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The Training Needs of School Library Staff for Service Delivery to Disabled Students

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Staff development programs dealing with library service to students with disabilities are scarce. A four-year study that evaluated school library services offered to disabled students in two Australian states considered staff development needs. The study assessed the availability of staff development activities for school library staff that would assist them in teaching, communicating, and providing for the information needs of disabled students. Results showed that there were limited opportunities/or school librarians to participate in such programs beyond those offered in individual schools to the teaching staff as a whole. There is a need for library-specific staff development programs that cover policy formulation, collection development, and adaptive technology aspects of library services for disabled students. Professional education courses should also cover this area as an integrated element of the core curriculum. A model for staff development programs is suggested.

Background

This article expands on a theme first put forward in a paper at the 65th ILFA Council and General Conference, in Bangkok, August 1999, in the Session of the Section for Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons. Earlier, in compiling the bibliography *Equity and Excellence* (Murray, 1994) for the National Library of Australia, I had found a lack of library-specific training materials on the provision of services for people with disabilities. I also found that few staff development programs on this aspect of service run by libraries had been reported in the literature. This situation is little changed eight years later and, if the viewpoint is narrowed to staff development programs for school library staff, evidence of any library-specific training is hard to track down. Wesson (1995) suggests school librarians can provide themselves with staff development by visiting other school libraries that cater for disabled students, or can undertake some action research in their own library that focuses on disabled students. In Australia, some staff development programs on service provision for people with disabilities are available (Spriggs, 1997), but provision is still sporadic (Murray & Wallis, 1996). None of these programs has been targeted at school librarians. Research by Herr (1989), Klauber (1990), and Caller (1997) found that there was limited coverage of library services for people with disabilities in preprofessional training programs.

There appears to be little staff development of any type available for school librarians. Such programs as are offered are rarely reported in the literature. Heeks and Kinnell (1994) found that in the United Kingdom, a

range of staff development activities were available to school librarians, but the identification of those suitable for individual school librarians was inhibited by the lack of confidence by line managers in assessing the individual school librarian's staff development needs. Earlier research by Edwards and Schon (1986) identified professional reading, attendance at conferences and seminars, training provided by school districts, involvement in professional associations, and formal tertiary education courses as being the chief training activities engaged in by school librarians. There appeared to be no evidence of staff development programs being run specifically for school librarians to assist them in providing services to disabled students. Comprehensive literature searches conducted over the last two years have not identified any articles other than those discussed here.

If little is being done for these professionals from the library perspective, what is happening in education circles? Bradley and West (1994) investigated the staff development needs of classroom teachers who were teaching disabled students in mainstream schools. Results showed that teachers wanted staff development that covered: how to modify educational programs; working and teaching in a team; the impact of the inclusion of a student with a disability on other students in the class; knowledge of specific disabilities; attitudes to disability; expectations of disabled students included in their classes; and background information about special education, integration, and inclusion. Unless teachers have studied special education in either pre or postprofessional courses, they may have no knowledge of these areas. In the Australian state of New South Wales, all teacher training courses now include a compulsory unit on special education. Thus any newly qualified teachers in that state who go on to train as school librarians will have some background to help them as librarians in catering for disabled students.

The Study

I recently completed a study that evaluated the library services provided to disabled students enrolled in mainstream schools (Murray, 1999). Data about the availability of staff development programs and training needs for school librarians were collected through both a longitudinal survey and case studies. The survey instrument, a self-administered questionnaire, included two questions about staff development. The first asked if any programs related to disabled students had been offered in the school and invited comments about this topic. The second asked about the awareness of school librarians of disability legislation that affected library services. Those who were aware were then asked to identify the source through which they became aware of the legislation. The options included the school principal, library literature, professional networks, educational publications (including professional literature and publications made available through the education system), the media, or training/education. The survey was administered

twice; the second survey (Survey 2) was administered 18 months after the first (Survey 1).

Fourteen schools across the two states participated in the study as case study schools. In conducting interviews in case study schools, I asked the school librarians about the staff development programs that had been made available to them or their staff. School library staff discussed their personal experience of disability. Special educators were asked what type of staff development programs they had made available to staff in the school and whether library staff were included.

Results

Two hundred and seven respondents (52%) to Survey 1 reported that staff development programs related to disabled students had been available. One hundred, four respondents (27%) to Survey 2 reported that such programs had been available in the period since Survey 1. Thus there was a decrease in the staff development programs available in the 18 months between the first and second surveys. Qualitative responses to this question indicated that most of the training was in-house; there were no library-specific programs. Training covering a wide range of disabilities was mentioned; visual impairment, hearing disability, and learning disability were the most frequently mentioned. The programs consisted of special staff meetings, inservices or talks by personnel from external organizations, or staff being sent to external courses; this latter option was available only to special educators. Where school librarians were aware of disability legislation, their main sources of information were evenly distributed across the six sources identified. There was a drop in the percentage of respondents quoting training as a source between 1994 and 1996, from 22% to 15%, which is consistent with the decrease in training available in the same time period. The two surveys showed that 57% of respondents were totally unaware that legislation existed that affected the services offered to disabled students.

Several school library staff members working in case study schools had personal experience of disability. These came from a range of experiences: teaching, community work, or through the involvement of family members in the disability field. Special educators in nearly all case study schools provided training activities of some kind for teaching staff, but these either did not include nonteaching staff, or they were held outside of school hours and nonteaching staff were not willing to attend in their own time. Schools often provided intensive staff development programs when disabled students were first enrolled, but this was not an ongoing activity as it was presumed there was no further need. Often special educators briefed a small group of teachers who taught particular disabled students, but the school librarian was not included in this group.

Discussion

The survey results showed that few opportunities were provided for the library staff to participate in staff development programs related to service provision for disabled students. In 1994, just over half of the schools with disabled students enrolled had offered whole school programs; in 1996, this had dropped to 27%. Although professional library staff would no doubt have been able to attend any programs offered to the teaching staff, it is questionable whether these programs would also have been offered to technical or clerical staff in the school library. It is interesting to note that more staff development programs have been offered in the government schools sector than in the private schools sector. Given that government schools are the largest school sector, this could be due to the availability of training activities run at the regional or state level for school staff.

Although school librarians in the case study schools were able to attend training activities offered to the whole school teaching staff, none had received any library-specific training, nor had they provided it for technical or clerical library staff. In some schools, little or no information was provided about disabled students to the school librarian by special educators, often because the special educators failed to recognize that the school librarian would be likely to deal with most students in the school and therefore should be included in briefing sessions about particular students. The lack of ongoing disability training in some schools did not take into account the needs of newly appointed staff.

The Training Needs of School Librarians

The survey results and discussions with librarians in the case study schools and in schools visited during fieldwork in Canada and the UK indicate that staff development programs are needed in several areas, some of which correspond to Bradley and West's (1994) findings. School library staff who do not have personal experience of disability would benefit from disability awareness training. Unless they have personal experience of disability, it is quite likely that school library staff may have misconceptions about disability that need to be overcome. Some staff may be well informed, but may need to enhance their communication skills to enable them to deal more effectively with students with particular needs. It is important that all school library staff are given the opportunity, in a relaxed and informal atmosphere, to discuss any fears or apprehensions they might have about dealing with students with particular disabilities.

School librarians need the knowledge about resources and technology to enable them to improve services. They need to be aware of the existence of disability legislation and of guidelines and standards, both national and international, for library service to people with disabilities. Information is needed about available support services and the range of alternative format material published. School librarians should also understand the need to

provide quality information about disability and fiction that portrays disability in an understanding and empathetic way.

The greatest need is for school librarians to receive specific information about the disabled students in their school and how to deal with them, how to teach them, and how to meet their needs. School librarians should be included in briefing sessions on particular students and in meetings of students' individual learning support groups when information resourcing is an issue to be discussed. This includes being given the opportunity to work with special educators in modifying materials used in information skills teaching to suit individual students. However, school librarians need to ensure they always attend general staff meetings and other forums where information about disabled students may be disseminated. Training in working with others is not such an issue for school librarians, as they are experienced in this area through their endeavors to integrate information skills teaching into the curriculum and by working alongside other library staff, although some do work in isolation. But as classroom teachers and special educators receive much-needed training, as many of them have worked independently in the past, information flow and cooperation between them and the school librarian should improve.

School librarians would benefit from gaining knowledge about special education, the purpose and processes of integration and inclusion of disabled students into mainstream schools, and particularly the legislation governing this area. Beyond the staff development needs identified by Bradley and West (1994), school librarians need training in the library-specific areas of policy formulation, collection management, and technology requirements. The survey results showed that 5% of respondents had a formal policy on services for disabled students in 1994 (3% in 1996). Few of the case study school libraries had formal policy statements, even those with exemplary school librarians. The lack of policy statements indicates lack of awareness of need. Both survey and case study results showed that the school librarians provided good collections of informational materials about disability and of fiction materials that treat disability in a realistic and sensitive way. However, most school librarians have a limited knowledge of the alternative format materials that are available and of the external libraries or organizations where these can be accessed or borrowed. Although school librarians are experienced users of information technology, there was no evidence of recognition of the role of technology in compensating for disabilities. Although adaptive technology can provide many options, such as access to print for visually impaired students and keyboard use for students with little motor control, it was provided only in a small number of school libraries.

Meeting these staff development needs involves a variety of mechanisms. Wesson's (1995) suggestion that individuals should take charge of their own staff development is realistic, given the isolation experienced by most school

librarians and the frequent lack of understanding of their staff development needs by their line managers. Individuals can pursue professional literature. Several good videos and some training packages on disability and disability awareness could be used effectively by one person or by a small library staff together. Some school districts and school clusters provide staff development programs for school library staff that could address collection management and information technology issues. Conferences and seminars held by professional associations are another avenue, although my experience indicates that specific seminars held at a district or local level will be more successful than running a session at a general conference. Opportunities for staff development are so limited for school librarians, and emphasis on information technology so great, that any topic considered at all peripheral will be ignored where a choice of sessions is offered at a conference.

Clearly all these areas must be reinforced in ongoing staff development activities, but there is an argument for including them in professional education courses. Although there is no room for additional subjects in the already crowded curricula of preprofessional courses, disability awareness training and information about resources and technology can be built into existing subjects. This is, in fact, preferable, so that the information needs of disabled people are seen as a valid and appropriate consideration in all types of library service. An obvious example is in the collection management area where information about alternative format material can be included. Evaluation of fiction that portrays people with disabilities could be an interesting inclusion in any subject that looks at literature, whether adult, children's, or young adult literature. The curricula of most library school address communication skills, and a session on dealing with disability would be appropriate and probably organized at little extra cost or effort, as voluntary agencies in the disability field will frequently provide trainers free or at a reasonable charge. At the post-professional level, flexibility in offerings could enable school librarians to undertake a subject in a special education course available in their university.

Further research in the area of library services to disabled students is needed. My own study highlighted two particular areas needing further research: an evaluation of the learning outcomes for disabled students undertaking information skills programs; and an assessment of the benefits of electronic information sources for students with disabilities.

Conclusion

Staff development programs on services to disabled students are rarely provided for school librarians or other school library staff. University departments offering courses in librarianship and information management should be encouraged to address library services to people with disabilities in mainstream curricula, so that newly trained professionals would be sensitized to the needs of this client group. The inclusion of alternative format

materials in collection management subjects/ as suggested above, could be easily achieved. In most countries, such materials are produced and published by major disability agencies. The most obvious example is materials for blind people. Students could be told about the agencies that publish materials—such as the Canadian Institute for the Blind or the Swedish Library of Talking Books and Braille—in their country. Similarly, in subjects dealing with information retrieval and reference work, information could be included about bibliographical sources for these materials. Most national libraries, such as the National Library of Australia and the Library of Congress, include alternative format materials in their catalogues and databases. Although the literature about services to people with special needs is not extensive, several texts are now available, predominantly by North American authors, but these have some application in other countries also. Apart from the excellent *Serving Special Needs Students in the School Library Media Center* (Murray, 1995; Wesson, 1995), there are several others that deal with library services for people with special needs. Those by Velleman (1990) and Walling and Karrenbrock (1993) are just two examples.

Encouragement of staff development activities at a personal level and lobbying of professional associations, tertiary institutions, and education authorities to provide more programs in this area seem to be the most viable solutions to the lack of staff development activities for this specialized area. A short course run by any of these groups should include disability awareness training, information about disability legislation, and information about specific services and publications that could be accessed by school librarians.

There are several good training kits available that provide videos and other resources that can be used to raise awareness of disability. Several students I have taught in the past, in a postgraduate elective on library services for people with disabilities, have commented that viewing interactions with disabled people on video dispels initial hesitation about how to approach people with disabilities. This can then be followed by experiential exercises in disability simulation, and/or talks by disabled people about the barriers they find in libraries. If a library deals specifically with clients with a specific disability, they might pursue training that facilitates their dealings with that particular group. Staff from disability agencies are available to talk to groups about specific disabilities. In a school, there are many visiting professionals, such as physiotherapists, speech therapists, and visiting specialist teachers, who may be available to talk to library staff. Library staff from the larger agencies that provide specialist library services can provide information about alternative format materials, where they can be purchased or borrowed, and criteria for their selection.

As mentioned above, school librarians need to be proactive in both gaining information about students with disabilities enrolled in their school and ensuring that any staff development activities offered in the school are made available to all library staff at professional, paraprofessional, and technical-

clerical levels. In addition to this, there are three other options to ensure the library is accessible to any students with disabilities who are enrolled in the school. First, libraries could be audited for physical accessibility, possibly by a staff member from an agency for physical disability or by self-assessment using one of the published lists available (Murray, 1995; Natale, 1992; Bell, 1992). Second, disability awareness training for all staff could be provided. Again, tools are available that could be used by a school librarian to provide this training for the staff, possibly with some assistance from special education staff in the school. It is advisable to seek advice from local disability agencies about suitable training kits, but two books by Wright and Davie (1991, 1990) contain suggestions for training activities. Finally, school librarians can find out which adaptive technology is currently being used by disabled students in the school and ensure that the necessary equipment is available so that it can be also used in the library. This often requires something straightforward such as a power point in a particular position or a particular socket or add-on device for computers and other equipment. These are straightforward, cost-effective steps that can be taken by any school librarian to prepare for the enrollment of any student with a disability in the school.

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