A Library Skills Program Serving Adults with Mental Retardation: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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During the past decade, there has been a thrust, both socially and legally, to integrate adults with developmental disabilities, particularly those with mental retardation, into community life. Libraries, which are resources in the community for all citizens, can play a significant role in this integration. This article describes the format and outcome of a California-based library program for mentally retarded adults. It describes the materials developed, gives the contributions made by an interdisciplinary team, and discusses occupational therapy’s role in the implementation of this community program.

During the past decade, there has been a significant national commitment to improve the status of people with disabilities. For example, in 1975 Public Law 94-142 was enacted. This law included provisions to help people with developmental disabilities move from the restricted environments of institutions to more normalized lifestyles of home and community (1). Other federal legislation and judicial litigation have resulted in public agencies being required to provide disabled persons with full access to services and facilities. Of this disabled population, those mentally retarded people who are not institutionalized represent a vulnerable group, who require a wide array of specialized services to become mainstreamed (2).

The principles supporting the philosophies of normalization and mainstreaming thread through occupational therapy services: goals are actualized through the occupational therapy education process, which teaches the use of purposeful activities, and through therapists’ use of task analysis, which permits activities to be adapted to promote patient performance (3).

As the profession assumes a greater advocacy role for patients, occupational therapy services, once provided primarily within clinical settings, are expanding into nontraditional community settings. An example of a nontraditional setting is the public library. Because the library is a community resource, it strives to respond to the needs of those in the community. And, as more individuals with mental retardation leave institutions to return to community living and/or become more visible in the community, they will probably use community resources (the public library in particular) more frequently. This poses the question of whether or not their special needs for library services should be considered and planned for. If plans...
must be made, then who should make them? This paper describes the implementation of Project LISTDD (Libraries in Service to Developmentally Disabled), a program designed to assist the mentally retarded in using the library and thus make the transition from restricted environments into community life.

Overview of Program

Project LISTDD was a three-year federally funded program implemented by the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System (MCLS), which serves 28 independent cities within the Los Angeles County area. The project is based on the concept of normalization, which recognizes the need for mentally retarded people to experience normal risk-taking situations in their interaction with the community (5).

Project LISTDD had three major goals: a) to train librarians to more effectively teach library skills to these adults, b) to develop a model collection of materials appropriate for the interest and low reading ability of this group, and c) to provide a five-week training program for these adults, many of whom resided in group homes and worked in sheltered workshops. The project used an interdisciplinary approach to implement these objectives.

The Interdisciplinary Approach

A team composed of members from five disciplines collaborated on the project. The team approach to treatment is not new; however, critical to the success of this interdisciplinary process is the “loosening of bonds of status until cooperation and finally collaboration occurs among group members” (4, p 5). Each group member must be able to communicate and share knowledge, to accept the limitation of his or her own profession, to recognize and articulate the potential contributions of his or her professional input, and to “respect himself and others as having knowledge, understanding, skills, and most importantly, equal right to participate in the problem-solving process” (5, p 38).

The contributions of each team member’s unique knowledge base and professional expertise are listed in Table 1. In addition, the project director brought to the program previous experience in providing library services to disabled people (East Orange, NJ). The project librarian showed the librarians the practical methods of and the immediate returns for the libraries when their services are provided to retarded adults. (The returns for library personnel included greater visibility in the community and increased job satisfaction.) The educational psychology consultant matched the disabled individual’s learning style with the most effective education strategies. The occupational therapy consultant blended age-appropriate library-related activities and purposeful involvements to meet the teaching principles. Both these consultants were from the University Affiliated Program (UAP), Childrens Hospital of Los Angeles. A third consultant came from the University of California, Pomona (communication discipline).

Together, the five members of the interdisciplinary team had 45 years of experience working with

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Discipline/Role</th>
<th>Professional Expertise</th>
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<tr>
<td>Social work (project director)</td>
<td>Community organization. Professional background in training and development. Skills in public speaking and written communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library science (project librarian)</td>
<td>Research and development of appropriate library materials for the nonreader. Mediation between patron needs and service providers. Development of bibliographies of print and audio-visual resources for MR adults, professionals, parents, and concerned individuals.</td>
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<td>Occupational therapy (consultant)</td>
<td>Use of purposeful activities to develop competency in work, self-care, play, and leisure functioning. Task analysis/sequential implementation to meet patrons’ developmental, motivational, and situational needs. Designing, modifying, and adapting activities to teach skills in unique and novel ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational psychology (consultant)</td>
<td>Knowledge of cognitive characteristics of the mentally retarded and how they affect learning. Knowledge of socio-emotional characteristics of the mentally retarded and how they affect learning. Dealing with inappropriate behavior in the library situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication (consultant)</td>
<td>Knowledge of language characteristics of the mentally retarded and how they affect learning. Knowledge of receptive language and how it affects service delivery. Knowledge of expressive language and how it affects service delivery.</td>
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mentally retarded persons. The members’ shared knowledge, experience, and uniform commitment to the philosophy of normalization were valuable assets to effectively implement this community program (6–8).

Launching the Program

The first task of the project was to identify the target population: noninstitutionalized mentally retarded citizens, in each of the 28 cities served by the MCLS. The project director collected lists provided by seven regional centers that indicated where members of the target population were located. These lists also assisted local libraries in outreach efforts and served as a needs assessment. Each list contained the contact information for every community-based facility, giving the number of beds and detailing special needs. The bed count permitted each library to gauge the number of individuals who required specialized services. Additional support for the project was gathered from local sheltered workshops, board and care facilities, rehabilitation programs, independent living skills facilities, and social service agencies.

Initial explorations of the target population revealed a large interest in using the library. These explorations also identified potential constraints to program implementation. For example, many board and care personnel were hesitant to encourage their residents to use the library. Also, transportation was frequently limited or unavailable.

The second task of the project was to establish an information, programming, and training center in the Pomona Public Library from which project services could be developed and offered to other libraries that wished to start similar programs. The Pomona Library professional staff were trainers for the target population of handicapped library users. This model was a five-week, one-hour-per-week orientation to library skills such as knowing library geography; securing and using library cards; understanding rules and fines; using hi/lo collections; and using the audiovisual, reference, children’s and periodical sections. This orientation was designed by the project director to explore and propose answers to several problems that libraries often encounter when serving mentally retarded individuals such as what is appropriate content and effective presentation, and what are behavioral expectations. The curriculum included published materials geared for the non-reader or slow reader that had been selected from similar programs throughout the nation.

The third task of the project was to provide in-service training to the library staffs served by the MCLS. This training was needed to dispel misconceptions and concerns about working with mentally retarded individuals and to implement the five-week curriculum. The librarians’ expressed concerns ranged from fearing that retarded individuals would display inappropriate behavior in the library to questioning what resources the staff could make available to this group with special needs.

The purpose of the in-service training was to a) present information about developmentally disabled adults and their learning characteristics, b) present insights related to behavior problems, and c) discuss the staff’s concerns about providing library services to this group. The in-service training was offered in a one-day format and was attended by approximately 150 librarians (representing 53 communities), 30 general staff members, and 15 professionals from other disciplines. Most of the librarians’ misconceptions were dispelled from the in-service session and others were resolved by direct experience when providing library service to these adults.

Following in-service training, the five-week orientation-to-library-skills program developed by the host library was offered to the target population. It was offered 15 times and included 10 to 15 participants in each class, for a total of 115 graduates. The findings from these library orientation classes are available in a US Office of Education report (9). Overall, the classes were important to the mentally retarded adult’s success in the library environment (10).

The Role of Occupational Therapy in the Training of Mentally Retarded Adults

The occupational therapist was asked to provide librarians with guidelines for training mentally retarded adults. Thus, the therapist designed a pilot library skills training program at UAP. Ten moderately handicapped adults, who represented a wide range of abilities and disabilities, participated in this pilot program, the objectives of which appear in Table 2. The bases for the ongoing occupational therapy consultation to Project LISTDD were the insights gained from the pilot program and collaborative input from an education psychologist.

The ongoing consultation consisted of providing adaptations and modifying the in-service training programs and the orientation-to-library-skills curriculum. These adaptations and modifications were
Table 2
Objectives of Pilot Library Training Program for Mentally Retarded Adults (how to use the public library for special needs and for pleasure)

<table>
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<th>Session</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
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| 1st     | To assess the functioning level of each participant's library skills  
• Use of a pretest questionnaire  
To develop a forthcoming curriculum from participants  
• Identification of interest for future programming following exposure to a film on library use  
To get exposure to the geography of a local neighborhood library  
• Use of specially designed seat games  
• Walking trip to nearby library to match the real situation with the simulated game experience |
| 2nd     | To provide librarians with direct help with disruptive behaviors  
• Tape recordings of responses to "how would you have me handle this situation"  
To establish an awareness of library procedures and library rules  
• Board game activity (map technique)  
• Walking trip to library |
| 3rd     | To develop a motivational/interest tool  
• Questionnaire comparing interest in using library with other community opportunities and establishing choices for leisure use and interests within the library  
To get exposure to and review participants' abilities to complete library card application  
• Completion of enlarged mock application form  
To assign tasks related to library use  
• Distribution of assignment cards ("find a magazine that shows..." "find a book about a place you wish to visit/something you would like to make...")  
To gain experience with checking out library materials  
• Library walking trip |
| 4th     | To share positive feelings about individual library experiences  
• Rap session about library assignments during past week  
• Sharing problems and approaches for resolving problems related to borrowing and returning library items  
• Involvement in a display center  
To get an overall review of library procedures  
• Use of a library board game |
| 5th     | To introduce and practice aspects of library browsing  
• Sharing experiences  
• Modeling how to make judgments  
• Encouraging permission to dislike a book  
To express appreciation to the librarian  
• Creation of a card |
| 6th     | To experience another community involvement  
• Observations to identify areas of overlap in other situations (comfort level, confidence, increased skills, freedom to explore, pleasure) |

Adaptation Based on Cognitive Characteristics

Listening skills and the ability to understand verbal instructions are key considerations when training persons with mental retardation. Because attention span limitations and receptive language difficulties affect a retarded person's processing of information, an emphasis was placed on activity-oriented tasks rather than on verbal instruction. Mentally retarded people also have trouble with the verbal expression of ideas and with problem-solving skills. Therefore, the following is suggested:

1. Make instructions explicit, exact, and concrete.
2. Use multisensory materials (e.g., charts, films, graphs or visual representations, and table games).
3. Focus attention by pointing out what the group will do, describing the activity while it's being done, and finally reviewing what the group did do.
4. Pictorially chart newly learned processes (e.g., threading films, using video TV equipment, or operating a variety of audiovisual devices).
5. Use audiotapes to record step-by-step procedures for the learner to review.
6. Design concrete, simulated library experiences (e.g., board game and seatwork activities).
7. Provide ideas from which a person may choose rather than generate new ideas.
8. Use role play and discuss ways to solve problems. Some sample questions follow.
• What must you do if you want to take a book outside to read?
• What is a good thing to do if you want to talk with a friend rather than look at a book?
• What do you do if you want to look at a magazine but all the chairs in the room are being used?
• What do you do if you want a drink of water and cannot find the drinking fountain?
9. Practice library procedures in on-site experiences.
10. Provide opportunities to generate library rules, which are then charted for discussion and reviewed.

Adaptations Based on Social and Emotional Characteristics

The mentally retarded library patrons do have certain concerns, such as their discomfort in new situations, fear of failure, lack of self-direction (passivity), the appropriate use of the librarian's time, and...
fear of inappropriate behaviors (e.g., interrupting, loud talking, persistent requests, loitering). Therefore, to address these concerns, therapists can do the following.

1. Escort the new library users through the library to practice coping with new environments and materials.
2. Provide small assignments, such as the following:
   - Check out a book about a hobby you might learn.
   - Check out a book about an animal you might like to own.
   - Check out a book about a place you might wish to visit.
   - Find a book about a job that is interesting to you.
3. Use discussion to help individuals mentally retarded adults share experiences and ideas with their peers.
4. Offer alternatives to inappropriate behaviors. For example, say “If you wish to talk to your friends you might wish to use the patio or library entrance” rather than “do not talk to your friends!”
5. Practice appropriate behaviors through role play. Some examples follow:
   - Someone comes into the library making a lot of noise. I am the librarian. How would you like me to handle this problem?
   - Someone is taking up too much time just because he or she likes attention. I have work to do. What would you have me do?
   - Someone is very shy and lonely. What would you have me do to help this person?
6. Practice self-direction through role play.
7. Model self-direction (e.g., browsing and selecting books).
8. Practice appropriate library behaviors using simulated (board game use) and on-site library experiences.

Outcomes of the Interdisciplinary Collaboration

During the last two years of the project three products based on project services were researched, developed, field-tested, and brought to the distribution phase. These products include two filmstrips, a manual, and an education tool.

Filmstrips

The occupational therapist provided editorial services and assisted with script development and revision and production agency selection. The first filmstrip, entitled The Library is for You, presents the mentally retarded adult with the following basic informational concepts about libraries:

- what the library is
- that the library is for all kinds of people
- what the library offers
- how to use the library, and
- the responsibilities to the library.

The filmstrip also extends an invitation to the retarded adults to actively use the library.

The filmstrip consists of approximately 75 to 80 slides and runs for about 10 minutes.

The second filmstrip is designed for use by librarians and other professionals to present orientation programs or tours to handicapped adults. Entitled The Library is for Everyone, this filmstrip builds on the following concepts:

- how libraries are changing
- how users are changing
- how the nonreader can be trained to use the library, and
- where materials are located and how to use them.

Approximately 80 slides represent the text, which runs 12 to 15 minutes.

Manual

The manual was written to assist librarians, special education teachers, and community care facility personnel in training adults with developmental disabilities to use the services of the public library. The publication (10) represents contributions from many disciplines, including library science, rehabilitation, social service, and special education. Several articles in the manual represent input from occupational therapy. For example, one article documents the impact of Project LISTDD through surveys given to librarians and disabled patrons, a second article contains suggestions for modifying and applying learning principles to the orientation curriculum, and a third article describes the board game developed by occupational therapists to teach library skills.

Educational Tool

The board game called Check It Out is based on the concepts developed in the UAP pilot library skills program for mentally retarded adults and was designed to

- summarize the rules of the library,
- stimulate decision making, and
- provide practice in solving the unexpected problems that arise during library experiences.

Players move along a track that simulates a library floor plan. A die or spinner is used. The object of the game is to collect “check-out” cards, which are acquired when the player moves into a library room.
Figure 1
Board game development

![Diagram of the board game development process]

Analyze Training Task → Analyze Trainee ↓
Select Suitable Game Format ↓
Design Basic Rules → Design Game Equipment and Materials ↓
Construct Prototype Game ↓
Revise Prototype Game ↓
Test Game with Trainees and Modify ↓
Package

Normalizing experiences can be incorporated into game content and are designed for the particular intelligence level of the participants (11). This is an excellent way to involve the learner in an activity-oriented situation: Needed repetition is possible, replay of experiences with varied problem-solving approaches can be built into game play, and idea sharing from all players can be encouraged. Also, using the board game before entering the library reduced the discomfort level for many of the mentally retarded adults. Questions were generated during game play that were later answered through self-discovery during the library visit. Occupational therapy developed the board game following the nine-step process shown in Figure 1.

This board game was pretested with 22 trainable mentally retarded (TMR) and 39 educable mentally retarded (EMR) persons. TMR refers to persons with low functioning levels (IQ 35-49); EMR refers to higher functioning individuals (IQ 50-70) (13). Multiple revisions in the board game were made, which altered many aspects of the artwork, print size, surface directions, card instructions, and rules. The revised board game was then field-tested with 52 TMR and 81 EMR individuals. The finished product was finally presented to 20 professional educators, counselors, and librarians who critiqued and assessed its use. Two major strengths were indicated: a) the participation in the board game builds on the strengths of the higher functioning player (EMR level) and b) game play can be adapted and modified to meet the needs of adults requiring maximum assistance (TMR level).

Conclusion

Programs were initiated and guidelines disseminated to introduce mentally retarded adults to the library (14-16). A special project of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Cooperative Library System (Project LISTDD) was begun to help local libraries provide and modify their services for many of mentally retarded adults who were deinstitutionalized over the past decade. This project met the needs of librarians who want to start programs to serve this special population.

Occupational therapists performed a follow-up evaluation of LISTDD services using a survey of librarians and disabled library patrons. Pomona library graduated 120 disabled adults. Los Angeles library had just begun a program for 8 developmentally disabled individuals, and Whittier Public Library continued to conduct a program for 25 participants. Ten librarians taught the orientation and training programs and responded to an evaluative survey along with 15 handicapped library users. The findings from this survey represent viewpoints from the perspective of the library service provider and the developmental library consumer and are included in the manual.

The efforts of Project LISTDD contributed to the transition of many handicapped adults from their often limited and passive daily existence to community involvement, as mandated under Public Law 94-142. Crucial to this transition into a more normalized lifestyle is the development of more
positive attitudes by the general public toward the handicapped. Shortridge (17), in a review of research on attitudes toward disabilities and disabled persons, discussed the many constraints on mainstreaming handicapped children into neighborhood schools. She said, "...educators have found attitudes to be an obstacle in integrating handicapped children into public schools and in educating handicapped children to their full potential" and "mentally retarded children were generally victims of less favorable stereotypic attitudes than physically impaired children" (p 457). These same attitudes were held by many librarians who were to provide training and encouragement to adults with learning limitations.

The varied skills of the five professionals greatly enhanced the efficacy of Project LISTDD. The discipline of social service contributed expertise in community contact, the development of strong community ties, the exploration and acquisition of support systems for the program, and the creation of a library curriculum that blended informational content with the learning needs of the mentally retarded adult. The discipline of library science provided a variety of appropriate and exciting materials to serve this special population. (The multimedia library collection was carefully evaluated, organized, and made available through the Pomona Public Library for other libraries and facilities starting similar programs.) The discipline of educational psychology provided insights on how the mentally retarded person learns and gave information on effective educational strategies. (This allowed the unique problems facing community-based library personnel to be confronted and guidelines to be formulated to accommodate special user needs.) Occupational therapy's approach was guided by an occupational behavior perspective. This theory base acknowledges that skill, habits, and role building occur in an environment of work, play, and social activities (18). We blended developmental knowledge with the understanding of sequential task mastery. Library participants were engaged in purposeful library-related activities to promote feelings of competency and skills for successful functioning in the library environment. We feel that this was a significant contribution to the total team effort.

Project LISTDD was a successful adventure because it enhanced the quality of life for some mentally retarded adults. Its success can be attributed to competent leadership and skillful staff efforts, to the creativity resulting from interdisciplinary collaboration, and to occupational therapy's commitment to nurture and develop the competencies of the handicapped adult.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Bonnie Hauch and Ann Keller, special education trainees, for contributing to game development and Beth Shaw, intern from the field of communications, for contributing to Project LISTDD. This article includes work done at the University Affiliated Program, Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. Agencies contributing to the support of this work were Maternal Child Health (00094-11-0) and Developmental Disabilities (59-P-45219-04).

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