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Early years developments in France and beyond

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A colleague from Latin America was invited to present the situation of library services for the very young in this part of the world. Unfortunately she could not attend our conference. So John asked me to present the situation in France. I have accepted because the French experience I am going to describe has something to do, in some ways, with this continent.

I could give an overview on library services for very young children in my country. But actually, in many aspects, the library services for the very young in France are basically very much the same throughout the western and northern world : public libraries are widely open to the very young, to babies, parents and child minders. Every publishing house has its collections for these "newcomers" etc. Training sessions, special bookfairs are organized throughout the countries about what we call "le bébé lecteur", the baby reader. Sometimes, we are even afraid that this new population in our libraries, absorbs, on a too exclusive manner, the attention we should give also to other children.

My paper shall concentrate on what appears to me an important movement, initiated in France, about 20 years ago, and which is, for the time being, one of the major inspiration for children's librarians in my country. It has a strong impact on the work carried out in libraries with the very young, their parents and caretakers. This movement is giving a new dynamics to children's library in France, but not only. Its influence is gradually reaching other countries and help librarians to think of new strategies for reaching marginalized groups.

ACCES is its name. This acronym means access : Actions Culturelles Contre les Exclusions et les Ségrégations. Cultural actions for preventing (or against) exclusions and segregations.

It has been initiated by an eminent psychoanalyst René Diatkine, together with colleagues of his, and more generally, pediatricians and mental health professionals. René Diatkine had a long experience of therapies of children coming from immigrant families. He had observed the major role of stories, reading and books in children's therapies. That is why, when he created the first nucleus of his association, he asked some children's librarians to join and play an active role.

So the first characteristics is that this movement deeply affecting our profession of librarians comes from other professions aware of the potentialities of our institution ; these professions being usually not considered as traditional partners of libraries, like schools for example. Their immediate interest for our institution shows a strong wish from these therapists and researchers to give a cultural dimension to their project. They are clear about it : the association is not dealing with psychotherapy, bibliotherapy or psychology. For them, cultural proposals, cultural activities are essential for preventing segregation and exclusion. Reading pleasure, literature and art are important factors for an harmonious development of the person and contributes to a better insertion in the community.

What makes this movement important and relatively new for our profession is that it associates librarians, especially the ones who have a daily practice with children with researchers coming from various disciplines (mental health, anthropologists, linguists, pedagogics, etc.) who precisely are interested in this practice. It is a tremendous stimulation for making our work at the grassroot level more and more conscious, responsible, interesting. It helps to be more imaginative and creative. Instead of routine, we may be in a constant progress.

Library is recognized, as a place where children can live important experiences thanks to books, to people who share reading with them. Getting to know these "live experiments" is important for this researchers, because any serious researcher needs to refer to experiments. We shall see later how we, as librarians, are invited more precisely to contribute.

For us librarians, it is important to have our everyday practice supported by a theory which is permanently based on our own practice. It helps to be clear about the reasons of what we are doing.

Another characteristics of the members of this group is their motivation which meets ours : cultural actions against segregation and exclusion. Together with Emilia Ferreiro from Mexico, former assistant of Jean Piaget, they have noticed that all children during the first five years of their life may equally enjoy the pleasure of stories and books, whatever the socio-economical background of the families. It supposes they have an early access to literature, it means, to "written language", the language of stories and books, different from the strictly utilitarian language. (The same observation was related in Margaret Clarke's excellent book : "Young fluent readers", ed. Heineman). Disparities, differences, inequalities appear later, when children enter school and meet social difficulties. Also important is for the children to grow with people who take time and/or show real interest and pleasure for reading and talking with them. We know that these favorable conditions are more exceptional among deprived communities.

These consideration, confirmed by most observations, bring ACCES to formulate some points which should guide our practice as librarians, especially when working in marginalized communities.

1. it is important to help parents and caretakers to be aware of their children's ability to enjoy stories and books. For this reason, emphasis is put on the necessity of presenting books and sharing stories when these adults are present. This necessity being especially important for uneducated and marginalized people, so that they can overcome their reluctance towards books and reading. Professionals of early childhood or daycare centers may, this way, become interested and, as collaborators, take over this task in their daily environment.

2. considering that these parents do not attend libraries or any cultural institution, the idea is to look for places where nobody would expect to find books and where parents and their little children are supposed to wait, to have time, to be bored and feel like browsing... Preparing unexpected encounters with books is one of the concerns of ACCES. It is the necessary first step before attending a library. Waiting rooms of Centres de Protection Maternelle Infantile are good places, because, there, deprived mothers have to go there for health consultation for their babies and themselves. It is compulsory . In some rural departments, in connection with the public mobile library, the little bus ACCES for medical consultation presents some collections of children's books for mothers who would not spontaneously use the regular bookmobile.
3. ACCES insists about the quality of services, professionalism, training, partnership. They are very strict about the literary and artistic quality of books, because they noticed that babies and very young children's make very early the difference. Tight cooperation with libraries and other existing institutions is important for a long term action. Librarians learn also from health professionals and gain from the variety of representations and experiences of reading observed in various contexts with people coming from different professional backgrounds. ACCES is, for this reason, encouraging the building of networks associating different institutions and groups, children's libraries being the permanent central point. The example of its project carried out in Paris is a good and successful experience. If necessary, we will tell more about it.
4. Permanent reflection on work and practice ; tight links between theory and practice, priority to grassroot work are the most essential aspect of this cooperation. Here come new responsibilities for children's librarians . It is an absolute necessity in our time of quick and radical changes, if we want to be efficient and not to rely only about a priori or practice thought for middle class children of another time. We need to up date our practice.

Here is for us the main contribution of ACCES. Some eminent psychoanalyst like René Diatkine, or the Colombian linguist Evelio Cabrejo Parra from the Sorbonne, as any real researcher, have the humility and the seriousness to refer constantly to observations children's librarians are noting. They need them, just the way we need their reflections and their progressive elaboration of tentative theories, for improving our work.

In the last 20 years, as children's librarians, we have been taking a great benefit of regular monthly seminars open to librarians, professionals coming from different backgrounds, to scientists (psychologists, anthropologists, linguists) ; all of them being deeply eager to know more about how children spontaneously experiment sharing books and stories. These sessions have been for many years conducted by René Diatkine, principal initiator of ACCES.

The first part of these monthly sessions is always devoted to one or two very detailed reports on observation of child's reactions and reading attitude. This presentation is made by the librarian or the "animatrice de lecture" who has shared the reading of the book with one child. Then, under the leadership of René Diatkine or another theoretician, most stimulating discussion are carried out. Four or five times a year, ACCES organizes in a children's library, lectures and free discussions with researchers which are for us an invitation for a multidisciplinary approach, always with a clear connection between concrete experiences and theories.

This whole approach is not limited to the Paris area. In various parts of France, groups are being organized approximatively on the same pattern. It is also very inspiring for other countries. I believe it is even an absolute necessity for librarians working in countries where there is no long tradition of library services for children, in marginalized communities etc. I am involved in a Latin American project, initiated by

Cerlalc, an organization which has its headquarters in Bogota and is promoting reading in this part of the world including the Carribeans. The aim of this project is, within a network, to help children's librarians from various countries to think of new strategies for reaching children and families who do not have a access to libraries and books. We have started with the very young, for various reasons. Among them, there is the fact that parents are the first partners at this age. In so many countries, reading seems to deal only with school work and curriculum that enjoyable family involvement is important. In such work, it is not too difficult to involve a variety of adults. It is a good way for spreading interest for reading.

We appreciate also the fact that librarians naturally share the reading of books with the very young, not lost in a group but most of the time for one or two children. Here are good conditions for observing the child's attitude. This sharing and observation is a way for the librarians to know better what books should be selected. Thanks to all these observations, the value of library work with children at the grassroots level increases. It makes librarians more responsible and give them the desire of a constant improvement. It gives to the library a real dynamism and a new and very positive image. It is interesting to note the impact of ACCES approach in this Latino-American network. Quite a few of librarians working under difficult conditions are taking time for writing their precise observations. Exchanges are made easily through internet and it is a tremendous stimulation.

It is a start, just a start : children's libraries must offer services for children of all ages. This type of work I have been trying to explain gives an idea of what should be our work. Children's librarians, whatever their level of responsibilities, may be involved in a truly scientific work. Of course, with older children, we have to look for other ways, other solutions. But it reminds us that the first duty for a librarian is to be as closed as possible to the children for positive observation and attention to their needs and desires. It is important for the child to be listened to. He feels stimulated. As for us, librarians, it prevents us from relying too easily on general and out of date a priori.