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Reader development

Briony Train

Introduction

Reader development, with adult readers in particular, has experienced a dramatic growth in relatively recent years. This chapter explores this growth, in terms of its impact on library service delivery and policy, and in the context of its more social benefits. Themes frequently used in definitions of reader development are considered, such as intervention, cultural change, reader-centred and social inclusion. A number of frequently cross-sectoral initiatives are presented in order to exemplify the various facets of these definitions. The chapter ends with a consideration of the future of reader development.

Intervention in the act of reading

Public libraries were developed in the mid-19th century to promote and encourage the act of reading. Despite considerable changes in appearance as a result of the introduction at the end of the 20th century of Information Technology and electronic access to information, the original aim has been maintained. Proponents of the public library service believe that reading has an intrinsic value to all citizens, not only in a formal educational setting, but as a means of informing and enhancing the lives of all who choose to use it.

The public library is non-judgemental: the materials selected by the fiction reader have always been regarded as equally important as those by the academic. An equity of access, therefore, to a service used by a broad cross-section of populations, irrespective of age, gender, race or class.

However, what happens when a person entering a public library requires information from the library staff? Is the fiction browser looking for ‘a good read’ offered the same degree of advice and information as the student looking for an academic text on a particular subject? The author is not suggesting that public library staff do not perceive all readers’ needs as equal, rather that adult fiction librarians have previously tended not to intervene in their clients’ search for fiction, have perhaps felt that any such intervention would remove the neutrality of the service provided. Was it their role to tell people what they should be reading? Was it ethical to promote reading, essentially to direct people who should be self-directed? Former children’s librarian Grace Kempster spoke of the views of her colleagues, ‘who sometimes felt that we should not be trying to guide people in their reading at all' (Kempster, 2002b).

It was these kinds of concerns that ensured that adult fiction library staff provided an essentially passive service to the fiction reader: information was readily available if the demand was articulated, but otherwise, library users were expected to select and locate their own reading matter, without promotion or encouragement. Any form of intervention in this selection process would have been regarded by some as curtailing the freedom of choice: 'Librarians have tended to take a neutral stance, giving information rather than advice on reading' (Kinnell and Shepherd, 1998, 103).

Intervention in young people's reading

For the children's librarian, the story is very different: somehow it has always been more acceptable to intervene in the reading lives of young people. The young are automatically involved in the formal education process, and are subsequently more accustomed than adults to others offering them information and advice. As Kempster suggested to the author, 'They [adult fiction librarians] talked a lot about book selection and publishers and numbers of copies – but we talked about the excitements and impacts of the stories encountered' (Kempster, 2002b).

Children's librarians have for many years organized programmes of activities to promote reading as an enjoyable experience, in an attempt to foster 'the reading habit', to ensure that the avid young readers of today will become the avid older readers of tomorrow. In the book trade, the active promotion of reading to young people is perceived as equally vital. At the Reading the Future conference in 1992, an event that considered the role of literature in public libraries, Tim Waterstone, the founder of the Waterstone's bookshop chain, made the following statement: 'The future of the book trade largely lies in the hands of educationalists . . . and I just hope that they are up to the challenge and the responsibility they have to put literacy back on the map and in the consciences of our children' (25).

Unsurprisingly, this disparity in the approach to fiction service delivery and the promotion of reading to adults and young people has not gone unnoticed by library professionals. Kempster described an experience she had while working as a children's librarian for Bexley libraries in 1985:

> We organized a marquee celebration for the twenty-first birthday of the authority and had in one half books, drawings, story blankets and dressed-up characters for children, along with author visits and events and also a huge 'cake' made from display panels . . . this half of the tent just throbbed with families. . . . In sad contrast, the adult 'half' of the marquee was poorly attended: book displays on tables . . . some sparsely attended author events. It made me feel sad: why hadn't our colleagues used the skill, excitement and inventiveness to engage people? Did they not realize that people [adults] . . . were simply more reticent and complex and diverse about their reading [than young people] . . . ?
>
> (Kempster, 2002b)

The need for cultural change

During the late 1980s and into the 1990s there was an increasing professional awareness that public libraries in Britain were not engaging adult readers as much as they could – and should. Borrowing statistics were declining as a result of external pressures such as budgetary restrictions, local government reorganizations and the 'gradually improving prosperity of the population', and as a result the library's very existence was in question: 'The changing needs and values of the public library's owners have pushed it this way and that until it's really quite hard . . . to see what it's actually for' (Matarasso, 2000, 35).

As part of the Reading the Future conference, a seminar was conducted that investigated the education and training needs of library staff in promoting contemporary writing (Van Riel, 1992b). Delegates from both public and private arts organizations underlined 'the need for large scale change in library culture', and suggested that 'The pressures of accountability and structures have overwhelmed the qualities which should be looked for in library staff. These are [the] perceptions of their role as active, [their] ability to communicate well, [their] love of books, [their] love of people' (45).

Also at this time there was a growing recognition within and outside the library profession that reading, the essential business of the public library, was being overshadowed by the need to fight these external pressures. Suggestions were made that libraries had lost confidence in their fiction sections, and were no longer interacting with their readers: 'The complicated taboos and snobberies which surround attitudes to reading fiction have reinforced the reluctance of public library staff to enter the danger zone of developing policies in this area. Provision has been largely passive and user demand the main criterion' (Van Riel, 1993, 81).

A change in library culture was called for, and a need expressed to meet the needs of the many library users who are not sure what they are looking for, to prioritize fiction reading as essential library public library work:

> This making a priority of non-fiction over fiction runs right from senior management . . . to the library assistant at the counter. In response to queries, library staff will confidently recommend books on do-it-yourself or travel. Asked for 'a good read' they hesitate and tend to fall back on their personal tastes. Is this a professional response?
> Why do we not have systems which enable staff to recommend fiction they have not read with the confidence they recommend non-fiction they have not read? When you consider that 75% of adult issues are fiction, this lack of support and attention is extraordinary.
>
> (Van Riel, 1993, 81)

Towards reader development

It is not the purpose of this chapter to present a chronology of reader development; nor would it be feasible, as sadly, in recent years, a good deal of time has arguably been wasted debating the origins and ownership of the concept of reader development. Why, children's librarians have argued, has reader development been hailed by the rest of society as such a great new idea? We've been doing it for years! The children's library service has undoubtedly promoted and encouraged reading for pleasure for many years, using a wide range of activities and programmes, and highly trained, specialist staff. As the Aslib (1995) review of the public library service in England and Wales reported: 'By making books available to all who want them, together with specialist staff to make them accessible through advice and assistance in the choice and use of them, libraries are uniquely placed to make a significant contribution to the encouragement of reading amongst children and young people.'

However, it would be unreasonable not to take into account the significant recent increase of reader development activities for both adults and young people that has taken place not only in libraries but in all educational and social centres. Perhaps it would be more helpful to view this increase not as a threat to the funding and status of children's librarianship, but as a means of bridging the gap between adult and young people's reading. Why not be delighted that this vital work is no longer left to the same group of people to carry out, but is now the concern and interest of many?

The cultural change referred to above began to occur largely because of the pioneering reader development work conducted not within the library profession itself, but by the private, independent reading promotion agencies Opening the Book and Well Worth Reading (the latter now part of The Reading Agency (discussed in detail in Chapter 3)). Although neither one works exclusively with one age group, it is frequently the case that Opening the Book works with adult readers, and The Reading Agency with younger readers. These agencies have been described as 'catalysts for change' (McKearney, Wilson-Fletcher and Readman, 2001, 116), using reader development techniques to offer support to library staff who are in turn able to support their readers.

Definitions of the term

In 2001 it was suggested that the term 'reader development' was 'a buzz phrase in the library world' (The Bookseller, 2001, 26), 'part of the everyday vocabulary of public libraries' (Forrest, 2001, 168). Yet what did professionals understand by the term? Reader development has often been confused with reading development, but the two are very different. Whereas reading development focuses on the acquisition of reading skills, reader development focuses on the reading experience itself.

The underlying principles of this concept were defined in 1992 as raising the status of reading as a creative act, increasing people's confidence in their reading, and finding ways of bringing isolated readers together (Van Riel, 1992a, 4). Today, Opening the Book and The Reading Agency provide very similar definitions of reader development. Opening the Book states that it is an 'active intervention to open up reading choices, to increase people's confidence and enjoyment of what they read, and to offer reader-to-reader activity' (Van Riel, 1998). The Reading Agency refers to 'work that intervenes to expand people's reading horizons, often by connecting people to each other to share reading experiences' (McKearney, Wilson-Fletcher and Readman, 2001, 116).

From these definitions it would appear that the concept of reader development emphasizes the importance of intervention, of increased choices and of shared activity between readers: reader-centred promotion that recognizes the creative role of the reader as well as the artistic role of the writer. Would the practitioners agree that this is a fair description of their work with readers?

> putting the reader at the centre of the process is the key determinant. Putting people first in other words. (Library staff)

> I much prefer [the term] 'reader engagement' – finding ways, however subtle or explicit, to help someone trip over a new experience, visit a new concept or world, debate a view, challenge their own and others' thinking, or just escape from their worries. (Senior Library Manager)

> To me reader development is a movement. It is creating opportunities for discovery and difference and with readers in the lead. It involves risk taking, trust, respect for difference and [is] about open doors – neither books nor readers being categorized for life. Reader development is powerful – it can change lives, attitudes. It is definitely about seeing our reading lives co-existing with our lived ones: disappointments, discoveries and respecting differences all included.
>
> (Kempster, 2002b)

The reader-centred approach

Each of these perspectives underlines the fact that the reader is at the centre of all reader development activity, is given the freedom to discover, to challenge, to escape, to take risks. Reader development has the potential to create the environment, to give the opportunity and to present the range of elements that can entice the reader, and draw him or her to the reading experience. It is not prescriptive, and although the role of the librarian in reader development is to 'intervene', this is not to suggest that he or she manipulates the reader in any way, rather that their personal intervention could make the fiction collection more relevant and more accessible to an interested reader. Visiting a public library can be an overwhelming experience because of the sheer scale of what's available:

> Faced with the huge quantity of books in a library or bookshop, finding the right book for you can become a time-consuming and frustrating task. A few people are searching for a particular book or author; a lot more recognize a familiar author or title while browsing; many of us pick something completely unknown from the look of the cover. With so much to choose from, how do you make a decision about what to take home with you?
>
> (Van Riel and Fowler, 1996, 23)

The reader-centred approach of reader development helps readers to answer this question, not by dictating or prescribing, but by enabling them to make a more managed, more informed choice. Access is increased, and even without direct human intervention, the reading environment offers a service that is more tailored to the individual.

As reader development aims to encourage wider reading and reading for pleasure, it follows that participation must be voluntary, and absolutely removed from the formal education system. Although it promotes 'great works of literature' as much as the most popular genre fiction, its aims are not to instruct or 'improve' the reader in any way. As Van Riel (2002) commented:

> Some people feel awkward or ashamed about how much pleasure they get from reading. Creative reading was about liberating people who loved reading to feel OK about it – 'readers come out' was the message. And what then began to happen was that those messages about how reading connects to people's lives were so powerful and so complicated, as opposed to the very simple message of 'read

> a book and you'll do better in life', 'read a book and be a more moral person', 'read a book and you'll get a job', that they released new energies. Opening the Book was about promoting reading in ways which weren't just saying 'this is good for you'. So although some of those techniques could be used within an educational sector, their power came from being outside of that.

Reader development is driven by the individual and by choices made by the individual. It follows, therefore, that the public library, accessible to all and non-judgmental, is the ideal environment in which to conduct such activity.

Reader development: a solitary or shared activity?

> Reading is a very individual activity and a very communal one. The act of reading is done individually and sharing it makes it communal. One of the joys of reading is sharing the thoughts and feelings a book has provoked in you with others. (Kendrick, 2001, 85).

Although the obvious focus of reader development is the reader, taking into account his or her particular interests, this individual nature of reading is often overlooked when discussing reader development. However, as Van Riel told the author:

> there is a huge amount of reader development going on that people are doing entirely by themselves . . . the act of reading, that's where this starts, isn't it? The act of reading in itself . . . [is] people willingly choosing to put themselves in a position where they're going to be influenced by someone else . . . through the printed word. And some people then want the opportunity to talk to others face to face, and others don't.
>
> (Van Riel, 2002)

Unless being read aloud to, the reader reads a text alone and, outside the educational framework, will begin to interpret the text alone. From the readers' point of view and in the professional practice of intervention, the majority of reader development is concerned with the individual reader, and the choices of the individual. Krashen (1993) emphasizes the crucial role of 'free voluntary reading', which 'means putting down a book that you don't like and choosing another one instead'. 'When I go to the library, I'm completely engrossed in what I'm doing . . . it's a very personal choice and nobody can make it but me. . . . I don't know what I'm going to find and I don't want to be anticipated' (40-year-old interviewee, in Ross, 2001, 6–7).

How would reader development help the above reader? Is there a place for intervention in their reading life? Studies have suggested that there is a role for both passive and active means of promoting fiction to readers, means that can be tailored according to the reading interests of the individual (Towey, 2001). As Van Riel and Fowler suggest, 'promotion is the key to helping the majority of borrowers who don't know what they want find something they are willing to try' (Stewart, 1996, 1.02):

The passive approach takes into account that some people prefer to be left alone in their choice of reading materials, 'enjoying the solitary and serendipitous pursuit of browsing' (Towey, 2001, 135). This does not mean that they would not necessarily appreciate the intervention of the library staff, who can use promotion to make ‘unspoken’ suggestions using such ideas as pre-selected displays, groups or highlighted selections of texts, presentations of staff or reader comments about a particular book. Readers then have the freedom to accept or reject a title on display. The term ‘display’ is often interpreted to mean a large-scale presentation of titles, using expensive and purpose-built promotional materials. Equally valuable, however, are the simpler acts of turning books ‘face-out’ to display eye-catching covers, using tables and small shelving units to do the same, or even displaying paperback titles on a ‘spinner’, away from the usual A–Z sequence.

The active approach is one which encourages the individual to interact with another, to share his or her reading experience. This may be a one-to-one conversation with a librarian (often described as ‘readers’ advisory’) or a group discussion with other readers or even perhaps the author of a chosen book.

Readers’ advisory

The one-to-one conversation with the librarian, initiated either by the member of staff or more likely by the reader, is frequently referred to as the readers’ advisory interview. Readers’ advisory is a term which originated in the USA in the 1920s, and has been defined as ‘a patron-oriented library service for adult fiction readers’, a service in which ‘knowledgeable, non-judgmental staff help fiction readers with their reading needs’ (Saricks and Brown, 1997, 1).

The primary difference between the original reader’s advisory as developed in the 1920s and that which is in practice today is the attitude towards the reader. The original advisors perceived themselves to be educators, leading the reader in a particular direction that they felt would be beneficial to them. Today’s role is different: ‘Readers’ advisors today see themselves as links between fiction readers and books, just as reference librarians are the connection between users and non fiction materials’ (Saricks and Brown, 1997, 9).

During the readers’ advisory interview, the reader describes his or her reading tastes or interests to the librarian, and what he or she is in the mood to read at that particular time. In the course of what is essentially a conversation rather than an interview, the librarian could first ask the reader to tell him or her about a book they previously read and enjoyed, or even if they have read anything lately that they disliked. Listening to the response to either of these questions should provide detailed information about the person’s reading tastes, although Saricks and Brown (1997) suggest that further discussion could take place regarding the special characteristics of the books enjoyed or disliked, for example the nature of the plot and characters (69–71).

Following the conversation, readers will hopefully walk away armed with a number of suggestions of ways in which they can explore their reading interests. Furthermore, none of the titles, authors or genres mentioned in the conversation will be anything more than a suggestion – the reader is free to reject any or all of them:

> The measure of success for the readers' advisory interview is not whether the reader takes and reads the books the readers' advisor offers. Rather, the exchange is a success when readers perceive, based on the service they receive, that the library is a place where they can talk about books and obtain suggestions and resources to meet their reading needs.
> (Saricks and Brown, 1997, 57)

Some advocates of reading promotion feel that the above term 'suggestion' is of particular significance. Although it may be reasonable to 'recommend' titles to friends and family, based on our personal reading experiences and our knowledge of their interests, it would be inappropriate for members of staff to recommend titles to readers in a library: they could instead suggest a range of books that may be of interest, based on the readers' comments regarding their tastes and current mood.

> When we make this distinction, when we suggest rather than recommend, we change the focus of our readers' advisory and of our patron interactions. It is far less threatening to talk with a reader and suggest a range of books than to take the responsibility for recommending something we think is appropriate. Patrons are also more comfortable returning with comments, especially negative comments, about books we have suggested than about those that come recommended. (Saricks and Brown, 1997, 58)

Van Riel and Fowler agree that recommending books to library users can be 'a dangerous business', and that 'recommendation' is 'a loaded term'. They use the analogy of buying clothes to illustrate that people should not feel that they have 'failed' if they choose not to accept the suggestion of another – or if their suggestion is not taken: 'If you go to buy a new outfit, you can take three items into the changing room; the assistant hopes to sell you one but she doesn't feel implicated by your choice. You try on a lot of outfits before you find the one that's right for you. It is just the same with books' (Stewart, 1996, 1.03).

The question of quality

While examining the interaction between librarians and readers, it is appropriate to consider the issue of quality. There are no fixed 'quality standards' by which to assess the value of a book: if 50 readers were to read the same novel, there would be 50 different interpretations to bring to a discussion. As has previously been mentioned, the reader is at the centre of the reading experience, and one reader's view of the text is no less valid than another's.

If each member of the above group of 50 readers were asked if the book they had been given to read was 'well written', it is equally likely that there would be a further 50 different responses. What is the exact meaning of the phrase 'well written'? All readers could list books that they consider to be well written, if such books meet their own personal standards for a satisfying reading experience. They may prefer a novel with detailed characterization, a highly descriptive use of language, a fast pace, and any title that failed to contain such elements would be inadequate.

There are, of course, many hundreds of thousands of new books published every year, and it would be foolish to suggest that all are of an equal literary quality. Prizes such as the Booker, Pulitzer or Whitbread are awarded to those novels that a panel of judges feel to be particularly worthy of merit, and they have their place in informing the reader of the type of book that is ‘critically acclaimed’. However, is a person a lesser reader if he or she fails to appreciate such an acclaimed novel? Is a critically acclaimed novel necessarily ‘a good book’ to the reader who prefers a different writing style?

Van Riel suggests that it is helpful to move from the quality of the book to the quality of the reading experience:

> Debates about standards tend to focus on the quality of the writer or the book . . . look instead at the quality of the reading experience. We all know that it is possible to have a fantastic reading experience with a book that is not generally considered to be great. It is also possible to have a poor reading experience with a book that has been accepted as brilliant. (Stewart, 1996, 1.48–9)

Because of the subjective nature of quality assessment in reading material, it is not the role of the readers’ advisor to make a quality judgement on behalf of the reader, unless the reader has specifically asked for information concerning, for example, recent award-winning titles. Even if the reader asks for ‘an easy read’, it is first important to establish how he or she would define such a level of quality, ‘to be aware that there are levels and variations at both ends of this quality spectrum’ (Saricks and Brown, 1997, 59).

The reading group

> When Oprah Winfrey started her book group it seemed that she started a whole new craze. People all over the country were reading what she told them, and book groups started popping up all over the place. This resurgence in reading just shows that people were starved for the joys of reading, and needed someone to tell them it’s OK to read and enjoy it; that’s what Oprah did, gave reading the stamp of approval. People thought this book group idea was a new phenomenon, but it’s not, it’s just a new awakening, a new phase. It’s not the new fad of the ’90s. Book groups have been going on for years in different forms. Traditionally, book groups tend to be women, and I think this is because book groups provided community, provided a place of self-education, a chance to escape from the family for a time for some intelligent conversation.
>
> (Kendrick, 2001, 87)

Although readers have discussed their reading experiences with others since the advent of mass-market publishing, the book discussion group, or reading group, has grown dramatically in recent years, to the extent that we can go into almost any public library in the UK and be directed to a group that is either organized by the library staff or by interested individuals. Essex County Council, for example, supports more than 200 such groups!

Reading groups take place in libraries, bookshops, pubs, restaurants, the workplace, people’s homes, residential homes, even via the internet. There is no fixed format for the reading group, either in terms of the frequency of meetings or the content of the discussion. Members may read the same book (or books) prior to a meeting, or may choose to bring an individual selection to the group. Some groups will be extremely informal, others will require more preparation or input from their members. Some will be open to all readers, others will target a particular age group or readers of a specific genre. Some will have a list of regular attendees, others will attract people who come to discuss one particular book. Some have a clear leader who decides the titles to be discussed, others will offer all members the opportunity to lead the discussion on their chosen title.

The reported benefits of participation in a reading group vary considerably. One librarian who had begun her own group gave the following response:

> For myself, it's the reading and sharing that goes on. I read books I've always wanted to but never got around to, and I read books I never would have on my own. The discussion is the second part of it. I like the sharing, the little insights, not only to the book but to the people themselves. I have fun with the group. One member is in three groups, she says she can't imagine reading a book and not discussing it. For her the groups give her a chance to catch up on all the reading she never had the time for when she was raising a family. Now she'll read anything, but she feels she misses something if she can't discuss it. (Kendrick, 2001, 87)

A member of the Clacton Booktalk group acknowledges the effect of participation on her reading choices:

> I doubt if I would have chosen any of the books [read by the Booktalk group] off the shelf for myself. Some I have loved, some have left me indifferent, some I have hated and a very few have proved to be almost unreadable but all of them, without fail, have produced lively discussions full of insight and humour. If I read something I enjoy I pester my friends and family to read it, then I have the joy of being able to talk about it all over again. While writing my reviews I find myself wondering what other members of the group might be thinking but there is always someone who surprises me – such an interesting collection of people brought together through a common love of reading.
>
> (Turner, 2002)

The obvious advantage of these groups is that they offer readers an opportunity to share their reading thoughts and experiences with others. In this way reading, often a solitary activity, becomes participatory.

Just as the reader is not obliged to read every book recommended by the library staff, neither should he or she feel that participation in a reading group in some way validates his or her reading. Many people will choose not to participate in such activities, believing that no external stimulus is necessary in order to enjoy the act of reading:

> I have . . . [a] friend who is an avid reader. . . . Though she loves reading she is not in a book group . . . she said sharing a book is like sharing your soul and you're giving someone a chance to stomp on it. Being in a group requires some trust. I find them too personal and I don't want to share the experience with others. I want to keep it safe, and there is a fear the group won't have the same feelings that I did and it would be a blow against me. (Kendrick, 2001, 88)

The reading experience: a summary

Reader development offers people a range of choices by which they can enhance their reading experiences. To provide these choices the public library is not required to spend vast amounts of money; reader development methods are inexpensive, and can be used to exploit all existing stock and back stock, to issue new stock to more people.

The project culture

The growth in reader development activity means that public libraries throughout the UK have become involved in a wide range of project-based promotional events and programmes. Over the periods 2000–1 and 2001–2 this growth had become sufficiently widespread for the Government, via its Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), to allocate two years' of its Public Libraries Challenge Fund specifically to reader development projects. This fund, created by the DCMS in 1997–8 to 'enhance the facilities and services provided by public libraries', resulted in a total investment of £4 million in projects that aimed to enhance 'libraries' traditional strength in promoting reading as a skill and pleasure' (Great Britain, DCMS, 2001a).

The overall impact of the DCMS/Wolfson funding was undeniably great, in terms of its support of the development of a wide range of projects for both adults and young people, many of which involved the creation of partnerships with other sectors. As the evaluators of the first year of the programme reported: 'The evidence showed that the Programme was resoundingly successful in stimulating short-term reader development initiatives and a great deal of extremely exciting innovative activity took place as a direct result of the award' (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, abstract).

However, it is necessary to acknowledge the potential dangers of operating within a project culture: 'There is a great danger, particularly because it has been funded largely from external, time-limited project budgets, that reader development is regarded as a fringe activity; something to engage in when a bit of money comes along or you need a quirky but worthy event to get some press coverage' (Forrest, 2001, 169).

Project timescale

The timescale of all funded projects is limited by the length of the funded period, and it will inevitably be difficult to maintain the momentum when additional resources are no longer available. The DCMS/Wolfson awards were given for one year, and the evaluation of the first year of funding (2000–1) illustrated that this was generally regarded as insufficient: 'Final reports expressed . . . frustration that a year is too short for the majority of projects of this nature. Further, many projects require more than a year to develop the momentum necessary to make them sustainable. This is particularly the case when projects require the active participation of other partners' (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 16).

The second year of funding showed similar results. The evaluation of the Caring with Books in the West Midlands initiative (2001–2) revealed concerns over the project timescale, both in terms of the length and structure of the funded period (Train, 2002, 57):

> It has been very difficult: the money was suddenly there, and there was very little lead-in, by the time you're making in-roads it's nearly over. You're looking for a longer period: what takes the time is setting up the networks, making contacts. Time is running out! (Library staff)

> The timescale, that puts such a pressure on them [the library staff]. I think there's a quality issue when you put a hard timescale on like that, the timescale actually becomes the driving force rather than the project itself, and that's a big mistake, I think. (Project partner)

A second example is The Vital Link, an initiative linking adult literacy and libraries. Project managers suggested that overall management difficulties had been exacerbated by the limited time available in which to complete the project:

> It's a very tight time scheme in terms of the promotion, with very severe deadlines. . . . It's too short a time: everyone acknowledges that Wolfson is too short. It doesn't happen overnight, nothing can, when you're going for socially excluded people. It should be two to three years, to get the systems sorted out. (Train, et al, 2002, 118)

The evaluation reports of all the above projects recommended longer timescales for future funded reader development projects, possibly to include a preliminary research and partnership development phase, and a second phase during which to deliver the project (Train, 2002, 71; Train, Usherwood and Brooks, 2002, 132; Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 16).

Project planning

The second potential danger of the project culture, as underlined in the earlier comment by Forrest (2001, 169), is that work is often conducted with little long-term planning. Public library staff are always understandably pleased to receive additional funds, and project work is the obvious way in which to receive such support. However, such work is extremely resource intensive, and when funding ends it is difficult to continue at the same level of intensity, to maintain the impact.

To illustrate this point, the following comments are taken from data collected by the author for the evaluation of four DCMS/Wolfson projects, 2000–1 and 2001–2:

> Incredibly valuable work is being done with very little money.
> There are not enough staff available to do the project work.
> Hard work is often done by a small number of enthusiastic staff.
> Libraries are well known for their short-term projects . . . which then stop.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of working on a time-limited project is that it provides the public library with the opportunity to trial new ways of working and new methods of service delivery, before introducing them to the organization as a whole. Financial constraints that affect core services would otherwise leave little opportunity for experimentation. For such trials to work, however, the funding application process should be sufficiently rigorous that each project is based on an original idea that tests a hypothesis or an alternative mode of delivery, and is then evaluated in terms of its potential outcome on the overall service. Similarly rigorous should be the strategic direction of the project: what does the project intend to investigate? Will the funding period be sufficiently long to complete such an investigation? What measures will be taken to ensure that the work is continued after the funded period?

In order to ensure that such measures are taken, project managers should ensure that each project is considered in the light of the following:

mainstreaming – i.e. making project work a part of everyday library work, with sufficient time, staff, resources, and commitment

sustainability – i.e. ensuring that projects do not end after nine months or a year, but are continued in the daily work of the library.

A failure to consider these two issues will result in a failure to incorporate library-based project work, however excellent for a time, into core service provision.

Collaborative working with other sectors

For the second of the two years of DCMS/Wolfson reader development funding (2001–2), the DCMS (2001) stipulated: ‘All applications must be in partnerships – we will not accept bids from single authorities or organizations acting alone. . . We are particularly keen to encourage partnerships between libraries and other learning organizations, and libraries and the private sector.’

This requirement emphasizes the growing expectation that public libraries develop partnerships with other agencies, in the first instance with other public libraries, but on a wider scale with external partners from both the public and private sectors. Wallis, Moore and Marshall (2002, 27) suggest that this expectation is due to the ‘government’s commitment to modernisation’. Some partnerships will take the form of commercial sponsorship, others will involve a mutual sharing of expertise and/or resources. Both are equally valid, but it is important to recognize that they are different in their objectives.

A commercial sponsorship could, for example, provide the library service with financial support and the opportunity to participate in a promotional campaign including the use of high-quality promotional materials and media advertising. This may attract members of the public and subsequently raise the overall profile of the service. In return, the sponsor would benefit from the advertising campaign, with publicity opportunities for its organization that may involve the materials, buildings and people of the library service. The potential danger of such a venture is that one party could benefit more than another: for example, if a library service agrees to promote the shortlisted titles for a particular literary prize, it may benefit to some extent from being mentioned in the advertising campaign, but with only a limited number of titles involved in the promotion, could it reasonably expect an increase in issue statistics? Has the reading public been offered something new as a result of the promotion? Benefits in terms of reader development would certainly be difficult to find in such a venture.

Perhaps more relevant to reader development are the many consortia-based projects that have taken place in recent years, in which resources and expertise are shared or jointly developed in order to bring reader development to particular groups or organizations. Projects on this scale require considerable co-ordination, with the development of committees, working groups, even boards. Yet it follows that as the size of the project increases, the potential for it to enhance the profile of the stakeholders is also greater.

DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund for reader development

The evaluation of the overall impact of the first year of DCMS/Wolfson funding suggested that as a result of partnerships with other local government departments and community-based services, 'the profile of the library service has been raised and its ability to support the Council's work . . . has been recognized across the Council' (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 29).

Evaluation findings from two second-year projects, The Vital Link and Caring with Books in the West Midlands, revealed that project partners from other sectors (adult basic skills education and Social Services respectively) had begun to appreciate the value to their organizations of working with the public library service:

> What we're going to do now is find a way of carrying on the partnership in a way that would benefit both of us . . . from now on I'll be in [name] library every Monday morning with [name of librarian], because we're going to make a real positive drive to get a creative group going. (The Vital Link – basic skills tutor)

> We weren't aware of all the library services before. We have to continue that relationship: the library is very important to the carers, libraries go hand in glove with the work we do, because of the educational link.
>
> (Caring with Books in the West Midlands –
> Social Services representative)

Branching Out

Branching Out was a three-year initiative (1998–2001) from the Society of Chief Librarians, managed by Opening the Book and supported by the National Lottery through the Arts Council of England. With representatives from 33 partner authorities throughout England, the project raised the status of reader development within and beyond each of the 150 public library authorities through a series of regional networks and national partnerships. Since the completion of the first three years, additional funding has been awarded to Opening the Book to extend the work of Branching Out to Wales and Scotland, and to further develop the project website (see also Chapter 8).

Historically, the compatibility of library services and the commercial sector has been questioned, and the potential for partnerships has perhaps tended to be unexplored. The evaluation of the first year of DCMS/Wolfson funding gave the following report of Books & Business, a collaboration between the London Libraries Development Agency and the company Arts & Business: 'On the business side . . . scepticism remains about the ability of libraries to deliver against business objectives. Business managers "have begun to understand theoretically what library partnerships have the potential to achieve, but they still doubt the ability of librarians to deliver and execute the partnerships effectively"' (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 28). Wallis, Moore and Marshall conclude that 'there is still much to learn on both sides'. (For more on the London Libraries Development Agency see Chapter 3.)

One of the commercial partners to Branching Out was Book Communications, a reading promotion agency in the private sector, an organization that worked with a team of Branching Out librarians to develop a world literature promotion. Jonathan Davidson of Book Communications summarized his perception of the partnership as follows: 'the whole process ran smoothly and, in our opinion, was a model example of how to work with partners . . . working with the Branching Out librarians was equally rewarding. They taught us a lot and were always well briefed, positive and most importantly reliable' (Train and Elkin, 2001).

Further evidence of the success of this partnership is the fact that a second Branching Out project was developed with Book Communications, a promotion called Future Tense which aimed to ease readers into the science fiction genre.

A second commercial partner to Branching Out was HarperCollins publishing house. Guy Pringle (2002), former marketing manager, describes the growth of the partnership and the increasing awareness of the relevance of reader development to its work:

> In the late 1990s, one of my responsibilities at HarperCollins was marketing the company's publishing to the library sector. At the time, HarperCollins' perspective of this market was – and for many publishers still is – that it was moribund, unexciting and unlikely to change.
>
> However, a chance conversation at Books for Students led to contact with Rachel Van Riel and, subsequently, HarperCollins' involvement with Branching Out . . . Initially, Terrie Riley (HarperCollins' Library Sales Manager) and I saw this as an opportunity to present HarperCollins' publishing plans direct to librarians rather than through the conventional channels of library suppliers.
>
> . . . HarperCollins became the publishing partner providing information on forthcoming paperback fiction by new and relatively unknown authors. The initiative was supported by HarperCollins' promotional materials and dumpbins and proved sufficiently successful for the publisher to widen it into its first Book of the Month scheme . . . having reached nearly 30 library authorities in England, HarperCollins is now actively promoting Book of the Month more widely.
>
> On behalf of HarperCollins, we also involved ourselves in the first, and subsequent Readers' Days in Bradford which proved influential in our decision to liaise more closely with librarians, now we realized what reader development meant and just how much of it was going on . . . The intention in each case was to initiate a dialogue between HarperCollins and a wide range of library authorities in order to make them aware of the company's publishing at first hand.
>
> . . . As a further result of HarperCollins' involvement in Branching Out, it also became the publishing partner in several other Wolfson funding bids.

As demonstrated here, reader development can be relevant to the work of non-library organizations, and as in the above example, an initial joint venture can lead to long-term, sustainable partnerships that are beneficial to both parties.

A second example of an effective partnership between the publishing and library sectors via the intermediary of reader development is the newBOOKSmag ‘Book of the year’ survey – and subsequent prize. newBOOKSmag, created by Guy Pringle, formerly of HarperCollins, is a magazine for readers and reading groups that is now widely used in public libraries in the UK. The most recent newBOOKSmag initiative is the search for ‘the book of the year’, as voted for by readers of the magazine. Its creator explains the potential impact of this initiative on the publishing industry:

> Publishers pump thousands of new books into the market place each year. Their only yardstick of success or failure is sales figures and anecdotal feedback. The statistics that will result from our ‘Book of the year’ survey will add another dimension to that assessment: what readers really enjoy reading and, by definition, want to read more of. The data could prove highly influential in guiding publishers to publishing more of what readers really want. (Pringle, 2002)

Further evidence of the growing impact of reader development on the bookselling and publishing sectors is that The Bookseller, the trade publication of the bookselling industry, included the following in its first edition of 2001:

> Reader development is a buzz phrase in the library world; but, unlike most buzz phrases, it has a real meaning. Library promotions are geared towards encouraging readers to make new discoveries: ‘If you like so-and-so, why not try such-and-such?’; ‘Here are some excellent thrillers/works of black literature/historical narratives’ and so on. Publishers’ and booksellers’ promotions are mostly geared towards selling frontlist titles; many backlist promotions are of the ‘three for two’ variety designed to appeal to bargain hunters.
>
> These promotions are not, to use another buzz term, ‘empowering’ readers to make their own explorations; they are selling to customers what the book industry wants to promote. Publishers and booksellers need to encourage readers for the long term.
>
> (The Bookseller, 2001, 26)

Partnerships between the public library service and external agencies can be difficult, particularly when objectives and working methods may vary considerably. However, there is evidence to suggest that they can be both effective and beneficial, developing original initiatives that have the potential to be sustained in the longer term. Public libraries have a pivotal role to play in the promotion of reading and reading materials, and should ensure that all potential partners are aware of this. Subsequent partnerships could then be mutually beneficial, sustainable and, above all, equal. ‘Readers are the greatest resource libraries have. Reader development establishes an expanding mass of confident, empowered readers which benefits not only libraries but also writers, publishers, booksellers and everyone involved in literature. Reader development offers a role to public libraries which puts them at the centre of the world of literature’ (Stewart, 1996, 1.20).

Social inclusion

Towards the end of the previous century, there was a growing realization in the public library sector that its user profile had changed considerably: ‘As a universal and free service, the public library has gradually come to be used more by those who would not depend on it if it weren’t there than by those who really need it’ (Matarasso, 2000, 35).

At the same time, one of the priorities of the new Government was to combat the growing problem of social exclusion. This is defined by the government Social Exclusion Unit as ‘a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown’ (Lang and Wilkinson, 2000). Since the beginning of the Labour administration in 1997, the focus of government policies has shifted away from exclusion towards inclusion.

In accordance with the Government policy that ‘social inclusion should be mainstreamed as a policy priority for library and information services’ (DCMS, 2001b, 4.1), working towards social inclusion subsequently became one of the key priorities of all public libraries. The current Annual Library Plan for Worcestershire Libraries and Information Service, for example, states: ‘Social inclusion is a fundamental policy of the library service in Worcestershire. Social inclusion is a factor in all policy decisions with the underlying aim being to improve access and services for all, particularly those people who are disadvantaged in some way’ (Worcestershire Libraries and Information Service, 2001).

A widescale attempt to develop a more inclusive service was a key focus of the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund (2000–1, 2001–2). This was awarded to reader development projects that specifically aimed to reach socially excluded groups, for example:

the homeless
those with poor literacy skills
members of ethnic minority communities
the physically and mentally disabled
the visually impaired
the elderly
carers and looked-after children.

Evaluations of projects from both years have suggested that reader development can be an effective means of promoting reading to new audiences who have not previously used the library or read a certain type of book, and can support the development of new library services specifically for such audiences.

> Inside Books, a project to promote reader development in prisons, set up a reading group with male vulnerable prisoners, who have to be segregated for their own safety. These men are, in their own words, ‘desperate to get hold of books’ and the reading group ‘has proved a lifeline to the real world’. (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 12)

> The three projects that focused on ethnic minority groups . . . the Bangladeshi Link, Black

> Inc. and the *Turkish Community Readers' Project* all met or exceeded their targets and raised the profile and use of the library service with the targeted minority community.
>
> (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 19)

Although there have been many successes in terms of reader development initiatives reaching marginalized groups, the difficulty of doing so is widely acknowledged. For example, the 2000–1 DCMS/Wolfson project 'Premiership reading challenge', a football-based reader development project targeted at men, boys and looked-after children, effectively reached fathers and their sons, but failed to reach looked-after children. The project manager reported that 'Reader development work with specific target groups needs to be more focused on those groups – we cannot necessarily expect such groups to join in alongside other library users, when there is no tradition or advantage for them to do so' (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 20).

Other DCMS/Wolfson initiatives that aimed to reach different excluded groups had similar difficulties:

First Steps, Northumberland: 'There were difficulties reaching the most needy families – parents with limited literacy skills lacked the confidence to participate'

Oldham, Something Lovely: '[Local residents regarded the public library as] an alien, perhaps even hostile, environment with little or no relevance to their lives'

East Riding, Word on the Street: 'young people felt unwelcome in libraries' (Wallis, Moore and Marshall, 2002, 21).

An alternative approach?

> Starting from the reader and not the book raises all sorts of questions about the differing needs of readers and the way those needs can be met. It is what makes reader development such a powerful force for change. (Turner, 2002).

Reader development has been considered so far as a means of reaching particular groups, groups that have been in some way 'marginalized' from society. There is evidence to suggest that such initiatives have been effective in many ways, introducing people to public library resources and the pleasure of reading. However, it is also clear that this form of outreach work is problematic: how do you encourage new audiences to try new services that they have previously felt unwelcome to use and have regarded as irrelevant to their lives? And should this be the main focus of the public library, a service to whom the established clientele is of equal importance?

The idea of the public library service is entirely socially inclusive, as it offers free access to reading and learning materials and information for all members of the public, regarding all people as individuals with equal rights to its resources. This idea acknowledges the inequalities that exist in society, and 'is dedicated to reducing the gap between a theoretical right to know and our actual ability to know' (Matarasso, 2000, 35).

In the same way, reader development begins with the individual, and fails to acknowledge any difference between one reader and another. It regards each person and his or her choice of reading as equally important, and makes no value judgements.

In its targeting of particular groups, the current practice of social inclusion could be interpreted as having an underlying assumption that those people who are 'included' are correct in what they do, and that others – who are different in some way – should be given access to another way of life in order to improve their own. 'Those people who are supposed to be having social inclusion done to them, they know when the people talking to them see a gap between 'them' (the needy) and 'us' (the providers). The real inclusion is to be included without that gap, and that's the reader-centred practice that we're doing' (Van Riel, 2002).

With reader development, therefore, the approach is 'reader-centred', its starting point is the reader as an individual with individual needs, not as a member of an excluded group:

> I think that the energy and dynamism of reader development came . . . [from] an understanding and an assertion that the fundamental act of reading was the same for all kinds of people. What they use it to do may vary hugely, but the practice of reading and what was going on there psychologically, socially and culturally . . . was something which could be shared. . . . That reader, that potential reader, is the same kind of human being as the people who are trying to provide the service. And the energy of reader development was to assert that fundamental connection . . . we recognize that the way in which somebody else reads is not fundamentally different from the way in which I read . . . that's a much healthier way to see it . . . and therefore there's no gap to bridge. (Van Riel, 2002)

A considerable proportion of the public library budget is today allocated to outreach work, to reaching those who, for many reasons, are not currently using the service. Many library staff are required to visit community groups or individuals either to bring the service to them, or to encourage them to go to the library building itself. Forrest (2002) suggests that this is not necessarily the role of library personnel:

> Libraries need to realize that when they are trying to reach the most disadvantaged groups, or individuals, who are excluded from the library service for all sorts of economic, social or cultural reasons, that they can never go there on their own. In fact librarians are often fairly ill equipped to reach the most disadvantaged or excluded people. Libraries are public institutions with all the strengths and benefits of a democratic cultural space – but the very fact of being a public institution can also be a barrier for some people. Nevertheless, they are the only sustainable way of delivering the service and we should give more attention to managing them better. The purpose of outreach and social inclusion work is to attract people in to the library but too many outreach programmes do not complete that loop. At the same time librarians feel the need to develop skills which are not germane to their role. Librarians need to articulate the benefits of what it is that they have to offer people and then work with the right agencies who can communicate that to the targeted audience. Then they need to make sure that when the targeted people do come in, that the library is vibrant and relevant, and inspiring to those people.

The public library service should reach out to the non-users, not necessarily by delivering more resources and services to them, but by giving them a greater access to such services, and above all a wider choice. Promotions would perhaps be more effective if the services they offered were integrated into the mainstream service, reducing the stigma of 'being different'.

Mind’s Eye

Two examples of promotions that have been devised to be integrated into the core service in this way are Mind’s Eye (2000–1) and the First Choice promotion of The Vital Link (2001–2).

The Mind’s Eye project (managed by Opening the Book Ltd) was awarded to the Public Libraries Group of the former Library Association, as part of the first year of the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund for reader development. It aimed to promote narrative non-fiction in particular to adult male readers under 50 – an age group that is widely recognized to be under-using the public library service for other than reference materials. However, the two book promotions that were devised during the project – ‘Reflect’ and ‘Decide’ – were integrated to the library service as a whole, and did not prioritize the reading needs of one reader over another. It moved the books away from the ‘serried ranks of spine-on books in an A to Z sequence’ (Van Riel, 2001, 30), towards a whole-library presence.

Pilot authorities participating in the Mind’s Eye project reported that they had been encouraged to rethink not only the content but also the presentation of their stock promotions. For example, library staff planned procedural changes in terms of the location of their promotional activities:

> It clarified the purpose of non-fiction promotion and also gave me the enthusiasm to think up promotional ideas of my own.
>
> In general terms our expectations are to extend reader development practices throughout the library, which is why our main thrust has been in focusing upon the non-fiction/reference floor of the Central library. The ideas we are using in that are a totally new approach for us . . . using location creatively, breaking down stereotypes . . . and barriers to borrowing non-fiction.
>
> I believe that continuity of approach is most important if we wish to change the public perception of libraries. (Train, 2001, 19–20)

First Choice

The overall purpose of the First Choice exercise, developed as part of the Vital Link initiative, was to develop a promotion of appropriate titles to be enjoyed by all emergent readers. Titles were specifically selected from ‘mainstream’ lists, thereby widening the choice of reading materials available to those with reading difficulties, while at the same time making them equally available to any library user. A basic skills tutor made the following response to the collection: ‘They’re very adult, and they’re certainly not in any way patronising . . . all that is excellent . . . you’re dealing with quite sophisticated people . . . it’s quite hard to have something that is adult and sophisticated, but still simple enough language to be accessible . . . this has got to be a move in the right direction!’ (Train, 2002, 115).

The inclusive public library service can use reader development methods to focus its attention not on a specific group, but on the individual, offering to but not prescribing for each member of society:

> the independence, the space and the trust. And it's the structure of libraries, rules, regulations, often that stand in the way of those things. And if you're talking about reaching a group . . . libraries do have to do more than just make themselves open, to open the doors . . . they have to reach out. So in that sense, yes, they have to be more socially inclusive . . . [to be] available to those people, to make sure that they're getting all the same chances as everybody else. But because of what it is, because of what the library is, because of what reader development is, what you give them is the space to have the choice about whether to be included or not . . . because I have the right to be different! I have the right to access all of those books, but I don't have to read them in the same way as you. (Forrest, 2002)

The impact of reader development on service provision and policy

> The real issue facing the profession is how to maintain the creativity, the power and the passion while delivering policy statements and performance reports. Of course, they are not mutually exclusive, we need to know why we are doing things, and to gain budget we need to show the impact . . . The principle reason many of us are so passionate about engaging people with words is because of the impact it has . . . In reality, it is this impact that is important. To ensure support for this work we, of course, need to translate this impact to service output and national strategy. (Blanshard, 2002)

The field of reader development has dramatically increased in recognition in recent years. At a time when book funds are increasingly limited, reader development initiatives have arguably brought individuals together into stronger working groups.

Work conducted in partnership with agencies such as Opening the Book and The Reading Agency (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) has affected the quality and range of titles purchased by library services, and the way in which such materials are displayed and promoted. Other core reader development activities have similarly affected long-established stock policies:

> Libraries involved with reader development will already have registered the impact on their stock policy. Reading groups, for example, challenge our established, or budget-led decisions on numbers of titles stocked and the way in which we move the stocks between libraries. Buying in stock promotions affects the way in which our policy is determined for displays, exhibition and promotions. (Lake, 2002)

An ongoing reader development programme ensures that work conducted 'on the ground' is more visible, and reveals the benefits of reader development to both staff and end-users:

> The whole concept [of reader development] has had a huge impact on Gateshead. It has changed the way we select our stock, we buy fewer hardbacks now and have a much wider range of fiction. Staff have become more confident to display titles which at one time they would have hidden in case they caused offence and most important of all, we now have a tradition of reader-based events across the borough. . . . Authors, too, seem to be more prepared to come and give talks and to listen to readers' groups discussing their work. Use of high quality nationally produced promotional material has enhanced the appearance and raised the profile of our displays. (Cameron, 2002)

The role of all staff in policy development

Whereas changes in organizational culture are often driven from a strategic level only, it is significant that all library staff have a role to play in reader development, and can influence its impact on their workplace. For example, after three years of participation in the Branching Out initiative, senior managers and frontline library staff were able to provide equal evidence of the considerable impact of participation on their library service:

- increased staff knowledge of contemporary literature
- increased staff awareness of readers and their reading needs
- acquisition of (transferable) skills with which to design training programmes
- acquisition of tools with which to attract larger reading audiences to libraries
- demonstration of sustainable models of partnerships, e.g. between libraries and commercial partners
- increased collaboration and co-operation between staff across an authority
- sustained development or creation of regional networks for reader development work
- new focus on stock selection and book promotion as integrated processes
- development and provision of centralized stock selection processes
- increased use of ICT as a reader development tool
- development/revision of reader development policies, e.g. Annual Library Plans, policy documents.

Frontline staff engaged in reader development activities are regarded as ‘good to do business with’ (Kempster, 2002b). They are frequently instrumental in the development of partnerships with other cultural services, and can raise the profile of library staff and the overall public library service.

Reader development and technology

It could be argued that one reason for the impact of reader development on library service developments is that it has served to dispel fears that the increase of information technology will result in the demise of the book. Electronic reader development initiatives such as whichbook.net (formerly Book Forager) and Ask Chris (developed by Essex Libraries) have helped to convince both staff and users that ICT offers an alternative – and not a replacement – reading experience (see also Chapter 7).

As Saricks (2001, 120) states, ‘Those of us who love books are not trying to win a battle against technology. We take advantage of that technology in serving patrons with reading interests . . . In the best of all worlds – and libraries – books and technology will continue to supplement each other.’

To regard the two as complementary would seem, therefore, to be the most effective strategy that today’s public library manager could adopt: ‘The future public library workforce will find reader development to be an ideal tool in squaring the circle of demand and resourcing . . . developing reader development virtual services and products will become a new area that could be both lucrative and high impact’ (Kempster, 2002b).

The future of reader development

In recent years, particularly since the late 1990s, a considerable amount of public and private funding has been allocated to reader development initiatives managed within the public library service. The largest single fund to date has been the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund for reader development (approximately £4 million awarded during the periods 2000–1, 2001–2), and when it ended fear was understandably expressed as to the future of reader development: ‘Reader development is still quite young and vulnerable especially in environments that just have not ‘‘got it’’ in terms of the underlying and fundamental nature of reader development. So I think the jury is out on what will happen without the lure of a budget’ (Kempster, 2002b).

The DCMS fund and similar awards strongly supported reader development work, giving public library services an ideal opportunity to trial and develop new and alternative elements of their overall service, to promote reading in innovative ways.

When the original funding period is over, it can be extremely difficult to sustain projects, promotions, websites, readers’ groups, without additional resources – both human and financial. However, perhaps the time following a funded period should automatically be dedicated to applying the lessons of the pilot phase, to finding a way to incorporate the effective elements of the project to mainstream service provision? In doing so, public library managers can use the evidence collected during the pilot phase to allocate internal, existing funds to deliver and sustain an enhanced core service: ‘Public library authorities know the agenda: this is what our readers want and it is up to us to maintain these services, to re-direct funds or create partnerships with bookshops, publishers and writers to provide the reader development services for the future’ (Lake, 2002).

Writing in the Independent newspaper in 2001, Ken Worpole made the following statement: ‘A few years ago Britain’s public library service had the look of a tanker sailing slowly but inexorably into institutional oblivion. Crucially, it had lost its vital relationship with the culture of reading and an engagement with contemporary literature. Librarians had, in every sense, lost the plot’. Fortunately, however, he reported that he had subsequently noted ‘a dramatic change in the public library’s relationship with reading’, and that ‘the tanker has been turned round’ (McKearney, Wilson-Fletcher and Readman, 2001, 116).

At the same time, McKearney et al (2001, 116) commented on the ever-increasing profile of the public library service in its promotion of reading: ‘Not only are libraries now directing major resources into working with readers, they’re getting much more confident about bagging the territory of being the UK’s most significant provider of the reading experience.’

Further evidence of the increasingly widespread acceptance of the role of public libraries in promoting reading can be found at a national level. The Audit Commission Best Value inspection process in the UK specifically requires library services to focus on reader development, and its recent report ‘Building better library services’ (Great Britain. Audit Commission, 2002) refers to reader development as one of the key recent changes to the library service.

In the public library sector today ‘the needs of readers are being seen as one of libraries’ managerial priorities’ (McKearney, 1999, 106). Reader development has become a high-profile activity, and its value and impact are being recognized by other agencies, both within the public sector and in the commercial world. Its recent dramatic growth was partially but not entirely due to the additional funding allocated specifically to reader development projects: the commitment of public library staff played an equal role.

Where library services have taken the initiative and incorporated successful elements of promotions or projects into the core service, and where staff at all levels are included in the process, sustainability is more likely to be ensured.

> ‘Bearing in mind the fortitude needed for reader development to get thus far, I am optimistic that . . . it will go forward. This is because passion wins through and the reading animateurs I meet are not doing this because it’s a job or a fashion: this is deep and strikes at the core values they hold as librarians’. (Kempster, 2002b)

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