Five Principles Towards a National Reading Strategy

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Several months ago, educators, librarians, policy-makers, publishers, writers and literacy advocates of all stripes came together in Toronto to discuss and debate just what it would take to transform Canada into a reading society. Armed with the conviction that a literate and reading culture supports a creative, healthy, successful and dynamic society, some of the world's top thinkers on the subject presented ideas, examples and approaches to laying the groundwork for national reading strategies that are coordinated, sustainable and far-reaching.

Around the world, governments, public service institutions and local communities are applying creative thinking to encourage literacy and reading - ideas that we can learn from and build upon. Fundamental principles that ensure broad and universal access to varied and ubiquitous reading materials, wherever and whenever people need them, in safe and welcoming spaces are essential to the success of any reading strategy.

**We must recognize literacy as a fundamental right**

"Wherever literacy is a problem, it’s as fundamental a problem as getting enough to eat or a place to sleep. The native language takes precedence over every other subject of study: nothing else can compare with its usefulness." -- Northrop Frye

Literacy is a foundational piece that must underpin any strategy to promote reading and a reading culture. It is an empowering force that liberates a person from dependency, and as such, is fundamental to participation in all aspects of living and civil society. As Professor Yusuf Kassam, an outspoken advocate of literacy rights, eloquently observes, "Literacy enables people to read their own world and to write their own history."

The principle of literacy as a fundamental right must therefore be core to any advocacy or political action focused on building a national reading strategy. The National Literacy Trust in the United Kingdom produced a very useful advocacy document, "Literacy Changes Lives", which clearly points out the relationship between improved literacy and the benefits for not just the individual but for the community, the workforce and the nation.

The South African government took the empowerment of literacy a step further by linking literacy with nation-building and entrenched this important principle in its 2008 National Reading Strategy, which states, in part: "Every South African learner will be a fluent reader who reads to learn and reads for enjoyment and
enrichment”. The strategy recognises that not only individuals stand to benefit from being literate and being able to read, but that there are direct benefits to the economies of nations with high literacy rates, where workers are competent in their reading and writing skills.

**Reading and reading material should always be available and ubiquitous**

To state the obvious, where there are limited or no reading materials -- where there is no print environment -- there will be no or limited reading. To put this in business language, it's critical that support be provided for both the production and the distribution sides of the equation. In Canada, supporting production means supporting Canadian writers and the Canadian publishing industry. On the distribution side, it means supporting booksellers and all types of libraries (public, academic, school, etc).

In Norway, the Norwegian government, in their national framework on reading, identified that school and public libraries are fundamental to the availability and dissemination of reading materials, and are one of the primary mechanisms for increasing reading interest and reading skills among children and adolescents. Here in Canada, the New Brunswick provincial government developed a Book Policy that argues for enriched library collections and enhanced support for independent bookstores so that access to books is maximised.

Many worthy literacy and reading initiatives focus on "giving books to people who otherwise could not afford them." However, very often, by the scope and nature of these initiatives, the number of books available are limited (for example, only one or two books can be provided for an individual), and the appropriateness or relevancy of the materials to their audience cannot be guaranteed.

A better approach is to make a public investment in books that ensures a combination of universal access, diversity of material, and choice. Happily, such a solution already exists -- the library.

With over 22,000 libraries across the country, in communities large and small, Canada has the network to deliver on the promise of access through public investment, but this investment must continue, and must be entrenched in any national reading commitment. There must also be a commitment to preserving the vitality and diversity of Canadian publishing and distribution through bookstores and libraries so that books continue to be made widely available and accessible to everyone.
Address all audiences, and all ages

Any successful reading strategy must be broad-based and address the needs of all: the very young who are not yet in school; school-aged children; young adults who are out of school; and adults, especially those with low literacy levels.

As a multicultural and multi-lingual society, it seems obvious but necessary to state that a national reading strategy for Canada must also address the needs of those whose first language is neither English nor French, and again, must address low literacy levels of these groups as well.

There are literally thousands of programs aimed at specific audiences -- here are just two examples. A creative solution to addressing both the multi-language needs of the reading public can be found at the Toronto Public Library, using that low-tech communication device, the telephone. To encourage early literacy in children of diverse backgrounds, the library developed "Dial-a-Story", a service that children (and their families) can dial into and have stories read to them over the phone, in their own language. Today the library has stories in 12 languages, from English to Mandarin to Tamil to Urdu, and is adding new stories and new languages all the time. It is a hugely popular service.

Libraries in other parts of the world are taking similarly innovative approaches to reaching targeted audiences. In the UK, an initiative called "The Big Book Share" helps build literacy skills in marginalized parents and their children by using traditional literacy-building techniques in non-traditional ways. As part of the program, librarians visit prisons and help inmates choose stories for their children, and then record the inmates reading these stories. The recorded readings are then sent home so that their sons and daughters can share the warmth and intimacy of listening to a parent read a story -- an important element to encouraging the joy of reading in children. What both of these examples illustrate is that any national strategy needs to recognize and embrace a diversity of approaches.

Promote Reading for Enjoyment and Create Reading Spaces, Places and Times

Research has shown that reading for pleasure stimulates the imagination of readers, awakening their emotions, and allows for the creative and imaginative mind to wander. Not surprisingly, the positive emotions associated with reading for pleasure feed a desire for further reading, so creating opportunities, spaces, places and times for reading that's fun and enjoyable will naturally lead to greater reading success.

Initiatives abound, from the more traditional author readings, book festivals and literary awards, to innovative community read events such as "One City. One Book" and CBC Radio's Canada Reads. Some countries have declared a
National Year of Reading, and in South Africa, they have dedicated a half hour each school day to "Drop All and Read", where everyone -- from principal to custodian to teacher to student -- drops everything and reads.

Libraries are in a unique position to promote reading for enjoyment. Library programs, services and spaces are continually being enhanced to offer stimulating literary and cultural experiences in comfortable, relaxed and accessible environments. Investing in school and public libraries is an investment in creating reading places, where one can find space, time, and something to read.

**Don't Privilege Particular Forms of Reading**

It was the World Wrestling Entertainment competition that really got me reading again. I like reading magazines the best, like WWE magazine, Match and GamesMaster. I like information books more than stories, especially facts about wrestlers, and going online to websites to read about games, cheats and cars. -- Sam, 14, cited in *Manifesto for Literacy*, National Literacy Trust (UK)

Who's to say that reading the Giller prize winner is of intrinsically greater value than reading the Driver's License Handbook (a perennial best seller at the Toronto Public Library, by the way, with all of our 400 copies regularly on loan, and with dozens of reserves on the book as well). Who's to say that reading The New York Times in print is better than reading your favourite blogger online? Reading is reading is reading, and we risk alienating, marginalizing or underserving large constituencies in our country if we build a national reading strategy that privileges particular types or forms of reading over others.

How does this translate into action in libraries? It's not only reflected in the breadth, depth and diversity of the titles and formats available as part of a library's collections. It's being seen in the process of renewal happening in libraries and other learning institutions -- a process aimed at preserving basic values while at the same time adapting to the modern multi-media environment and the changing needs of a knowledge-based constituency. As a result, libraries have seen an increase in library use by a wider public. Toronto Public Library, for example, has seen an increase of 88% in usage of downloadable formats of books and other materials.

**Building A Society of Active, Engaged Readers**

If Canada is going to get serious about transforming itself into a reading society -- and it should -- the groundwork needs to be laid for a National Reading Strategy. As demographic, technological and global changes abound, champions for literacy and reading must continue to work towards creating welcoming literacy-friendly environments; generating new ways of promoting the joys and pleasures of reading; and most importantly, providing ready and universal access to the
materials we want to read, in the places and spaces we want to read them, and with the supports to help those in greatest need enjoy the pleasures and successes that literacy and reading provide.