

*Inclusive Library Services for Children and Young Adults*  
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**Singapore**

## **Building Inclusive Public Libraries in Singapore**

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### **Abstract:**

*The National Library Board of Singapore (NLB) has made some headway in designing some services and programmes for persons with disabilities (PwD) in the past years. In the areas of collection, programmes and empowerment to work, these services aim to make the public library accessible for PwD. Despite the existing suite of services and programmes, more can and should be done to make PwD feel welcomed in the public libraries, so that both PwD and neurotypical users may co-exist, interacting with each other, building an inclusive culture. The setting up of Punggol Regional Library (PRL), scheduled to be ready in 2021, presents NLB with the opportunity to take stock of the existing services for PwD, and develop plans to strengthen space design, programmes, services and collection. The paper will cover NLB's existing suite of services and programmes for people with disabilities, share on the learning points from a pilot to develop an inclusive storytelling programme, and, briefly touch on preliminary findings from the user research done in early 2018 that will shape the development of future libraries.*

**Keywords:** disabilities, inclusive, programmes, user research, Singapore

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## **Painting the NLB backdrop**

Since 1995, the National Library Board of Singapore (NLB) envisages Singaporeans to be Readers for Life, be involved in Learning Communities in order to build a Knowledgeable Nation. To achieve this vision, NLB has put various masterplans in place.

The Readers for Life Masterplan has seen an extensive development of reading programmes for children from 0-17 years old. Based on our survey of KidsREAD, a reading programme for children from low-income families, 4 out of 5 children enjoy reading more. They also developed a positive self-esteem and positive attitude towards reading through attending kidsREAD sessions. Through Early READ, a comprehensive programme for the preschoolers, parents and educators, 99% of educators and 92% of parents observed that their children have gained an interest in reading (Ministry of Communications and Information, 2018).

Since 2016, NLB is now on its third year in its National Reading Movement campaign to encourage adults and seniors to read, and for citizens to read in their mother tongues. In a survey, the Reach Index<sup>1</sup> in 2015 achieved 50.4% (Lee, 2018). This meant that NLB had reached out to one in two residents in that year. The 2016 computation showed that it achieved 53.6%, indicating a significant increase in the proportion of residents who had made use of NLB's facilities and services.

The Libraries of the Future Masterplan also aims to transform the public libraries to harness digital technology and become social touch-points for bonding, collaboration and co-creation. In 2017, five libraries have been revamped and re-opened under the Masterplan - Bedok Public Library, Bukit Panjang Public Library, Sengkang Public Library, Tampines Regional Library and Yishun Public Library. Visitorship has doubled on average, and loans by over 40% at the Bukit Panjang and Sengkang libraries, compared to before the revamp. More people visit our public libraries last year compared to the year before, especially seniors and children.

Throughout its development in the past twenty-two years, NLB has also made some headway to provide some services and programmes for the persons with disabilities (PwD) to ensure no one gets left behind.

## **NLB's pre-loved books in the community**

Started in 1998, the annual NLB's Charity Book Donation programme makes pre-loved books available for non-profit and social service organisations (NPOs and SSOrgs) to keep them. NLB complements the efforts by NPOs and SSOrgs to promote reading and learning among their beneficiaries. It is also part of NLB's Corporate Volunteerism Programme which aims to develop a spirit of volunteerism among NLB staff through involvement in community projects.

NLB encourages NPOs and SSOrgs to chaperon their clients with special needs or disabilities to take part in the annual programme. The purpose is to create an inclusive platform for the clients to select their preferred pre-loved books. In 2017 itself, more than 150,000 pre-loved

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<sup>1</sup> The Reach Index measures the proportion of unique Singapore residents who have visited our libraries and/or accessed NLB's content through our programmes and services.

books were donated to the local and overseas NPOs and SSOrgs.

### **Nothing beats visiting the library – MOLLY to the rescue**

Mobile library buses were a common sight in the 1960s to make library books accessible for patrons living a distance away from the main Stamford library in the city. They were discontinued in early 1990s when NLB built more libraries in the residential towns.

The Mobile Library (also known as MOLLY) made a comeback in 2008 to reach patrons who find it difficult to visit the public libraries. The targeted groups include special education schools, social service organisations, kindergartens and childcare centres. With MOLLY being designed to allow wheelchairs to board the bus, wheelchair users are able to browse from the shelves and borrow from the borrowing station. Users will also be able to attend storytelling sessions, conducted by the MOLLY librarian.

Since 2008, MOLLY has served 518 institutions, and 80% of her visits are to special education schools. The demand for MOLLY has been so high that NLB added two mini MOLLYs from 2014 onwards that are able to manoeuvre in smaller roads, serving more institutions located in public housing estates.

### **NLB brings library materials to the door-steps of the homebound**

There is still the homebound that is not able to board MOLLY, much less visit the public libraries. Since 2009, the NLB's Project Deliver Me is a special delivery service that engages NLB's staff, volunteers and a pool of volunteer Taxi Sifu (ie. taxi drivers) in selection and delivery of library materials to the individual door-steps of the medically certified homebound library patrons at no cost. To date, 128 library members benefit from this programme.

### **Library makes a safe and supportive environment for PwD to learn to work**

Working with the social service organisations to make the collection more accessible to PwD created pathways to explore giving PwDs the opportunity to venture out to learn to work. This supports PwD's strong desire to have higher levels of independence (National Council of Social Service, 2017).

Started in 2010, the NLB Externship programme provides a customised scope of experiential learning opportunity for the youth, young adults and adults with special needs (including former convicts and probationers) to become more accustomed to being outside a controlled special needs environment. A two-year acclimatisation process coupled with a structured programme customised to match different level of learning ability among the clients with special needs. They acquire basic skillsets such as sorting, shelving and shelf-reading of library materials in a safe and supportive learning environment. To date, fifty-seven clients with special needs (autism, physically challenged, mental and sensory impairment) are on board NLB Externship programme.

The selected public libraries catered for the clients with special needs include library@chinatown, Lifelong Learning Library and Bukit Panjang Public Library. In addition, they gain the experience to interact with the neurotypical library patrons and be integrated back to the society progressively.

## **Adults with autism hired to digitise NLB's collection**

Five years later, in November 2015, NLB signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Autism Resource Centre (ARC) to develop a digital services centre where ARC clients (autism community) will assist to digitise NLB's collection for a period of five years. By leveraging on the strength of the autism community through a two-year acclimatisation process, eleven ARC clients have progressively improved on their performance output with the strong support provided by the ARC coaches and NLB. This has helped ARC clients to maximise their potential in life through regular employment with NLB. Under the MOU, ARC clients will sign up with one of NLB's appointed recruitment contractors to apply for work at NLB's Digital Services Centre at the Enabling Village<sup>2</sup>.

NLB's experience in working with the ARC clients has been positive and meaningful. It was a learning journey for NLB staff to work hand-in-hand with ARC clients as every change made in the process has to be carefully thought through and customised to match the individual learning ability. To do this, NLB works very closely with ARC job coaches to streamline the processes before they restructure the tasks and provide detailed steps for the clients. They had been a great help in communicating and training the clients.

Over the years, there has been better understanding of the processes and tasks available for NLB to leverage on the strength of ARC clients. While the operations have been gradually improving, it is equally important to recognize that expectations among the three stakeholders (ARC, clients and NLB) still need to be managed tactfully.

NLB management team has also been very supportive in all aspects of the project. NLB recognises the contribution and commitment provided by ARC coaches and clients, and invite them to participate at NLB's signature events year-on-year.

## **A mother suggests for a programme for children with special needs**

In April 2015, a mother of a child with autism wrote in to NLB to request for programmes at the library for special needs children. She felt "it is inappropriate for us to join the ongoing sessions because he will look totally out of place and we may not be well received by other parents with normal kids". She was not dissuaded when NLB shared of MOLLY's outreach efforts with special education schools, and that NLB also hosts special education schools' visits to the public libraries. This mother wants to bring her child to the library, attend programmes and feel welcome - a timely plea for NLB to focus on programmes for children with special needs.

A team of early childhood librarians started the trial in June 2015, adapting the baby lapsit programme (Jiggle Read and Rhyme) which includes songs and stories. To prepare for the trial, the librarians observed special education teachers. Librarians also made careful considerations to the choice of the venue and considered factors like the distance from the nearest train station

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<sup>2</sup> The Enabling Village is Singapore's first inclusive community space, focusing on training and employment of persons with disabilities (<https://enablingvillage.sg>)

to the designated library. Publicity for the programme was also limited to the mother's ASD community so that only children with autism will benefit from the programme.

Regular sessions were held during the school holidays for special needs from 2015 to 2017. Even though responses to the programme were good and parents were very appreciative of these sessions conducted for their children, running the sessions had its bout of challenges. NLB lacked staff who is able to conduct such programmes – they lacked the skillset to handle behavior of special needs children, for example, dashing out of the room and making sudden or repetitive distracting noises. It was also observed that there was a lack of public awareness and acceptance of special needs children at the libraries, thereby causing parents of special needs children to be stressed before and after the programme.

These challenges led librarians to consider the possibility of having inclusive programmes at the library, equipping librarians with skillsets to handle challenging behaviour, and at the same time, raise awareness for special needs. The team then moved on from having closed-door programmes to holding inclusive sensory storytime for the public in 2018.

### **First inclusive programme series at the public libraries**

Sensory Storytime was NLB's first attempt to introduce inclusive programmes for children in early 2018. Targeted for children from four to eight years old, this pilot programme aims to allow parents and children of different abilities to enjoy stories in a multisensory approach. Participants are required to sign up for the programme, and every child has to be accompanied by a parent. They will then receive an email requesting for information on their special needs, if any. This information will allow the librarian to make adjustments to the programme plan. Each participant will also receive a social story, detailing what they will see upon their arrival to the library to the sequence of activities during the thirty-minute programme.

Every session comprised action songs and a story. The librarians introduced simple songs from YouTube's Jbrary channel<sup>3</sup>. Using egg shakers and colourful scarves, the songs were a hit with both children and parents who enjoyed the familiar tunes and the sensory props. The librarian also ensured the story told could engage multiple senses. Participants could pop out Pete's buttons in Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons, wear animal masks in Little Owl Lost, and feel squelchy mud in We're Going On A Bear Hunt.

Measures were taken to ensure the visit to the library will be an enjoyable experience for the parents and children with special needs. They include

- Informing all library staff of this programme and guiding staff on what they could do when they encounter a child who may be making too much noise
- Informing library patrons of this programme happening that day
- Stopping all audio announcements before and after the programme

Out of the four sessions, there were as many as forty-five participants, including parents, siblings and the children with special needs. Feedback has been very positive and parents have asked if there could be more of these sessions in libraries closer to their homes. There were

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<sup>3</sup> The Jbrary channel, a collection of storytime songs they have collected, is created by two children's librarians from Vancouver, British Columbia. View their collection at <https://youtube.com/user/Jbrary> (last accessed on 27 June 2018)

also repeated participants. It was observed that they were happier during the subsequent sessions as they were more familiar with the space and the songs used.

NLB also invited occupational therapists to observe the sessions to provide feedback on the librarian's delivery. Some points include adding more visual signage to help children understand the boundaries, such as "no climbing under the tables" and "sit on the mat". To clearly show children that they cannot help themselves to their favourite prop after the librarian is done with it, the librarian will pop props that have been used into the "Finish" box. The occupational therapists also cautioned NLB to not over-provide for PwD as it will cripple them further from integrating into society. For instance, providing stimulation toys like lava drops during the programme is effective to keep children from moving in the room. A simpler and practical solution would be to allow the child to leave the room to expend his/her need to move and then bring him back to the programme.

With the success of the pilot run, the team of librarians will introduce another trial run of Sensory Storytime at another public library before developing a comprehensive suite of packages. There are also plans to explore how the floor-to-ceiling three-wall projection in NLB's immersive storytelling room<sup>4</sup> could be used for Sensory Story Time.

### **Hearing PwD's views of the libraries**

The setting up of Punggol Regional Library (PRL), scheduled to be ready in 2021, presents NLB with the opportunity to take stock of the existing services for PwD, and develop plans to strengthen space design, programmes, services and collection.

Located in the north-eastern part of Singapore, Punggol is a young residential town with an estimated population size of 360,000, characterised by a high number of young families with young children. According to the International Federation of Library Associations' (IFLA) guidelines for Children's Library Services, a full-fledged children's library would comprise services to diverse groups, including the PwD.

Riding on the design thinking methodology to ensure human-centered design, NLB has embarked on user research to understand the needs of PwD, their caregivers and the professionals serving this group.

Some preliminary ideas from a focus group of adults with various types of disabilities include:

- Providing ease of accessibility to get to and navigate within public libraries,
- Universally designed infrastructure and facilities
- Customised services for PwD

NLB plans to continue user research with more PwD, professionals and caregivers. In the process, there will be areas that can be implemented across NLB's public libraries which will be taken into consideration. Working closely with SSOrgs and advocacy groups in the community, NLB hopes to build its expertise in making the public libraries a welcoming space

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<sup>4</sup> NLB's immersive storytelling room is located at Bukit Panjang Public Library. For a quick preview of the room, view <https://youtu.be/rKM7y27lr10> (last accessed 27 June 2018).

for PwD.

The journey has begun for NLB to make its public libraries more inclusive for persons with disabilities. NLB hopes to also learn from libraries internationally and adapt to find a good fit to meet the needs of PwD in Singapore.

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