Learning Differences/Library Directions:
Library Service to Children
with Learning Differences

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"Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzie divey"¹

The problem of learning disabilities is a national issue. According to U.S. Department of Education figures, about 1.75 million school-age children have learning disabilities. The most widely recognized estimates are that approximately 3 percent of the children in the United States are learning disabled.²

Learning disability, as defined in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), is a disorder in the understanding or processing of language, thinking, talking, reading, or math. It is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of learning-dysfunctional symptoms, behavior, and causes. According to Betty Osman of the Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities, many children with learning disabilities have average or even above-average intelligence. She calls this "discrepancy or lag between overall intelligence and [one's] apparent ability to learn in one or more areas" a learning difference.³

Children with learning differences often have difficulty in reading—in distinguishing or decoding symbols or with letter inversion and directionality (e.g., reading d for b or p for b). Sometimes the problem is with listening, remembering, sequencing, or organizing information, or with arithmetic processes—calculations or understanding basic concepts. Sometimes the problem occurs with dysfunctions in

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What is it like to have a learning difference? One may simulate the experience by remembering the frustration and amusement attendant with the childhood song “mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzie divey.” The frustration was prior to the amused relief that accompanied the discovery that if the words were spoken slowly they would, almost magically, reveal themselves to be “mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy.”

This is an example of scrambled hearing—of how a child with an auditory learning problem might, at times, hear spoken language. One can speculate that it would be easy for a teacher or a librarian to perceive a child’s difficulty in deciphering a spoken message as a failure to follow directions or as deliberate inattentiveness on the part of the child. One can also see how easily frustration, anxiety, and loss of self-esteem could further complicate the issues.

Mary Banbury, in her film, The ACB’s of Learning Disabilities,4 asks viewers to try writing with their left hands (the right hand if the person is left-handed). She further simulates the experience of the learning disabled child by suggesting that the viewers simultaneously tap out a steady rhythm with the foot opposite to the writing hand. This kind of sensory overload is similar to what a child with learning disabilities might experience. In figure 1 the picture seen one way is a vase, seen another way it is a picture of two facing profiles. It is important to realize that for some people it will be extremely difficult to see both the vase and the profiles. Explaining that the picture contains two different images, depending on whether one focuses on the foreground or the background, might help. Too often children are chided, blamed, threatened, or even coaxed to see what for them is not an act of will or choice to see. The implications for teachers and librarians are manifold and important. It is incumbent upon teachers and librarians to acquaint themselves with learning styles, differences and problems that go with the variety and multitude of individual children whose learning lives they will intersect and affect.

Libraries and librarians have been overlooked and underutilized as resources for children with learning differences. In 1984, the Westchester Library System in New York State received a grant from the Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities to explore and develop ways in which librarians could become more responsive to the needs of learning disabled children, their families, and the professionals who
work with them. The grant involved in-service training sessions for the children's librarians in the thirty-eight member public libraries in Westchester County, the establishment of replicable pilot projects, and the development of printed resource materials.

The in-service training included intensive simulation education to increase sensitivity to the special needs of children with learning disabilities. Librarians developed increased confidence in themselves and in their skills in direct proportion to their new awareness of the needs and problems of learning disabled children. One librarian—who upon the beginning of the training experience questioned how to distinguish learning disabled kids from lazy kids—remarked that she no longer believed that there was such a thing as a lazy child, only lazy librarians. She had modeled her statement on the slogan of special education—"there are no learning disabled children, only teaching disabled instructors."

Librarians also began examining and reviewing books with an awareness to the needs of learning disabled children. Criteria related to print, page design, general format of books (as well as organization), clarity, and use of language had a special significance for librarians newly sensitive to the needs of children with learning differences.
The pilot projects developed in Westchester varied in scope and intent. Several libraries established special book/media collections to provide learning disabled children with broader options, alternatives, and support in reading. One library selected books for library purchase that would be especially useful for school assignments, as well as reading pleasure, that had been recorded for the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. Thus, the learning disabled student could have a matching cassette for the books he or she might choose to read, and the reading process could be reinforced. Mamaroneck Public Library checked catalogs of recordings and matched them up with books available through interlibrary loan services; eventually they will have created an up-to-date catalog of all books in the Westchester Library System with matching cassettes.

Several libraries held parent education programs. Yonkers Public Library held special workshops to address the needs and concerns of Spanish-speaking and other minority parents of children with learning differences. For many parents the opportunity to share their problems with other parents and concerned professionals provided an almost physical relief. It became clear that parents need opportunities to vent feelings, to share anxieties, and to learn methods of effectively intervening and helping their children. It also became clear that parents as well as children respond positively to the nonjudgmental, nonthreatening atmosphere of libraries.

The use of the computer in word processing and creative writing was another project. For many children with learning differences, the computer does not present the same blocks as do paper, pencils, and books. "Keyboarding for Individual Achievement," software designed by Jack Heller especially for the learning disabled, helped students at the Ossining Public Library acquire basic typing skills relatively quickly and easily. It also helped them to improve their spelling and vocabulary skills. Stories and essays were composed more easily with more attention paid to content. There was less distraction from the physical demands of writing and correcting by hand. The final product looked good and reflected the children's efforts. Perhaps most importantly, the children gained a sense of accomplishment and success associated with a writing experience.

The Ossining project began as a cooperative effort with the schools. Designated students were allowed to use the public library during the school day. The popularity of the project continues with children coming in after the school day is over and on weekends, and often with parents, to use the library computer and software.
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One of the essays written on the Ossining computer was a joint effort by two fourth grade boys entitled "A Christmas Adventure."

There was only one thing this little boy liked to do. The one thing was to learn how to read and write nicely. The boy's name was Jimmy. This little boy was very peaceful to be with and good. He liked a lot of things just like me, but most of all he wanted to read and write well for Christmas. He was different from other boys.

A different, but equally successful approach to encouraging children to write was the group creation of a book. The staff of the Mount Pleasant Library worked with the staff and students of a private school for learning disabled children to create a scrapbook about the school. Lively group meetings took place at the library and the children learned to take turns in the discussions using the storytelling technique of the Indian Talking Stick. The completed book is on display at the public library, offering an opportunity for children and adults to learn more about the school and its students. Many of the students, not surprisingly, have become regular library users.

The experience of creating their own book helped the children to understand that books are not some strange form of communication, but merely the writing down of spoken words or thoughts. They learned that they do not have to be intimidated by the thoughts of others just because they are written down.

During the first year of Westchester's project, only two libraries developed storytelling projects. However, these projects were so significant that during the second year of the grant eight other storytelling programs were established and the focus of Westchester's efforts crystallized into a cohesive policy of promoting the use of storytelling and reading aloud to learning disabled children.

Children with learning differences are too often disenfranchised from story experiences. There is a lack of story sharing with learning disabled children. Teachers involved in the storytelling projects in Rye and New Rochelle—previously reluctant to use stories with their students—became delighted with the responsiveness of their children to stories and decided to integrate them into daily classroom activities in the future.

In Rye the children also learned to tell stories. To the amazement of all, the children performed their stories in front of other students and eventually before the town's board of education. The appreciation of the importance of storytelling spurred the Rye Free Reading Room to join with the schools and, with support from local organizations, proclaimed a year-long, townwide festival and celebration of storytelling.
superintendent's training day required all elementary teachers, including the physical education coach, to be trained in the skills and the philosophy of storytelling.

Storytelling, reading aloud, and the introduction of good children's literature is essential to helping learning disabled children with their reading problems. Appreciating the connection between written and oral language is central to learning to read. Storytelling provides a structure and a context in which this connection can become meaningful. Storytelling also builds confidence and self-esteem, both of which are crucial to learning disabled children. Accustomed to many failures, these children can be helped to extend their attention span, to develop clear, sequential thinking that precedes and underlies the reading process. They can be motivated to read on their own. Above all, storytelling can help them respond to literature with pleasure and view stories and books with joy and confidence rather than anxiety and dread.

Children with learning differences must not be denied access to aesthetic experiences and intellectual content because their reading skills are not equal to the task. They need to hear and to be introduced to good literature.

One learning disabled child's response to hearing Hans Christian Andersen's story of The Nightingale for the first time was: "If you hadn't told me that story, I never would have known it. I couldn't have read it myself. But now I know it. Maybe even, sometime, I can read it myself."

It is worth noting that the Commission on Reading, in their report, "Becoming a Nation of Readers," stated that reading in context (which storytelling and the use of good literature in the classroom provide) and hearing good stories are major factors in increasing children's fluency in reading.

Baskin and Harris, in their book The Special Child in the Library, make the point that:

Storytelling is so firmly entrenched as an accepted library practice that the reasons for its popularity are often unquestioned and frequently undervalued. Yet there are few activities that achieve so many academic aims through so enjoyable an experience. Storytelling teaches new vocabulary, stretches attention span, introduces cultural events, norms and values, provides a socializing experience, develops attitudes, and can be the stimulus for language practice, dramatic interpretations, artistic expression, creative writing, and research projects. Clearly then, it is essential that storytelling be included in programming for the exceptional child.
In 1985, The Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities funded a project by the Churchill School for Children with Learning Disabilities in New York City to develop special materials to support the Westchester activities. Churchill created The Hans Christian Andersen Storytelling Resource Kit. It is an integrated curriculum approach that uses the personality of Hans Christian Andersen (who had learning difficulties) as its focus. The kit contains a self-instruction manual for librarians and/or teachers to develop an ongoing program for learning disabled children in a library setting or classroom. It includes ways to introduce literature by and about Andersen and encourages the use of the folktales and biographical form. Puppets, flannel board figures, storytelling, and "oral" creative writing techniques for the learning disabled are provided. It is important to note that this kit can be used effectively with all children and it provides a subtle way for the child with learning differences to participate fully in library and schools literature programs. The kit also provides librarians with an entry to the schools by giving them something concrete to offer the schools.

The public library can also provide another important service for children with learning differences and their families. It is a place in the community where parents can take their children that is cultural, educational, entertaining, nonthreatening, and nonjudgmental. Libraries are excellent places for parents and children to spend time together sharing books, filmstrips, records, or watching a puppet show, doing a puzzle, or even playing a board game—depending on the scope of the library's resources.

Be aware, however, that beyond the classroom and library there is a whole group of children with learning differences that remain almost invisible to these institutions. These are the children who have entered the juvenile justice system, these are the youth in trouble with the law. There are many reasons why children get in trouble. For some, it is evident that their educational frustrations have played a very real part in this process. The National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention suggests a link between juveniles in trouble with the law and learning disabilities. A 1976 study showed that 50 percent of all illiterate prisoners in the United States were learning disabled as were 30 percent of all juvenile offenders. Educational frustrations may not transmute into antisocial behavior, but clearly the connection is there. The implications for intervention become even more evident when it is learned that 60 percent of all juvenile offenders placed in learning disability educational programs never again broke the law.  

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The concept of learning differences is a critical one for libraries to comprehend. It encompasses an attitude that respects individual styles of learning. It recognizes and validates the individual needs of each child and reaffirms that each child is unique, different, special, and valuable. There is no concept more basic than this one when working with children.

There are other realities and differences in the community of today's children. Some of them are joyous differences such as special talents and intellectual giftedness. Other differences show a reality that is a harsh world of childhood—where one out of every four children is living below the level of poverty with the future promising not relief but entrapment in a cycle of poverty, where almost 20 percent of youth between the ages of 14-17 are problem drinkers, where more than 1 million children under the age of 18 are victims of child abuse with about 5000 of them dying annually, and an additional 1.5 million are described as being vulnerable to physical injury from their parents each year, where over two million children come into the court system each year, where 13 percent of all 17 year olds still in school are functionally illiterate with the figure rising to 40 percent among minority students. This other reality reflects some of the different situations among American children in 1986.

The implications for libraries and librarians are there to be seen by those who care to see. Libraries have an important role to play in the reading, informational, educational, cultural, and ethical lives of children. Children's librarians are responsible for helping children become information managers and critical consumers of information. They have responsibilities to nurture their intellectual curiosity and protect their dignity and humanity. They have the responsibility to treat all children as special children and to meet the needs of children in their unique and special individualities. Children with learning and other differences can be helped. They can be brought into the library or libraries can reach out to them with their resources wherever the children are.

References

1. From the song "Mairzy Doats" (words and music by Milton Drake, Al Hoffman, and Jerry Livingston). Hallmark Music Co., Inc., © 1943.
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Additional References
