



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 162-150-E
Division Number: III
Professional Group: Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 150
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia

Gyda Skat Nielsen

Sollerod Public Libraries
Department of Outreach Services
Holte, Denmark
E-mail: gskatn@mail.dk

Within the last ten years there has in many countries been an increasing interest in dyslexia – of specific learning difficulties – not only among scientists and other professionals, but also in the general society.

Dedicated persons both here in the United States and in Europe have done a wonderful work to inform about dyslexia and how to help persons with dyslexia in different ways.

Much has been achieved - but we still have a long way to go.

I think I can say without exaggerating that a good deal of the positive results obtained happened thanks to the NGO organizations: the American International Dyslexia Association and the European Dyslexia Association of which I am one of the founders and which by now includes about 30 countries and territories in and outside Europe.

Thanks to national and international campaigns both associations have done a great work to focus on this invisible disability. Let me just mention one campaign run by the European Dyslexia Association during 1993: “The Year of Early Recognition”. The slogan of this campaign was “Early Help – Better Future” and the aim of the campaign was to raise awareness of the need to help children showing signs of dyslexia as early as possible, which means before school age. The campaign raised the awareness not only of pre-school teachers and teachers but also of persons working in the medical field. As the chair of the campaign, I was especially pleased to see that children’s librarians also showed great interest in improving their services to children with reading problems.

But in spite of the growing understanding of dyslexia in many countries most persons with dyslexia still hesitate to reveal their disability. No wonder, because during their time in school many of them have been told over and over again that they were stupid, lazy or misbehaving. One defeat followed another, and many persons with dyslexia are marked for the rest of their lives.

How do you think these people feel getting into the library? Passing the threshold – both the physical and the psychological one – into the library is extremely difficult for many persons with dyslexia. You may have experienced a similar feeling standing in front of a very exclusive shop: “Should I enter? Do I have anything to do in there?” This is exactly how persons with reading difficulties feel standing in front of the “castle of knowledge”. “What do I have to do among all these reading persons who can manage everything?” or as a friend of mine once said: “I don’t visit the library, because I don’t want any more failures”.

Of course, all of us here know what a wonderful feeling it is to enter a library, but do we prevent some people from sharing this feeling with us because we do not know enough about their situation and their needs? Or maybe even because we consider them a little bit “difficult” to deal with? We would like everybody to use our libraries but we should realize that some people do need a special attention and understanding.

I am aware that the tendency in many countries is to focus entirely on education of persons with dyslexia. The role of the public libraries is underestimated, but all of us here know what an important role information and culture play in the daily life of both children and adults.

Therefore I was very pleased when in 1997 the issue dyslexia/reading difficulties and the role of the libraries were brought to international attention at the IFLA International Conference in Copenhagen. A workshop “Access to Information: Serving Persons with Dyslexia” was arranged by the IFLA Section of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons (LSDP) in co-operation with the Danish Professional Group of Outreach Library Services to Disabled Persons and the European Dyslexia Association (EDA). The workshop was completed by a poster session on dyslexia.

During the Copenhagen Conference, we noticed that there was a high degree of ignorance about dyslexia among colleagues from all over the world. On the other hand, we also noticed much interest and understanding, and many participants in our workshop expressed their intentions to go back to their countries and improve their services to citizens with reading difficulties

At the 1999 IFLA Conference in Bangkok, LSDP and EDA likewise presented a poster session on dyslexia, “Dyslexia is everywhere. What does your library do?” An information leaflet was produced of which we have brought some copies today for those of you who are interested. Birgitta Irvall from the Swedish Library of Talking Books and Braille and I were delighted to inform many colleagues from all over the world about dyslexia during that week in Bangkok.

At that time, the European Dyslexia Association had been granted Consultative Status to IFLA, an honor we consider an acceptance and understanding of dyslexia from the international library community.

As a natural consequence of this positive development the Section of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons wanted to continue and expand on the 1997 and 1999 initiatives with a guideline for everybody working in libraries. Birgitta Irvall and I were happy to take on the job of writing these guidelines.

And now here it is: the “Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia”, the 70th IFLA Professional Report.

Birgitta and I are grateful to the many persons who helped develop this publication: the members of our standing committee, colleagues in Sweden and the European Dyslexia Association. We would also like to thank Vibeke Lehmann for her editorial assistance

The Guidelines bring official definitions of dyslexia, and clarify a very important point, namely that dyslexia is **not** related to social status and that dyslexia does **not** mean lack of intelligence. People with dyslexia are just as individual persons as the rest of us; some are very bright, some are less bright. Some people with dyslexia are known as being very creative and many famous artists and scientists like for instance Leonardo da Vinci, Auguste Rodin, Hans Christian Andersen, Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, are known to have had difficulties reading and writing.

The democratic right to access to culture, literature and information extends to all – including those with reading difficulties. It is of vital importance that **all** citizens are able to obtain information about what is going on in society. In order to exercise one’s democratic rights and control one’s own life, every citizen must be well informed.

Reading promotion is strongly supported by the Standard Rules of the United Nations concerning persons with disabilities, the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, and the Charter for the Reader.

The main objective of the Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia is to change the attitude of the library community by informing about the needs for persons with dyslexia coming into the library.

We also want to emphasize the responsibility of both library schools and the libraries themselves to provide both the basic and the continuing education of the library staff – so they have the necessary knowledge to welcome persons with dyslexia.

In the Dyslexia Guidelines we also recommend to invite representative from the dyslexia community to the library to discuss their needs, because **they** really are the “specialists”.

A co-operation with the national or local dyslexia associations is warmly recommended and there is a list of dyslexia associations in the back of the Guidelines. If a dyslexia association does not exist in your country: why don’t you take the initiative to start one?

We are aware that the necessary materials for persons with dyslexia do not exist in some countries. As cultural institutions, libraries **could** take initiative to start a production of Easy-to-read literature or books on tape/CD if these materials are not readily available.

The Guidelines also include examples how the library can make persons with reading difficulties feel welcome in the library by creating pleasant surroundings.

We introduce the concept “My own librarian”, knowing how important it is to a dyslexic person to have one person in the library with specialist knowledge of both reading difficulties and appropriate materials. But we also point out the importance of the entire staff having a basic knowledge about dyslexia so that they can welcome the dyslexic patron when he has crossed that famous threshold. One thing you can be sure is that a person, unfamiliar with the library who was received in a negative way, will never return to the library.

The Guidelines bring translations from a Swedish book “Det var ju inte dum jag var” (“I wasn’t stupid after all. Thirteen dyslexics demand to be heard”) published in 1996. Roger, a 42 years old dyslexic man, writes:

“Should I forget it or should I go in? Soon I was there, outside the library, and kept on sitting in the car. I debated with myself, should I forget it or should I actually go in. Libraries are old with narrow rooms; they are dark places with books from floor to ceiling. Like in the school library where the teacher was sitting. After that, I had never again gone to such a place, never in my life.

I will just begin to stutter, I thought, and I won’t be able to get a word out... Maybe people will stop and stare at me. I couldn’t think of what to say to the librarian, but that was not as important as just taking the step inside.

Then I gathered up all my courage. Carried it with me.

Must first walk around the library, size it up, absorb the atmosphere, really feel the place.

The people there were mostly young. I didn’t think they were looking at me when I went over to the talking books, in the middle of the room. So easy to be able to stand just in the middle of the library and look at the talking books. So easy it was to find them, they were not hidden away into a dark corner

Here I was in the middle of the room, after all like anybody else. I didn’t stand out in the crowd. A blind person has his white cane, a deaf person has his hearing aid, but my problem doesn’t show until I write, until I read. It becomes such an emotional thing, so charged.

But now I have been in the library for a while and have gotten used to it, I have stepped inside. The next thing to do is to walk over and talk to the librarian.”

We hope that these Guidelines will inspire libraries to help dyslexic people in accessing information and culture on equal terms with other citizens.

So please read the “Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia”, be inspired, and create a library for everybody. And use this publication to fit your individual circumstances.