of teachers and the type of literacy teaching they receive at school. It is not only illogical but irresponsible to be content for low attainers in literacy to follow the same secondary English curriculum as other students." [Lingard, 1997]

The role of libraries in relation to literacy is wide, and, fortunately, many librarians are seeing the need to maintain this wide-ranging approach, for example:

> "So what does literacy mean to a librarian? ... literacy should include two aspects:
>
> > a) functional literacy - the ability to read and make sense of a piece of writing, plus an increasing ability to handle information and manage it (including skim reading, location (e.g. using an index) and evaluation AND
> >
> > b) ability to enjoy powers of literacy through reading for pleasure (not just fiction, but any sort of reading that gives pleasure, including non-fiction in book format, periodicals, computer screen, etc)" [Tilke, 1998]

However, given the current emphasis on stock usage and the changes in stock-purchasing methods (for example the growing emphasis on supplier-selection), there are real dangers that wide ranges of good stock for basic education (including for adults with learning difficulties) are just not going to be available any longer. Added to this, the pressures on staff time and the diminishing resources for staff training mean that there may be fewer trained and aware staff available, and the lack of development of collections of materials outside library buildings will lessen access.

Literacy of children and young people

The Library and Information Services Council (England) Working Party on Library Services for Children and Young People report, *Investing in children* [1995], is forthright about the potential role of libraries:

> "It is our clear view that, at a time when unfulfilled reading potential affects the economic, cultural and social life of the country, the potential of a library and in particular the public library which is freely available to all as a force in support of reading and information literacy cannot be too strongly emphasised" (p16)

The Library Association *Guidelines...* [Blanshard, 1997] emphasise the role of the public library in relation to children's literacy:

> "The library service has a key role in fostering literacy. It can exercise this in three ways:
> > - by providing and promoting material which assists reading development in young children
> > - by organising activities (sometimes with other agencies) which promote literacy

- by providing and promoting services which assist those with literacy difficulties" (p21)

and Ross Shimmon [1997] (Chief Executive of the Library Association) echoes this:

> "The public library, as the main provider of books for the under-fives, has a major responsibility in satisfying [the] need [for constant provision of a wide range of high quality books" (p130)

Recently, Bookstart schemes, such as that in Wandsworth [Bray and Ash, 1997], have proliferated, and have just gone national, with the aim of giving every baby in the UK two books - the stimulus that this provides has now been shown to assist in improving children's enthusiasm for books and reading, as well as learning more generally [Raven, 1999]. In addition, this is a good way of getting information to parents and carers about childcare and other issues.

One example of the way in which a public library service has developed literacy provision for children is in Lewisham where a partnership approach has been taken to improve standards of children's reading, involving schools, families, Community Education Lewisham, voluntary organisations and the public library [Gibson, 1998]. The School Library Association has also produced guidelines intended to make to school library a focus for promoting literacy [McGonagle, 1998].

Many UK public libraries organise summer holiday activities for children to assist with their literacy development[7]. For example, in 1997, the Library Association surveyed the activities that summer, and, of the 155 local authorities mailed, 79 replied. Of these 47 offered a reading activity scheme over the summer holidays, and 71 provided special events in libraries [Library Association, 1997a].

The Library Association also surveyed local authorities whose schools were included in the

Government's pilot[8] summer literacy schools initiative [Library Association, 1997b]. Projects in six authorities involved the public library children's service in the project, but it was clear that greater use of public library resources could have been made.

Although it has been a problem well documented in the past, attention is now also being paid to the specific under-achievement of boys and young men at school [eg Barclay, 1998]:

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[7] for summer 1999, *LaunchPad,* a partnership between the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL), the Library Association, and the Society of Chief Librarians of England and Wales (SCL), will be promoting the National Summer Reading Challenge - further details from Trish Botten, Professional Adviser, Youth & School Libraries at the Library Association, 7 Ridgmount Street, London WC1E 7AE (tel: 0171-636 7543).

[8] see, for example, the description of a pilot summer school at Foxford School and Community College *Basic Skills* [1997]

"Many schools and local education authorities increasingly recognise that boys' achievement is an area for concern and a wide variety of strategies to raise performance in the area of boys and English is being employed." [National Literacy Trust, 1998b]

A recent article [Dunne and Khan, 1998] highlighted some of the evidence [OFSTED, 1993; Schools Curriculum Assessment Authority, 1998; Frater, 1998] for this problem and reported briefly on two research initiatives: Birmingham Libraries are starting to collate information on activity/usage by gender, and Hampshire Libraries are researching the difference in reading patterns between boys and girls in one 11-16 mixed comprehensive school. Amongst suggestions for improving services were: using publicity materials which would attract boys; using "Boox", the teenage book magazine produced cooperatively under the "Well Worth Reading" umbrella by Hampshire, Dorset and West Sussex; and putting on events which would attract boys.

Adult basic skills, including literacy

In the literature at least, little attention is currently being paid to public libraries' role in providing support for adults with basic skills needs. Although I undertook an extensive literature search, I have been unable to find anything except the following isolated examples - this in itself surely gives a strong message about the priority.

Although dated, Gerry Bramley's introduction [Bramley, 1991] does give some useful pointers to developing a service, and some ideas (including for services for children) are included in Sharon Sperling's brief article about Kent Libraries' contributions to literacy [Sperling, 1997].

However, it may also be that emphasis is currently being put on Family Literacy, rather than concentrating on adults alone. One pilot project in Stockport involved visits to and work around the public library [Jordan, 1998], and a recent NFER study [Brooks, et al, 1997] showed that Family Literacy programmes appear to make lasting improvements:

> "This follow-up study shows that the Family Literacy children have successfully maintained the gains they made during the courses, and that parents have continued to widen their participation in education and society." (p10)

Recent initiatives [Library Association, 1998] include: a Family Reading Initiative in Redcar and Cleveland, and family reading events in Croydon, and the LaunchPad programme is including "More fatherly words", as part of its "Kick Off! for Lads and Dads" scheme [*Guardian Education,* 1999].

Open Learning (the provision of self-study packages by public libraries) has been an area of major development: in 1996, about 10,000 different subjects were covered by open learning, and some 98 public library authorities in England, 30 in Scotland and 7 in Wales were making open learning provision. These packages provide accessible (re)training: the most popular topics in 1996 were keyboard skills; basic European languages; GCSE maths and English; job-finding skills (such as CV preparation); and returning to learning/work [DfEE

1996a; 1996b]. The Library Association was involved in the piloting of this initiative, and the rapid growth of the service, especially in the first two years of operation, is an indication of its success [Allred, c1995]. Currently, access to the Internet (and to email facilities) has enhanced the provision public libraries make, and has proved very successful [McCormick and Sutton, 1998].

It is vital that public libraries make every effort to serve those particularly excluded, for example women refugees. Talking about the efforts that some urban libraries in the US are making to serve the needs of linguistic minorities, Stephanie Asch [1998] says:

> "outreach efforts that educate and inform them about the library and how it works are absolutely critical to successful programming ... A library's location in the heart of a linguistic minority community does not automatically make it relevant and important to that community ... Haphazard approaches work like 'band-aids' over gaping wounds ..."

The National Year of Reading

Many local authorities are involved in the National Year of Reading. A few examples[9] of the wide range of work are:

> - in Devon's programme of activities, many of which were designed to draw together partners from the public and private sectors, January 1999 was designated "Adult and youth basic literacy and IT focus" month;

> - the Newcastle Literacy Collaborative has focused on drawing together local businesses and media to enlist their support and to raise private-sector awareness of literacy;

> - "Bolton - the reading town" is an initiative to put reading and literacy on the town's agenda.

IT literacy

Concerns about literacy are not just related to reading skills, but to IT too. For example, it is being recognised that there is an urgent need to provide IT literacy for all:

> "Although technology offers the prospect of information access to those who were formerly excluded by distance, time or social status, it is also creating new zones of social exclusion ... Nations as diverse as Cuba, Malaysia and South Africa have embarked on ambitious programs to provide computer literacy to all people, rich, poor, urban and rural." ["Technology for literacy", 1998]

and, in the UK too, there is a very real danger of an impassable divide between classes:

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[9] taken from the National Year of Reading's "Star" authorities, one of many useful feature on their Website, <www.yearofreading.org.uk> - accessed 13 January 1999

> " ... a public access IT service for children in public libraries ... helps to balance the increasingly large disparity between the opportunities for children who are 'information rich' and those who are 'information poor'". [Denham et al, 1997]

and:

> "The distribution of home PCs is becoming increasingly skewed towards middle-class homes, however, putting children form poorer backgrounds at a major disadvantage when it comes to information technology." [Scales, 1999]

A recent literature review [Kerslake and Kinnel, 1997] summarises the position well:

> "While print literacy is an expected achievement for many children and adults, IT literacy is not. As increasing facilities - banking, shopping, using the telephone - rely on some form of IT skills, some level of IT literacy becomes ever more useful; and as more jobs in the labour market involve use of IT, IT literacy becomes necessary to finding a job." (p11)

In addition, Alistair Mutch [1997] suggests that, to date, there has been too great a concentration on data as opposed to information literacy which he takes to include:

- the need for the information;

- locating information;

- evaluating information;

- the use of information to address a problem.

Without such an emphasis, he argues:

> "... it may well be that the promise of IT continues to be illusory."

The National Literacy Trust is supporting a number of initiatives, including the National Grid for Learning (which will shortly have enormous impact on public libraries and librarians); the Computers in Schools pilot project; and, via the Basic Skills Agency, is negotiating with the DfEE and computer companies to get funding to produce software which could be used by staff to learn in the workplace. The Trust also suggests some ways of using IT, including using word processors to encourage pupils to develop their writing; using desktop publishing to give pupils a more realistic experience of writing and editing; using interactive CD-ROMs and talking books [National Literacy Trust, 1999b].

In addition, EARL (the consortium of UK public libraries) is carrying out a project under its Readiness (Research and Development in Networking Subject-based Services) programme on lifelong learning, "Supporting the learning society". The project:

> "is aimed at supporting funders, suppliers, museums, chief public librarians and HE and FE librarians who want to contribute to creating and implementing an ICT strategy for delivering

[lifelong learning] in public libraries to support learners from the cradle to the grave."
[EARL, 1999]

Just what could be developed is illustrated by the examples given in a recent issue of *Library Technology* [1999], where, for example, Gateshead Libraries and Arts Service have provided a number of services (compact disc interactive projects; cable TV services; the talking newspaper service, AIRS) to ensure that people with disabilities have access to information [Walters, 1999].

Conclusions

Whilst it is clear that some library authorities are making some real progress in tackling childhood and adult basic education needs, there is also an enormous amount to be done. It does seem to be the case that, after some major developments were made in basic skills provision by public libraries in the 1970s and 1980s, this area of work has slipped down the priority list. Unless urgent action is taken now, there is a very real danger of the UK's having not only low levels of basic skills (especially literacy and numeracy), but also of creating an IT-illiterate society.

It is not the public library's role to eliminate illiteracy: however, it is clearly its role to ascertain which local and national organisations are involved in this work, and to develop partnerships with them, with libraries contributing their expertise and other resources.

Recommendations

Some recommendations for further development include:

1. ensure that public libraries make available a wide range of current and appropriate stock for basic education (including for adults with learning difficulties). To enable this to happen, public libraries need to review their sources for acquiring stock (particularly for adult basic education) and the skills of staff in acquiring such stock, using sources such as the Basic Skills Agency Resource Centre[10];

2. provide training and staff development/awareness courses regularly, including basic skills training and the development of skills in community-based work;

3. develop provision of collections of material in community settings (such as basic skills projects, youth clubs, unemployment projects, ex-offenders hostels) partly in order to reach a wider audience and partly to demonstrate that public libraries are viable partners and have a role to play in delivering community-based literacy - and other basic skills - programmes;

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[10] at the Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL (tel: 0171-612 6080).

4. public libraries must take advantage of any additional funding which becomes available, and need to become adept at identifying such opportunities, and applying for funding. However, it is vital that public libraries work in partnership with other agencies (both statutory education providers and voluntary sector groups);

5. libraries need to build on the National Year of Reading, drawing on good practice which has been developed, to ensure that initiatives are sustained;

6. basic skills work in public libraries (especially adult literacy work) need to be given a much higher profile. At present, there seems to be no obvious forum for discussion by library workers of the services they might develop: therefore, an action-planning conference needs to be called as a matter of urgency to take this forward;

7. basic skills work should be included in any new performance measures developed (for example to include resources deployed; staffing involved in this work; work with community organisations). These need to be monitored, for example via the Annual Library Plans;

8. public libraries need to investigate requirements of *The National Literacy Strategy: framework for teaching* [DfEE, 1998c];

9. public libraries need to grasp any opportunities which become available following the publication of the report by Sir Claus Moser.

Acknowledgements

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