

Shouldn't we start at the beginning?



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Adelaide's community television station offers a wonderfully eclectic range of programs, one of which — during a break in the cricket in late January — captured my attention. It was a replay of a 23 January open session of the United States Senate's Education Committee chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy. Focused on early childhood education, this session had been deferred from its original date of 11 September 2001. There was inevitably much reflection by members of the committee on the lessons of humanity and mortality deriving from the tragedies of that day. However its highlight was the presence, assured demeanour, and speech of First Lady Laura Bush — librarian and teacher — which focused on the importance of establishing the foundations of literacy in pre-school children. She did it well. It was fascinating to hear all of the ten or so senators — with one exception all males — show they understood the issue and commit themselves to it. It was also good to hear the 'L' word used frequently as an absolute positive during the discussion.

This issue has become Laura Bush's national leadership issue from her experience as a teacher and subsequently as — apparently — a very effective public librarian. In Australia we need to go back to Margaret Whitlam's involvement in the 1990 Year of Literacy to find any such similar interest in the critical issue of developing and sustaining a literate population, without which the contribution of all of us — academic, public, teacher, special librarians and information specialists is constrained

For a president of the United States to be aware of libraries and librarians — the last to be so aware was Eisenhower — is a good thing globally. President Bush has familial reason to assert his warmth towards them, and to recently commit US\$10million to improving their education 'to help create a new generation of librarians'. Given Laura Bush's position, the futurist who in arguing for creativity over knowledge asserted that 'If information is power, librarians would rule the world', might now rethink.

In leading on the issue of early childhood literacy development Laura Bush is set to make a more enduring contribution than many of her predecessors because illiteracy remains the base of individual and societal dysfunctionality worldwide. We might now see information literacy — the recognition of information need and capacity to identify, access, evaluate and apply the needed information — as the umbrella literacy for the 21st century. However under that umbrella, the capacity to read is fundamental.

Did you know that member countries of the OECD have up to half of their adult populations not reading at the level of literacy required for

everyday life? Or that in Australia forty-four per cent of adults are deficient in their literacy and numeracy levels? As Geraldine Casterton, president of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy, observed last year

2001 marks the 10th anniversary of the release of Australia's Language and Literacy Policy ... at the time of the release Australia was thought to be at the vanguard of adult literacy policy and provision internationally. Now, ten years down the track, we are falling behind ... with a dying commitment from federal and state governments resulting in poorly co-ordinated action, fragmented, under-resourced provision and lack of appropriate accountability measures' (Adult Learning Australian Commentary no. 20, 2001)

As Laura Bush and the committee she addressed identified, illiteracy comes at an enormous cost to the life and potential of the individual. It also comes at great cost to the community, in terms for example of crime at all levels, particularly that committed by young males. Addressing it as an adult remediation issue is important and public and TAFE libraries, in particular, continue to make their contribution through adult and literacy support programs and providing accessible resources. However, is it not even more important to address the core issue, which is that children need to be introduced to books and reading *before* their school years because they learn more in their first five years than at any other times in their lives. Numerous studies have now shown that children who are read to from an early age learn more sounds, extend their vocabularies, imaginations and understanding of concepts, and learn to read by themselves more easily — but many parents need encouragement and support in providing early learning experiences for their child. As South Australian writer and educator Mem Fox has stated 'reading aloud is the most important tool in literacy education', a reference in an article published in *APLIS* June 2000 (pp52–58), 'Establishing the foundation of literacy for pre-school children' by WA librarian Sue North. That article tells a good story from WA about family literacy initiatives there but public libraries across Australia need a much bigger investment in children's librarians and resources by local and state governments — and library managers — to partner parents in this most important need for their children for the future of Australia. Children's librarians working with teacher librarians can arguably have more long-term impact on the future of Australia than all other sectors of our profession put together. They can also have the greatest impact on how the decision-makers of the future view investment in library and information services.

If, as the refrain goes 'children are our future', nothing is more important than developing their literacy, and at an early age. It should be a priority for our profession. Agree? Disagree? What's been your experience? Let *inCite* know e-mail incite@alia.org.au. ■

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