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Library as an Inclusive Space, Librarian as a Social Curator (From the RSLYA’s experience of working with young adults with special needs)

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Abstract:

The Russian State Library for Young Adults (RSLYA) has been working with people with special needs for many years, cooperating with various organizations. Relying on its own considerable experience, the RSLYA strongly believes in not singling out people with health restrictions as a special group, but taking into account their features. They are not inferior people, on the contrary, they have something that others do not have, and it is necessary to know how to work properly with them.

It is important to use an inclusive approach, which is achieved by providing "accessible environment" and "equal opportunities". Despite that these concepts often go together, they are different. "Accessible environment" means that young people with various kinds of health restrictions can expect the readiness of libraries to accept them as equal users. "Equal opportunities" – the concept of a higher level - suggests that young people with special needs come to the library when they have an appropriate mood, need and opportunity to prepare for studies, attend an interesting lecture or meet with friends and peers. It means the library should be good for anyone and everyone and acts as a social curator.

The author would like to share the RSLYA’s ideas and successful practices of inclusive library services for young adults with special needs. Both regular activities, which take place in the RSLYA and can be implemented in other libraries worldwide, and unique national campaigns such as the short film competition for young authors about young disabled people called Overcoming.

Keywords: accessible environment, equal opportunities, inclusion, work with partners, communication strategy

The Russian State Library for Young Adults (RSLYA)¹ is the main library in Russia that works specifically for readers aged 16-35. It is a modern multimedia space with the latest technical equipment, comfortable design and numerous electronic resources. Up to 1000 people visit the RSLYA every day. It regularly accomplishes international, national and city sociocultural and educational projects; collaborates with government, non-government and commercial organizations.

Accessible Environment and Equal Opportunities: a Pledge of Successful Inclusion

For many years, the RSLYA has been working with young people with special needs. Relying on its own considerable experience, the RSLYA strongly believes in not singling out people with health restrictions as a special group, but taking into account their features. It is important to understand that they are not inferior people, on the contrary, they have something that other people do not have, and it is necessary to know how to work properly with them **by**:

- ensuring the availability of physical space;
- creating comfortable psychological atmosphere;
- providing services in accordance with their preferences and needs;
- creating conditions for their participation in all library's activities and access to all its services;
- giving opportunities for uncovering their abilities and skills.

As for the last point, it follows from the RSLYA's basic concept that is used for all young patrons. It is called *4S Concept* and means that the library's priority is solving the problem of self-education, self-knowledge, self-identification and self-fulfillment of youth, including young adults with special needs.

A good step forward in working with people with special needs was switching from gathering them into groups and organizing special events only for them to an inclusive approach that, in our view, is achieved by providing an ***accessible environment*** and ***equal opportunities***. Despite that these concepts often go together, they are different.

Accessible environment (points 1 and 2 from the list above) means that young people with various kinds of health restrictions can expect the readiness of libraries to accept them as equal users of library and information services.

While ***equal opportunities*** (points 3 and 5 from the list above) - the concept of a higher level - suggests that young people with special needs come to the library, where an "accessible environment" is already available for them, when they have an appropriate mood, need and opportunity. For example, to prepare for studies, attend an interesting lecture or meet and chat with friends. In other words, the library should be good for anyone and everyone. In this situation, it acts as a social curator.

In 2009, the RSLYA underwent significant changes and modernization at all levels. In particular, there appeared some new technical equipment for ensuring a comfortable space for people with health restrictions: a convenient navigation, a self-service book system, a wheelchair ramp with handrails, low bookshelves for a wheelchair user to reach, extra wide aisles, a wheelchair stair climber, etc. A reading machine and electronic magnifier have been

¹ Library website: <http://www.rgub.ru/> (English version: <http://www.rgub.ru/en/>).

purchased for visually impaired users. For hearing-impaired patrons there is a regularly updating collection of fiction and documentary films with subtitles.

For many years, the RSLYA has been running a free psychological support service not only for people with special needs, but also for other young patrons. At the meetings with psychologists, our librarians learn how to work with people with special needs, provide services and resources in accordance with their needs, preferences and abilities and find solutions in various difficult situations.

The RSLYA knowingly never divides events into events for young people with special needs and events for ordinary young patrons. People with health restrictions can participate in all library's activities along with others. Perhaps, hearing-impaired patrons might be an exception; however, we often solve this problem by providing sign language interpretation at the events. In addition, almost all RSLYA's lectures are recorded and uploaded to the library's YouTube channel where a feature of subtitles is.

Competent Communication Strategy is Today's Necessary Condition of Effective Work with People with Special Needs

Creating space, training employees and arranging events does not mean that people with special needs will come to the library and immediately start using its resources. Promoting ideas and opportunities in the outside environment is of a great value. Thus, it is important to develop a competent communication strategy aimed at the target group.

The communication strategy includes:

- **Representing detailed information on resources, services and facilities for people with special needs using all library informational means: website, social networks, information desks inside the library, etc.**
- **Making regular publications in the mass media, social networks and other information websites, where the target group usually get information.**
- **Conducting your own projects and activities aimed at forming a certain public environment around the library and reflecting the main ideas and values that the library bears.**

One of the latest examples, in February 2018 the RSLYA arranged the interdepartmental problem seminar *Socialization of Youth with Mental Features by the Means of Cultural Institutions*. Specialists of libraries, museums and other cultural institutions as well as university professors, social educators, psychologists, representatives of non-profit organizations, students, volunteers and others participated in it. They discussed not only the existing obstacles to socialization and sociocultural rehabilitation of young people with mental disorders, but also the ways of overcoming these barriers.

As a result, the RSLYA, firstly, has raised an issue, which is now important and relevant for both libraries and other cultural institutions, and has accumulated the available knowledge and experience on this topic. Secondly, the RSLYA has made new acquaintances with long-term partners. Thirdly, it has made a number of

publications on this topic, having secured its position as one of the authoritative experts.

Another example is a public discussion on working in NGOs and the employment of people with special needs within the RSLYA's project on career guidance and career development *Labyrinth of Professions*.

- **Interacting with partner organizations that work directly with people with special needs: information cooperation, joint activities, implementation of major projects.**

An example of information cooperation. A few years ago, the RSLYA launched a free digital library card for people with special needs. For promoting it and for even those people with special needs who live in remote parts of Russia could learn about its existence and use it, we have contacted various organizations working with this target group. They have shared information about the digital RSLYA library card via their own channels.

The RSLYA arranges several joint inclusive activities every month. For example, one of the latest was the round-table discussion *How to Raise and Educate a Hearing-Impaired Child?* It was organized by the RSLYA in cooperation with the Moscow City Organization of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf and the Moscow Association of Parents of Hearing-Impaired Children.

On March 16, 2018 the RSLYA and the cinema school for people with special needs called *Without Borders* held a meeting with the Irish filmmakers: director Aisling Walsh and screenwriter Thomas Martin who shared their secrets of skill. At the meeting, there were not only students of the cinema school, people with health restrictions, but also all comers.

The most striking example of collaboration is the project *Developing Leadership Among Teens with Disabilities*, implemented by the RSLYA and NGO *Perspective*, one of the largest organizations working with disabled people in Russia. Its participants learn how to be a leader, claim their rights to independent life and master the skills of developing their own projects and public speaking.

Wheelchair users, visually impaired and hearing-impaired young people, people with mental and developmental disabilities as well as parents of children with special needs and library visitors who are interested in discussed issues attend these trainings.

Here are some of the topics: *Resource Communications Skills; Dreams and Reality; The Key to Success, or How to Stand Defeat and Failure?; Cutting Edge, or How to Reach the Goal?; Motivation Charging*, etc.

- **Interacting with opinion leaders, bloggers, public figures who become translators of the idea of the library as an inclusive space, and taking part in thematic events.**

For example, the RSLYA has been good friends with Ksenia Bezuglova for many years. Ksenia is a public and political figure, Miss Wheelchair World 2013, member

of the Commission for the Disabled under the President of the Russian Federation, motivational speaker and head of the *Everything is Possible Foundation*. She regularly appears in the mass media and has thousands of followers in social networks. Ksenia often talks about the library in her speeches, regularly takes part in the RSLYA's activities, supports its initiatives and projects. In particular, she was a member of the judge, and her foundation was a partner of the RSLYA's *Overcoming* project.

Library Motivates: Young Authors Make Films about Young People with Disabilities

In 2016, the RSLYA implemented the All-Russia short film competition and festival called *Overcoming: Young Authors about Young People with Disabilities*. It was confidently a practical confirmation of the RSLYA's successful work in creating an inclusive environment. Within the project, young people (under 35) made short films about talented and successful young women and men with disabilities. These could be success stories in business and career, in sports, in creative activity as well as inspiring stories of self-fulfillment.

The RSLYA collected those stories and chose the most interesting of them together with the competent judge. The head judge was Sofia Geveyler, a young film director who has received several prestigious awards for her film about Paralympic athletes. To conclude the project, the RSLYA arranged a festival where we showed the best films and awarded the winners.

Using the competition format, we wanted to accomplish the following tasks:

- to direct young people's attention to youth with disabilities, and to motivate them to communicate;
- to raise an issue of social adaptation and self-fulfillment of young people with special needs;
- to show success stories of young people with disabilities, as an inspiring example for those who are afraid to leave home, feel lack of understanding, think that they will not succeed;
- to strengthen the library's position as an inclusive space for social adaptation and self-fulfillment of people with special needs.

Therefore, it was important to note the maximum number of films. The competition received 169 films from 69 regions of Russia. In addition to the three winners, ten more films were among the main laureates, the authors and heroes of which got special prizes from the judge and project's partners.

The 3rd place prize was given to the students of the Faculty of Journalism of the Russian State University for Humanities and their film about Evgeniya Malyshko, a young blind woman. Her life is full and active: she goes sailing, guides tours "in the dark", and works as a teacher at a school for visually impaired children. This film was their thesis work at the university.

Artem Alyukov, a young film director has taken the 2nd place. He filmed a story about a young woman who has become Miss Wheelchair Russia. Besides, she is a talented wheelchair dancer.

The winner was the film *Finding Your Person* by Dinara Kasimova, a documentary filmmaker from Tatarstan. Her film is about a young man in a wheelchair, an artist from

Tomsk, who becomes a father and tries to realize his new status. It is a very touching story, full of faith, hope and love.

The *Overcoming* project was supported by the Russian Ministry of Culture, the Russian Federal Agency for Youth Affairs as well as many NGOs. We attracted partners and sponsors, who provided prizes and educational programmes to the winners and the people their films were about.

To spread the word about the project, the organizers undertook a massive amount of work. In the beginning, the RSLYA held a press conference at TASS, the largest news agency in Russia. For promoting the project, we made some short videos with the judges as well as with friends of the library, a young couple Olga and Vladimir (wheelchair users). They got married at the same time as the project started. In the video, they told their story, how they met, how they started living together, what challenges they faced, what they are doing now, and shared their thoughts why a project like *Overcoming* is important and necessary.

The project also included several directing and screenwriting workshops, in which people with disabilities took part.

After the project finished, we continued to develop the idea. To keep up the information wave, the RSLYA announced an additional social PR campaign, within which any young person with a disability, wherever in Russia they might live, can apply for and get a digital RSLYA library card, which provides access to all RSLYA digital resources.

It is evident that working with young people with special needs, creating special services for them and inclusive space is a serious, multilevel and multiform activity. At the RSLYA, it requires the resources of several departments: Project Management, Technical Support, Special Projects and PR, Internet Technologies, etc. Moreover, we have a specialist who is engaged only in working with people with special needs.

The RSLYA sees one of its primary missions in that not only large libraries, as it is itself, become an accessible environment and space for self-fulfillment of people with special needs, but small regional, city and rural libraries in Russia aspire to this. As an information and consulting centre for the Russian young adult library network, the RSLYA regularly conducts educational and consulting activities on this issue. And we can already speak about some positive changes in this field.