

Reading Aloud — a challenge for Friends

FOLA's first Report to the Nation *Australian Bookstart: a national issue, a compelling case* was launched in December 2004. It recommended a national two day consultation to be held in 2005 to highlight the importance for literacy development and bonding of reading aloud to babies and young children, and assisting parents and caregivers to develop the awareness, skills and access to good books to do so.

And so, in Sydney 31 August-1 September during National Literacy and Numeracy Week and due to the efforts of Mem Fox and Julie Urquhart, this consultation came to pass in the form of a national Read Aloud Summit funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training. During his fine opening address to the 200 delegates Minister Brendan Nelson committed the government to funding a second summit in 2006 — important because the first Summit produced no tangible outcomes. It was more a voyage of discovery and connection about how a number of agencies are responding to the issues, sometimes in isolation from each other.

The program consisted of workshops and several keynote papers. Speakers included

- Frank Oberklaid, the Director of the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne which, in partnership with The Smith Family, has developed a research-based literacy promotion program called *Let's Read* www.letsread.com.au. His presentation looked at the evidence about why reading aloud to young children is vital to ensure the greatest chance of each child reaching their full potential.
- Jenni Connor has been an early childhood teacher, school principal and curriculum manager and has held the positions of National President for the Children's Book Council of Australia and for the Australian Literacy Educators' Association. She spoke on the evidence pointing to how sharing books at home plays a central role in laying the foundations for literacy learning and explained how families, librarians, carers and early childhood teachers can draw children's attention to particular structures and features of books, to build their concepts about books and print and to bridge them into enjoyable literacy learning.
- Julie Urquhart, Chief Executive Officer of the Dymocks Literacy Foundation spoke on a Newspoll survey, commissioned by Dymocks, which found that while 100% of people think reading to children is important, almost half of Australian parents do not read to their children on a daily basis.
- Dr Robert Needleman, associate professor of paediatrics at Case School of Medicine (US) spoke about the program he developed *Reach Out and Read* (ROR). In this program paediatricians and family doctors give advice about reading aloud and a picture book at every health promotion visit, from 6 months to 6 years of age. More than 2,300 clinics and offices participate in ROR, in the US and abroad. The ROR intervention has three parts:
 - 1 Volunteers or students read aloud with children in the waiting room (in many clinics, the wait is an hour or more!)
 - 2 During health supervision visits (check-ups) the doctor provides personalised, culturally sensitive guidance to parents about reading aloud, including demonstrating ways to enjoy books with their babies
 - 3 At each visit, from 6 months to 6 years, the doctor gives the child a beautiful new picture book to take home.
- Mem Fox was an associate professor of education at Flinders University for 20 years until 1996. As well as being, of course, a great writer of books for young children, she is now an

international consultant in literacy, and the major Australian exponent of the importance of reading aloud to babies. Mem's presentation was very interactive and focused on how to keep audiences awake and entranced during a reading aloud session, no matter how old or young the audiences. Delegates read together in the ways Mem directed – loudly, quietly, slowly, quickly, with pauses. Great fun!

- Rosemary Clarke joined the UK Booktrust in 1998 and helped to establish UK Bookstart as the first national books for babies program in the world. Similar programs linked to UK Bookstart have now been started in Japan, Thailand, Korea, and India. Several Australian public libraries are also linked with UK Bookstart. Her presentation provided an overview of Bookstart (see www.Bookstart.co.uk); the research supporting the benefits of early reading aloud and booksharing; how the program began with 300 babies in Birmingham in 1992; grew to 2 million children in just one year; and then made the transition from a comprehensive national initiative to an internationally adopted program..
- Dr Leonie Rowan, a senior lecturer in education at Deakin University, spoke on the challenges of engaging boys in literacy education and on the importance of ensuring that boys have positive experiences with books and with reading from a very early age. A key strategy is reading aloud to young boys and the presentation outlined some of the most effective ways to engage young children – and especially young boys - with a variety of books. It also identified some of the common pitfalls that people encounter when working with boys and reading, and highlighted the importance of having a robust set of strategies to draw upon in creating a bridge between boys and books.

The papers from the Summit should appear soon on its website www.literacyandnumeracy.gov.au.

FOLA was represented at the Summit by our executive director Daniel Ferguson and myself. A number of public librarians were also there. This was fortunate. At the beginning of the Summit many of the other delegates clearly had little idea that public libraries are already heavily involved in early childhood literacy support, Bookstart programs and have great potential to do more.

By its end, the Summit delegates would have been left in no doubt about the major partnering role of libraries in early childhood literacy. They would have also been left in no doubt about the importance of a nationally coordinated Australian Bookstart, following Rosemary Clarke's presentation which emphasised the critical importance of public libraries to the UK Bookstart. Their contribution to Bookstart is now a UK government impact measure for them.

Whilst it produced a consensus on Bookstart and reading aloud as a national issue, the Summit did not take Australia any closer to national action. Three states and one territory, individual organisations such as the Dymocks Literacy Foundation and The Smith Family, and individual public libraries (sometimes with the support of their Friends) are developing commendable responses to the issues. Yet at the current rate of progress it will be at least a decade before Bookstart will be supplied to all parents and their babies — and for every baby that is not read to there is potentially another semi literate or illiterate Australian who will not develop their full potential as an individual and as a contributor to society. Can Australia afford to wait that long?

So here's a challenge for all public library Friends.

- Discuss FOLA's first Report to the Nation (on this website)
- Review my observations on the Read Aloud Summit
- Read its papers when they appear on the Summit website

- Find out what your Council's strategic policy is on early childhood and parental support, and whether it makes any reference to literacy development
- Find out what your state or territory government is doing about the issue-some are doing very little, particularly Queensland
- Discuss with your library manager what the library is doing and would like to do
- Read Mem Fox's seminal book *Reading magic*, of which your library should have at least one copy

...and *then* organise a public meeting for parents, grandparents, other caregivers, kindergartens and Council elected members and staff to highlight the issues and how to respond to them at the local level.

Where I can, I'll be happy to contribute to such a meeting, but if you are really lucky you may be able to persuade Mem Fox to speak. However she is a very busy person indeed, much in demand in Australia and overseas. Often you will be able to find a local person who shares Mem's passion and knowledge about an issue about which we all should be passionate...reading aloud well, from the best books available and at the earliest age possible, to the next generation of Australians.

Dr Alan Bundy
President