

INCLUSIVE LIBRARIES IN PRACTICE

PENNY LACEY AND PENNY SMITH

The Inclusive Libraries research is now complete and it has been very exciting to be part of the project. The University of Birmingham worked with the central public library and with Quinton community library in Birmingham to develop their capacity to meet the needs of children and adults with severe and profound learning disabilities. The British Institute of Learning Disabilities have also been involved and will put on their website a short film on the project and a downloadable booklet for interested libraries and learning disability services.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

From previous research at the University of Birmingham, we know that there are ways in which children and young people with severe and profound learning disabilities can be involved in the world of books and literature. We called this 'inclusive literacy' and it consists of a range of resources and activities from sensory stories and interactive games through to picture books and books with simple accessible texts (Lacey et al, 2007). Following this research, we felt that whilst children with LD can have their inclusive literacy needs met at home and at school, it was not clear how this could be achieved for adults with LD. It seemed as if public libraries could have an important role for that group.

We wanted to study good practice in inclusive literacy within public libraries but when we looked at the literature we were not convinced that we could find very much good practice to study. Libraries seemed to be slow to respond to the Disability Discrimination Act (Ineson and Morris, 2006) and even relatively well-known resources for those who cannot manage print are not universally available (AFB, 2005). Attitudes of staff to disabled library users are crucial and disability awareness training is essential but not always available (McAuley, 2005; Charles, 2005).

Because of the lack of widespread good practice to study, we felt that this was an opportune moment to contribute some of our own. We wanted to spread the ideas we had gleaned from studying inclusive literacy in schools to a more public environment and thus asked, and subsequently answered the question:

'How can we develop the use of inclusive literacy in public libraries so they can meet the needs of children and adults with severe and profound learning disabilities?'

METHODS

We used action research as an approach to the research. Action research enables you to identify a problem, imagine a solution, devise a plan of action and evaluate how well the plan worked, over and over again in cycles. It is a research approach that is specifically about making a series of changes and evaluating how well they have worked. We worked in a cyclical way with the two libraries in Birmingham for just over a year.

Firstly, we used a survey which enabled us to learn more about current strategies in public libraries. We telephoned representatives from 32 local authorities to ask them how they

meet the needs of people with learning disabilities. We were also looking for examples of good practice which we then followed up with more telephone conversations and for some, a visit. We visited four libraries around the country: Bexley, Bradford, Leeds and Burnley and were able to share their innovative practice with the staff in the Birmingham libraries.

As part of the action research, Our Way self advocacy group from Kidderminster were employed to carry out an evaluation of the libraries. They visited twice: once before the changes had been effected and once after. They wrote two accessible reports with support from a facilitator.

Staff at the Birmingham libraries were at the centre of all the research and nothing would have been achieved without their enthusiasm. The researchers provided support, information and encouragement. It took a while to find a leader for the project from the libraries but once one was identified activities followed each other quickly.

Activities included:

- Developing a strategy
- Training
- Building relationships
- Changing the environment
- Purchasing resources
- Developing activities

From the data we collected in all the libraries we are able now to present the factors we feel can lead to an inclusive library.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

Few local authorities have a strategy for specifically developing a response to the needs of children and adults with learning disabilities, although all had a general strategy relating to disability in general. This usually referred to physical access such as lifts and ramps and access for those not able to use print such as those who have a visual difficulty or a specific literacy difficulty such as dyslexia.

A strategy that includes people with learning disabilities should also include ways of engaging with people for whom the library environment and most conventional books are cognitively inaccessible. The few libraries that were specifically meeting the needs of people with LD had individuals who were leading the changes that needed to be made. From our experience in the Birmingham libraries, very little happened until a leader was identified. If no-one is responsible for developing the strategy and making the necessary changes, they are unlikely to occur.

Funding is also an issue and unless funding is set aside for this group their needs will be subsumed into other disability considerations. In the project our grant from the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the Rayne Foundation contained #5,000 for each of the two libraries. This money was for purchasing resources identified as suitable for people with LD. These are described later in this article.

Strategically this is an opportune moment for public libraries to be considering how to include users who have particular needs. The whole service is in the midst of huge change as they adapt to the demands of the digital age and the decline in use of books. Birmingham Central Library is shortly to move into a new building and they can now plan into the new environment the needs of people with LD.

TRAINING

As part of the project Open Storytellers were engaged to provide training for the library staff. The training included general learning disability training but also training in how to engage with storytelling at a level suitable for people with severe and profound learning disabilities.

As with many members of the general public, staff at public libraries should learn to understand the needs of children and adults with LD, especially those who do not communicate using words or who may have unconventional behaviour. They require advice on how to approach people who come into the library and how to find out what their needs might be. Staff from the Business Library in Birmingham went to a local day service for people with LD and got to know a group of people who then visited the library. The visit to the library is described below in the section on 'Activities'.

RELATIONSHIPS

As can be seen from the previous section, building relationships between public libraries and people with LD is essential. All of the successful libraries in the project had regular visits from particular groups or individuals with LD and this had led to increased commitment on both sides. Once carers and supporters can see the benefits of visiting the library, the relationships can develop.

Not only do relationships need to develop between libraries and users with LD, but relationships between library staff are crucial as well. The Central Library in Birmingham is huge with many different departments and communications between them are hard to achieve unless they are deliberate. Even in Quinton community library it was hard to get the project going as many staff work part-time and do not have a chance to discuss policy and practice together. This meant disseminating good practice was difficult to achieve.

As mentioned before the presence of a leader is very important. As with all initiatives, a champion who is well informed and committed can make all the difference. In one of the surveyed libraries the project was led by a librarian who had a relative with LD and in another a parent approached a librarian for a particular piece of software and that person took on the initiative and helped it to grow. Someone has to lead.

CHANGING THE ENVIRONMENT

So once a leader has been identified and funding set aside, what can libraries do to meet the needs of people with LD, particularly for children and adults with severe and profound learning disabilities? One of the most important considerations is the environment.

Our Way self advocates had the job of considering the environment in terms of their less able peers. They were very complimentary about the Centre for the Child in the central

library, approving of the bright colours and interactive displays. They liked the amount of physical space to move around and the height of the books; accessible to people in wheelchairs. They approved of the changes made in the adult lending library where new display shelves enabled books to be set up with their front covers visible. It is much easier to see if the book is right for you if you can see the pictures on the front. The staff had chosen accessible books to place on this shelving and had labeled it 'Easy Reads'. They are considering whether to have a spine sticker for the ordinary shelves that denotes an accessible book. Stickers on spines with symbols for different genres can be seen at most libraries and an accessible sticker would fit in with this system.

Although there are some accessible symbols already used in public libraries, Our Way felt that there could be more and they should be clearly visible, especially when negotiating a large central library. Staff at Birmingham Central Library plan to increase the symbols and pictures to help users find their way around. They are also planning to produce a pictorial guide to the library which will be available at the front desk. Quinton library only contains one room and so much easier to negotiate once the different areas have been located.

The favourite area of the library for the Our Way self advocates was the music library. They found that very accessible with CDs and DVDs easy to find. They liked the 'listening post' where they could try CDs and appreciated the few that were selected on a particular theme. They thought their less able peers would find it easier to choose music from a small set of suggestions. They spent a long time in this department!

PURCHASING RESOURCES

As was mentioned #5000 was available to each library for the purchase of new resources and this money was spent on the display shelving, accessible books and a touch screen computer with accessible software. Both libraries already had some accessible books but most were related to dyslexia or adult literacy and thus were cognitively too demanding for people with severe learning difficulties. The Central Library had some Bag Books but these were not available for lending to families. From their purchases they are now able to lend some out.

Staff at the central library are considering ways in which they could make their own sensory stories and have discussed how they might get volunteers involved in achieving this. There are other ways in which volunteers might be able to support the needs of people with LD. For example, a volunteer has offered to work with a group, perhaps around a project on photography. Purchasing loan cameras was a possibility for the future.

The computer was very popular with Our Way and they spent some time playing simple games specifically designed for people with LD. They thought the touch screen would be very useful for their less able peers. The computer is still rather limited in software, especially for people with PMLD but they can access simple cause and effect games from the internet. This is an aspect that requires more training.

Although the libraries did not need to buy more CDs and DVDs as they already had a large collection, these resources are very important. Small community libraries do not always have CDs and DVDs but if they are to be able to meet the needs of people with LD then they

need to have at least a small selection. The collection could be shared between a group of community libraries and rotated.

DEVELOPING ACTIVITIES

The survey libraries gave several examples of activities that they have undertaken with individuals and groups of people with LD. In one library a group of able people with LD run a café for library users and in another they provide a welcome and directions for users. One group uses the Wii in the library to play games and another had sensory story sessions.

In Birmingham central library there were two specific activities set up as part of the project. The first was a sensory story in the music library. The staff chose the Tempest as the stimulus and they devised a range of sensory experiences for a group of people with LD, especially music. The group contained people with PMLD and they seemed really to enjoy the session. The librarians were very pleased with the result and were intending to put together a Tempest pack for other staff to use.

The other activity was carried out by the Business Library and was related to shopping. The group consisted of people with severe learning disabilities and they were involved in quizzes and games about buying a birthday present. Both the staff and the library users with LD enjoyed the session.

The success of the two activities have been very encouraging for library staff and they are looking forward to offering more and to developing their relationship with regular groups of people with LD.

Although they were not specifically arranged for the project, the Centre for the Child also organized activities for children with LD. They had a storyteller come to tell a sensory story from Bag Books. Two librarians told a sensory story themselves to another group of children and they organized a group from a special and a mainstream school to come together to enjoy a music session with a musician from the CBSO. These kinds of activities are already part of the general library strategy for including children with Special Educational Needs.

CONCLUSIONS

We feel we can say that everyone involved in the Inclusive Libraries project really enjoyed the experience. Library staff built up understanding of the needs of people with LD, engaged with children and adults with severe and profound learning disabilities and felt that their efforts were successful and worthwhile.

There were difficulties in the project, particularly with the lack of a leader at the beginning and with changes in staff at Quinton. There were also delays with ordering resources and with getting the computer set up. All the changes took longer to achieve than was anticipated and we all know that this is only the beginning of a whole new strategy for including people with LD.

Perhaps PMLD-Link readers can help to spread the ideas and encourage changes in public libraries? You could go to your library and talk about sensory stories and a touchscreen

computer with interactive stories and cause and effect games. They probably do not know such things exist. Try to enthuse one person. That's how things got started in one of the survey libraries. When the film and booklet are on the BILD website, you can direct them to that. Hopefully the changes experienced by public libraries at the moment will be encouraging librarians to look for new ways in which they can engage their users. This could be the project they have been looking for!

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