

Canadian Public Library Services to Newcomers: Challenges for the Saskatoon Public Library

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I have worked at the Saskatoon Public Library (SPL) for over 20 years. When I began working at the library, my job title was “Adult Basic Education/English as a Second Language Librarian” which was understandably shortened to A.B.E. /E.S.L. Librarian. I was frequently called the ABC Librarian, to more clearly explain the nature of my work.

Public libraries are complex institutions and a lot of library vocabulary is foreign to the people who use our services. The impact of this unclear language is greater for newcomers who may not be familiar with public library systems or who are learning English. The Ottawa Public Library recognized this in its 2006 publication developed with the Ottawa Community Coalition for Literacy, *Getting to Know the Library*. The instructor’s manual component of the publication contains five pages of definitions and descriptive pictures concerning unfamiliar, library-specific terms (Harwood 2006, pp. 12-16). The Toronto Public Library lists library terms and their definitions in the “Multicultural Resources” section of its Web site (TPL 2006).

The SPL shares many of the values of other public library systems in Canada. Our library’s vision statement refers to providing accessible resources for people of all ages and backgrounds, meeting the informational needs of the people who make up its community, and enhancing cultural understanding and development. The library’s contract with its unionized employees specially affirms that the library is governed by the Canadian Library Association’s Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom (1985): “All persons in Canada have the fundamental right, as embodied in the nation’s Bill of Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to have access to all expressions of knowledge, creativity and intellectual activity, and to express their thoughts publicly. This right to intellectual freedom, under the law, is essential to the health and development of Canadian society.”

Saskatoon was founded in the 1880s and settled by Aboriginal peoples and immigrants of European and American origins. The city’s origins are still reflected in its population; Aboriginal peoples make up just over nine percent of the population. It has a large proportion of people born to parents of different origins (Pontikes and Garcea 2006, p. 10). It is a pleasant prairie city with an attractive river surrounded by parks, a thriving university, and a population of 233,923 which makes it the largest centre in Saskatchewan. Saskatoon is sometimes referred to as the Paris of the Prairies but not usually in January when the mean temperature is -17 °C. Approximately 43 percent of immigrants arriving in Saskatchewan choose to live in Saskatoon but, as recently as 2005, the province attracted just 1,600 immigrants. Growing up in the 1960s in Saskatoon, I would not have described it as a diverse community.

Things have begun to change in Saskatoon and in the rest of the province. From 2006 to 2007, immigration to Saskatoon increased by 48 percent and to the province in general by 29 percent (Brady 2008). The majority of immigrants came from the People’s Republic of China, Afghanistan, Sudan, India, and Iraq. Now one can frequently see non-Aboriginal visible minorities in Saskatoon and the need for services to newcomers to our city is immense.

As most of Canada goes through an economic recession, the Conference Board of Canada is projecting an increase of 3.3 percent in the GDP for Saskatoon and 3.6 percent for Saskatchewan in 2009 (Kyle 2009). One of the greatest challenges facing the province is a labour shortage which has led the government to expand its Provincial Nominee Program. The expansion of the program allows employers to hire qualified immigrants for most technical, trade, and professional jobs in the province. In 2008, Saskatchewan politicians (including the premier) brought together 50 of the province’s companies in Toronto for Canada’s largest job fair. They also hosted a community barbeque in an ethnically diverse Toronto neighbourhood in an attempt to attract skilled immigrant workers to Saskatchewan. The government hopes to attract as many as 10,000 immigrants to the province within the next year.

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These economic, political, and demographic changes have presented challenges to all agencies that serve newcomers in Saskatoon. The executive director of one settlement agency described the changes in the past year as “exciting and explosive” (SODS 2007-2008, p. 3), an apt characterization as we struggle to meet the growing needs of the newcomer community.

To meet these needs, the SPL provides services particularly targeting newcomers. The central library and six branches all include books for adults and children in 24 languages other than English. These collections are lent to us by the Provincial Library’s Multilingual Services Program and are heavily used. Three library locations have specific ESL collections of material for people who are learning English and all of our locations carry popular and heavily used study guides for English proficiency examinations such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Many of these materials are expensive and require special packaging and shelving for library use. They are also labour-intensive in that they are composed of multiple formats (book, CD, DVD, and MP3) that are easily separated, lost, or damaged. Our library also carries magazines in Vietnamese, French, and German and newspapers in French, Ukrainian, and Ethiopian. We provide electronic access to subscription databases that offer digital copies of newspapers from 73 countries in 39 different languages. We maintain a file of information on Canada’s citizenship examination to help newcomers answer questions about Canada and the library regularly hosts citizenship ceremonies in our meeting rooms. Library staff offer community agencies tours of our facilities and go to community agencies to talk to their clients about our services. We partner with community agencies and organizations that serve newcomers on grant applications for projects and to advocate on issues important to newcomers to the city.

Many of the standard services that the library provides to the general public are particularly appealing to newcomers to the city. The SPL offers free computer classes for those who are just beginning to use computers and on more advanced computer applications. Library staff have created online Research Guides on popular topics such as “careers and jobs” and “literacy and ESL resources,” where users can find links to library materials and to community and electronic resources: <http://www.saskatoonlibrary.ca/is/subjectguides.html>. The library provides free computers for the public to use in all library branches. The computers are accessible for e-mailing, Web browsing, and word processing and are frequently used by newcomers referred from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to print downloadable forms. Library programs for adults and story times for children and families are attended by newcomers eager to practice their English skills.

Many public libraries in Canada provide similar services to newcomers in their communities. Funded by CIC and the Ontario government, the well-developed Settlement.Org Web site for newcomers to Ontario promotes public library use to newcomers through the direct appeal of many of these services. Included on the site is a fact sheet developed by the Settlement Workers in Schools Program which frames the direct appeal of public library membership for newcomers in terms of free public library services that will:

- help their children succeed in school,
- provide information on finding employment,
- lend materials in many languages,
- provide access to computers and the Internet, and
- offer an opportunity to have fun with their family.

Several public library systems in Canada offer more direct services to newcomers in their communities. Canadian public libraries offer English language training, TOEFL preparation classes, conversation circles, and book clubs for newcomers. Some public libraries host classes on financial management, preparing for the citizenship or a driver’s license examination, and the social services available for newcomers. Library Web sites provide membership applications in various languages and some have embedded videos in different languages on becoming a library member and the services they offer. The Hamilton Public Library lends bilingual books (English matched with 13 other languages); family language kits (FLAGS) containing books, picture dictionaries, and puppets to assist newcomer families with learning English; and school readiness workbooks in 12 languages. In British Columbia, the Richmond Public Library has partnered with community agencies to provide a wide variety of programming in Cantonese, Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Russian.

The need to provide this level of essential public library services for newcomers is a challenge for the SPL. Like most of the agencies and organizations that serve newcomers in our city, we do not have the developed structure of centres in Ontario and British Columbia. The tremendous increase in the number of immigrants and refugees arriving in Saskatoon has stretched the existing resources in our community while we struggle to meet needs. The federal and provincial government agencies which govern immigration in Saskatchewan have begun to recognize this challenge and announce funding increases to agencies and organizations that serve newcomers. The SPL is funded primarily by the City of Saskatoon, which provides almost 93% of the library's budget. Currently, our library does not receive sustained, dedicated funding from the federal or provincial government to help us provide materials for learning English or develop programming for newcomers.

For many newcomers, like many other people in Canada, the public library plays a critical role in accessing free information, materials, and programs to help navigate in life. This role, as the Canadian Library Association has expressed, is essential to the health and development of Canadian society.

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