

## Literacy Matters! The Literacy and Reading Needs of People with Special Needs

**Helle Mortensen**

IFLA Standing Committee, IFLA Library Services to People with Special Needs, Denmark

E-mail address: helleamortensen@gmail.com



Copyright © 2015 by Helle Mortensen. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

---

### Abstract:

*All people need libraries where citizens can meet inspiration and ideas, either alone or as part of a common room or by meeting other people. But not everybody is able to visit the library. Libraries are the best kept secret for people with reading difficulties. But they can benefit from the library despite their level of reading difficulties. This paper focuses on those persons whose living conditions and/or physical, mental or cognitive disabilities prevent them from accessing current library services. These groups can include, but are not necessarily limited to people in hospitals and prisons, homeless people, persons in nursing homes and other care facilities, the deaf, and people with dyslexia and dementia.*

**Keywords:** special needs, libraries

---

### Introduction

All people need to be able to grow, change and be inspired by having access to knowledge, information, good stories and events. Libraries are places, where citizens can tap into inspiration and ideas, either alone or as part of a common room or by meeting other people. However, not everyone is familiar with or able to visit the library. Libraries are the best kept secret for people with reading difficulties, because they can benefit from the library despite their level of literacy.

### Library services to people with special needs

The IFLA Section *Library Services to People with Special Needs* (LSN) focuses on those persons whose living conditions and/or physical, mental or cognitive disabilities prevent them from accessing current library services. These groups can include, but are not necessarily limited to, people in hospitals and prisons, homeless people, persons in nursing homes and other care facilities, the deaf, and people with dyslexia and dementia.

### **Why literacy matters?**

Access to information is a human right closely connected to reading. People with special needs have the same right to information as everyone else, but they also have special challenges in accessing information when it comes to literacy and reading needs. Reading is a socio-economic necessity in a society where written language is deeply imbedded across cultures. Being able to read and write is not just an intellectual skill, but it has a deep social and cultural meaning. Being unable to read and write increases the risk of social exclusion with all its negative effects on participation, development and even health.

### **The dimension of reading**

Reading has two dimensions the social and the existential. The social dimension enables you to read, to participate in democracy and society. The existential dimension enables you to read and to live your life.

### **Inclusion**

It is very important for people with special needs to be and feel included. An integrated approach covering all aspects of the lives of persons with special needs is essential to meet the challenges wherever they occur either at hospital, at home, at work, in the library, in prison, in nursing homes and other care facilities, or in the streets. People with special needs may lack basic library experience and habits. They may not have experienced much pleasure in reading and may not understand the value of the library with regard to leisure, events, and learning. Others are unable to come to the library because they are hospitalized, homebound and incarcerated, or because the library building is inaccessible. Some are already familiar with the library services, but might have special reading needs.

### **The reading needs of people with special needs**

Special needs often demand special materials such as easy-to-read books, audio books and books with large print. The important thing is that you can enjoy good stories, even if you are unable to read in the traditional way. Persons with dyslexia might not be able to learn to read, so we need to support them with solutions and alternative ways of reading. It is possible to read in different ways using a PC, smartphone, ipad and other reading tools including software programs. Using alternative materials such as ebooks, audio books and DAISY books make reading a possibility for all people with print disabilities.

Investigations show, that the majority of inmates in prisons have limited education and life skills, and do not come from a background where reading is a frequent or popular pastime. A significant number of prisoners have low literacy and few have been regular users of libraries during their lives on the *outside*. Many inmates have reading difficulties and the library collection should therefore include materials in print and other formats.

People with dementia might not be able to read, but listening to good stories and calm music can help to stimulate the memory, as well as provide enjoyment and entertainment. Reminiscence means to raise memories and is a well known method to stimulate people with dementia. A combination of short stories, illustrated books and items from old times stimulates memory and helps people with dementia to remember and communicate. Some libraries make their own *reminiscence kits* which include a variety of materials and items.

People with hearing disabilities can benefit from easy-to-read materials, Braille books and films with subtitles. In order to provide adequate and appropriate services, it is necessary for library staff to have an understanding of their special needs, including those relating to varying communication needs.

### **Challenges**

The challenge for libraries is to create spaces where everyone can be a participant, which means creating different resources, services and offerings that will appeal to users with special needs. The profile of the library according to services and activities and the library space should also appeal to users with special needs. Physical access to the building is a major issue as this will prevent people with special needs from fulfilling their reading needs.

The traditional library is changing and it may not necessarily be limited to a physical place. Many people with special needs can benefit from the e-library services, but only if the website meets accessibility criteria.

Copyright is another barrier. Digitization does not always improve accessibility. Hopefully the ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty in many countries will contribute to facilitate access to published works for persons with difficulties accessing printed materials.

### **What competences you should have?**

Everything starts with well-educated staff members, who truly believe that every child, young person and adult have the right to read and enjoy books and good stories. Professionalism combined with enthusiasm and visibility is necessary – you have to bring yourself into play without losing your professionalism. It is important to be able to step back without getting involved in the personal lives of the users. Library staff should be knowledgeable of the many and various reading needs of a range of clientele, and should possess empathy and good interpersonal skills. Of course we should not forget that people with special needs are just as diverse as all library users, they only have special needs.

### **Users, stakeholders and partnerships**

Involve the users or employ the users, and ask them about their opinion in order to optimize the library services. Libraries have much to gain by hiring staff members with special needs. Involve your colleagues and be open-minded about the reading needs and challenges of visitors with special needs, and cooperate with social workers when needed. To make library services a success, it is necessary to work together with partners around people with special needs such as social workers, caregivers, teachers and prison staff. Working with partners provides access to information and knowledge about the user group, and introduces the possibility of involving users in the service.

### **Guided shared reading**

Guided, shared reading is a reading method where you bring people together in small groups. The reading guide reads a poem or a short story aloud and pauses in between to allow participants to contribute with personal stories or reflections. There is no pressure for anyone to read or even speak, because it can be stimulating simply to listen to the literature and other group members. The reading guide seeks to create a good atmosphere. Normally you do it once a week for a continuous period which means the participants gain confidence in each other which allows the guide and the group to touch deep topics through the text.

Danish research has shown that guided, shared reading has an effect on concentration, awareness and memory. It also facilitates social relations and brings people together and thereby helps individuals to make changes in how they feel about themselves and how they relate to other people. In this way shared reading can make a difference to people of all ages and backgrounds.

In Denmark this method has been successful both for groups of people with light depression as well as homeless people. Librarians have been educated as reading guides, so they have the necessary competencies when choosing different texts. The reading groups become a space where participants can talk freely about their lives, and this can help them to address their problems. It also serves to wake memories for people with dementia.

### **LSN Guidelines**

LSN has created several guidelines about library services for people with special needs. These include Dyslexia, prisoners, Dementia, easy-to-read materials, deaf people, hospital patients and the elderly and disabled in long-term care facilities. LSN has also created a checklist about *Access to libraries for persons with disabilities*.

In 2014 the revised *Guidelines for library services to persons with Dyslexia* was published as a joint project between two IFLA sections, Library Services to People with Special Needs (LSN) and Libraries Serving Persons with Print Disabilities (LPD). The guidelines are a revision and expansion of the previous guidelines published by IFLA in 2001. We expect them to be a valuable tool for library staff who have the responsibility of serving persons with reading and learning difficulties.

The next project is about developing guidelines for library services to homeless people. You will find all the guidelines on the LSN website <http://www.ifla.org/lsn>

### **Conclusion**

The LSN standing committee is very pleased that IFLA has placed accessibility to information on the agenda by launching the *Lyon Declaration* on access to information and development. It is very encouraging that it has more than 500 signatories. LSN believes that the *Lyon Declaration* will have an impact on literacy and reading for people with special needs and thereby create strong societies for all.