



Date : 21/06/2006

Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia

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Meeting:	101 Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons
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Simultaneous Interpretation:	Yes
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WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 72ND IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
20-24 August 2006, Seoul, Korea
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/index.htm>

Abstract

No matter what language – dyslexia is everywhere!

It is estimated that dyslexia affects 8% -10% of the world's population. Dyslexia or Specific Learning Disability is a serious disability in a world of letters. Since Dyslexia is an invisible disability, many people have difficulty understanding the problems of a person with dyslexia. The libraries have the responsibility to assist this large group of patrons in accessing information on equal terms with their fellow citizens.

The democratic right of access to culture, literature and information extends to all, including those with reading difficulties. It is of vital importance that all citizens be able to obtain information that enable them to function society. In order for a person to exercise his/her democratic rights and to control his/her own life, all citizens must be well informed.

This paper offers examples on how to welcome persons with dyslexia in the library and provide appropriate services and materials. The entire staff should be well informed about disabilities, including "invisible" disabilities like dyslexia. The library should be accessible for persons with dyslexia and should offer books made specifically for persons with reading problems, materials on CD and other media, including computer programs designed for persons with dyslexia.

Literature: Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia. By Gyda Skat Nielsen and Birgitta Irvall. Under the auspices of the Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons Section. IFLA, 2001.

Dyslexia is everywhere

During the 1999 IFLA Conference in Bangkok, the European Dyslexia Association (EDA) in cooperation with the IFLA Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons (LSDP) Section presented a poster session entitled “No Matter what Country – Dyslexia is Everywhere” and “No Matter what Language – Dyslexia is Everywhere”. Many colleagues from all over the world visited the exhibit stand expressing great interest in learning about dyslexia and what libraries can do to include persons with dyslexia in their services.

When the LSDP "**Guidelines for Libraries Serving Persons with Dyslexia**" were introduced at the 2001 IFLA Conference in Boston, conference participants also showed much interest. Since then the dyslexia guidelines have been translated into several languages, including all the official IFLA languages.

In spite of this wide interest, there is still a long way to go before libraries around the world reach the goal of equal service to all patrons, including those with dyslexia.

A significant population group

One should keep in mind that we are not talking about an insignificant minority population group. The European Dyslexia Association estimates that between 8% and 10% of the world's population are dyslexic. About 2% -3% have major problems or are not able to read at all. In short, we are talking about millions of people, and we as librarians have the responsibility to extend our services to these patrons.

Dyslexia is present in all cultures and affects all social groups. It is important to emphasize that dyslexia is not caused by a mental disability, sensory defect, emotional problem, or cultural deprivation. The intelligence levels of persons with dyslexia are no different than those of the general population. Some very famous persons were dyslexic: Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Niels Bohr, Auguste Rodin, and Hans Christian Andersen.

Responsibility of all library staff

The democratic right of access to culture, literature, and information extends to all citizens, including those with reading difficulties. All citizens should be able to obtain information that enables them to participate fully in society. Quality of life is also an important factor. Through reading, people are able to share ideas, thoughts and experiences with other people.

Venturing inside a library presents a real barrier to many people with dyslexia. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the **entire** library staff to make sure that persons with reading difficulties receive attentive service when they do visit the library.

Persons with dyslexia frequently have low self-esteem. During their school years they often experienced a sense of failure which makes them vulnerable. We have to make an extra effort to make this large group of people, who are generally unfamiliar with the library, feel welcome when

they visit. This may mean changing the attitude of library staff and teaching them the appropriate way to interact with and assist dyslexic library patrons.

Some librarians may even think that patrons with reading difficulties are more “troublesome” and less “interesting” than other patrons. This attitude may stem from inadequate training in library school and lack of knowledge about various disabilities.

Always keep in mind that in a world of letters, dyslexia is a serious disability. And since dyslexia is an "invisible" disability, it is especially difficult to earn the empathy and understanding of other people. It is easier to notice a blind person or one using a wheelchair and to realize that this person requires special assistance.

Crossing the barrier

Many persons with dyslexia feel that the library is not a place for them and are hesitant to cross the “threshold” to the library. The dyslexic person who **does** muster the courage to enter should be made to feel welcome.

I would like to read a passage from the book **“I wasn’t stupid after all. Thirteen dyslexics demand to be heard,”** which was published in 1996 by four Swedish county libraries. It illustrates well how a dyslexic person feels entering the public library for the first time. The translation into English was done by me.

Roger is 42 and has a severe reading problem. He has decided to try to enter the library – to cross the threshold! But it is not easy.

“Should I forget it or should I go in?”

Soon I was there, outside the library, and kept on sitting in the car. I debated with myself, should I forget it or should I actually go in. Libraries are old with narrow rooms; they are dark places with books from floor to ceiling. Like in the school library where the teacher was sitting. After that, I had never again gone to such a place, never in my life.

I will just begin to stutter, I thought, and I won’t be able to get a word out. A book about bowling. Maybe people will stop and stare at me. I couldn’t think of what to say to the librarian, but that was not as important as just taking the step inside.

Then I gathered up all my courage. Pulled myself together.

The building actually felt spacious. Not so many books, the shelves were not so heavy, and were smaller than I remembered from my childhood. They didn’t close in on you. And the windows were big, letting in lot of light.

Then I stepped forward. This won’t work, I thought, I won’t be able to say a word.

Then that feeling went away and it was actually easy. But to walk up to the librarian and say: I am a very bad reader, can you help me find something about bowling. No way!

Must first walk around the library, size it up, absorb the atmosphere, really feel the place.

The people there were mostly young. I didn't think they were looking at me when I went over to the talking books, in the middle of the room. So easy to be able to stand just in the middle of the library and look at the talking books. So easy it was to find them, they were not hidden away into a dark corner. Because in a dark corner, I would draw attention to myself; why does he stand back there in the corner looking at talking books, he seems normal, so why does he stand looking at such books?

But here I was in the middle of the room, after all like anybody else. I didn't stand out in the crowd. A blind person has his white cane, a deaf person has his hearing aid, but my problem doesn't show until I write, until I try to read. It becomes such an emotional thing, so charged. They think it is clear from the first grade, or even before, so that they can brag about their intelligent children.

But now I have been in the library for a while and have got used to it, I have stepped inside. It feels spacious and nice and the talking books are in the center. The next thing to do is to walk over and talk to the librarian."

Roger was lucky. He succeeded in passing the threshold to the library. But how do we make other "Rogers" standing outside the library feel welcome in there?

Accessible libraries

First and foremost, the library should be **inviting**. Signposting inside and outside the library should be clear with pictograms that make it easier to find the right materials.

It is highly recommended placing materials of special interest to dyslexic patrons, e.g., talking books and easy-to-read books, centrally and easily visible in the library. It is also important to keep in mind that many persons with dyslexia feel embarrassed having to ask for help.

You can read more about accessibility for persons with dyslexia in the IFLA publication "**Access to Libraries for Persons with Disabilities**," which was introduced last year at the LSDP Pre-conference in Gothenburg, Sweden, and at the IFLA Conference in Oslo.

"My own librarian"

In the Sjøllerød Public Libraries where I worked until last year, patrons with reading problems have their "own librarian". They can visit the library during scheduled hours or by appointment. Having a librarian who is specialized in serving patrons with disabilities does not, however, exclude other staff from offering assistance.

The **entire** staff should be knowledgeable about various disabilities, including dyslexia, in order to serve all patrons in the best possible way. And, of course, the patron does not have to present a “disability certificate” in order to receive appropriate service!

Ongoing service

Once your library has decided to focus on dyslexia, how do implement and maintain the new services? It is essential to include the services in a long-range plan (e.g., a three-year plan) in order to obtain regular funding and train staff. When the new service has been implemented, it is time for the hard work of outreach and marketing and finding community partners for future cooperation.

One possibility is to start a “dyslexia campaign” to inform both the primary target group (the dyslexic persons themselves) and their family and friends. You can read more about such awareness campaigns in **Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia**.

Partners

I strongly recommend including the dyslexic patrons in the work to improve your service. If a national or regional **Dyslexia Association** already exists in your country, it is useful to engage this association for future cooperation. If a dyslexia association does not exist in your country, why not take the initiative to establish one? In countries where dyslexia is not yet widely recognized or understood, libraries in their role as cultural institutions should take the lead to change this situation.

Another obvious partner is the national **Library for the Blind** in your country. In the Scandinavian countries there is close cooperation between public libraries and the libraries for the blind. Persons with dyslexia are able to borrow appropriate materials directly from the library for the blind as a supplement to the materials in the public libraries.

Examples from Denmark

I would like to end this presentation with some examples of initiatives taken in Denmark within the last years.

In 1999 the **Danish Equal Opportunities Centre for Disadvantaged Persons** (www.clh.dk) published a report, “**Accessibility to Public Libraries,**” which I regard as the first phase in a very positive development. The report's recommendations are based on data collected from a survey of all public libraries in Denmark. The data showed that many public libraries at that time did not provide adequate services to disabled persons, including persons with dyslexia.

Shortly after the report was published, a number of public libraries established working groups – in some cases in cooperation with local disability associations and/or local politicians – in order to improve their services to disadvantaged persons.

In the years following, many public libraries established new services to persons with dyslexia and other disabilities providing, among other things, special computer programs and establishing departments for persons with reading disabilities.

In 2002 a **National Strategy** to Extend Services to Persons Underutilizing Libraries was set in motion at the initiative of the Danish Library Association and a key group of leaders from the library community was established. The National Strategy recommendations were forwarded by the Danish National Library Authorities to Parliament.

The most important outcome of our National Strategy until now has been the 2003 funding by the Ministry of Culture of a **Danish virtual library** named “**E17 – the highway to accessible information.**” The website was developed by the Danish National Library for the Blind. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to talk more about “E17” at this time, but on the webpage of the Library for the Blind www.dbb.dk you can find a description in English of “E17” which is absolutely worth looking at as a model for other countries.

This summer a “**Handbook**” on library services to patrons with reading problems was published by the Danish Library Association. It was forwarded to the library directors and chairpersons of the boards of culture in all Danish municipalities and regions. The Handbook focuses on computer programs and other aids for persons with reading difficulties. It is our hope that the Handbook will lead libraries all over the country to provide these tools and technologies.

I hope these examples can inspire representatives from the many countries present here today - whether you come from a country where persons with dyslexia already have access to your libraries, or you come from a country where until now you have not been aware of this need. I also highly recommend you study the LSDP **Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia**, which was published by IFLA in 2001. The guidelines are available on IFLANet.

I wish you all success in your future work for the many persons with dyslexia in your country!