

NOTE: This article appeared in *The Teaching Librarian*, Volume 15, number 2.

Including Students with Developmental Disabilities in High School Libraries

By Brenda Dillon

"They're not library users anyway." That was the teacher-librarian's response when I asked whether the library could provide some materials for our students with developmental disabilities. While these students were not actually forbidden to use the library, they were not welcome and no attempt was made to provide suitable resources or a library program. I vowed to change things, should I ever have the opportunity. And I have.

The Context

I've been the teacher-librarian at Philip Pocock Catholic Secondary School, a mid-size high school in Mississauga, since September 1996. Our diverse student population includes a number of students who have developmental disabilities and who are enrolled in our Planning for Independence Program (PIP). I am passionate about creating an inclusive school library, one which welcomes and supports all members of the Pocock community – including our students with developmental disabilities.

The Students

The students in PIP have moderate to profound developmental disabilities.

Some of these students have specific diagnoses, such as Autism/PDD, Down's Syndrome, Williams Syndrome, Fragile X, and Cri du Chat Syndrome, while others are simply identified as having a developmental disability. Some of them have multiple exceptionalities. While it's important to get to know students as individuals and no student should ever be reduced to a label, I've always found that knowing the name of a condition allows me to do research, finding information which helps me better understand and support the student. I also find it helpful to read the student's IEP and review the OSR as well as talk to the PIP teachers and the Education Resource Workers (ERWs – teaching assistants) who work with the students. Over the years, I've worked with PIP students who were functioning at a variety of levels, from infant to perhaps grade three/four. And yes, the school library has been able to offer something to each of these students.

The Program

Because PIP students are not working towards diplomas, it's possible to be quite creative when designing library programming. As long as the students are having positive learning experiences, experimentation is fine. In fact, I consider it a requirement. I find this freedom quite exciting and I've taken full advantage of

it. While I haven't yet managed to implement a comprehensive, integrated PIP library program (in part because there is no actual PIP curriculum), I have built several pieces that have worked well, including library orientation and skills, information literacy and research, reading and literacy, and vocational training. I've also been able to contribute to other areas of students' programs.

One of the first units I created was a library orientation and skills unit designed to introduce students to the basics, such as appropriate library behaviour, resources, and basic skills such as signing out and returning books. I reduced the library rules to three: quiet, walk, and work. I used Boardmaker to create information sheets, worksheets, activities and puzzles, and library signs. I also wrote a social story for a student with autism. The students in this group were, generally, functioning below the kindergarten level, so the focus was vocabulary development as well as social skills and appropriate behaviour. I did not expect that these students would become independent library users, but I did want them to feel welcome. The students demonstrated both enjoyment and learning, so I deemed the unit a success.

I've done several research projects with PIP resource classes. While the students varied considerably in ability, most were functioning at an early primary level. I taught these students a simplified version of the research process and provided lots of support and scaffolding. I even expected the students to cite their sources, although I created a worksheet and didn't worry about MLA format.

We created a survey for the pets project and graphed the results, created and presented PowerPoint presentations about zoo animals, created brochures about the human body, and worked on posters about the provinces. These projects took quite a bit of time and effort, but it was time and effort well spent. The students learned about research, did work that boosted their self-confidence and amazed their teachers, and continue to ask me when we're doing another project.

I've also offered a literature unit. I chose a variety of picture books to read aloud and used Boardmaker to create journal and vocabulary worksheets for each book. Favourite books included *How Smudge Came* (story by Nan Gregory, pictures by Ron Lightburn) and *Cats Sleep Anywhere* (by Eleanor Freon, illustrated by Anne Mortimer). One of the students so enjoyed *Cats Sleep Anywhere* that she practiced with an ERW until she was able to read the book to the group. It was the first book she'd ever read. That's success!

I've developed a vocational skills training program, which I offer almost every semester to an individual student assigned to the library for one period each day as a work experience placement. Generally, these students do not have significant physical disabilities, display reasonably appropriate behaviour (e.g. violence and running are not concerns), and have some degree of academic ability (generally pre-K to about grade 2). Sometimes there's an ERW assigned to work with the student, but not always. There's an interview and a contract.

The student signs in each day, checks the schedule, completes the assigned tasks, keeps a journal, and prepares a display for the Coop Job Fair. The tasks include such things as shredding, processing new magazines, putting the new magazines in order in the display spinner, filing the back issues, tidying the shelves, and helping at the Circulation Desk. I've created instruction cards for these tasks, model the work, and provide support as necessary. I've also modified the tasks to ensure that they're suitable. For example, we put a round green sticker in the top right corner of each magazine cover, with the first letter of the magazine title. Each pocket on the spinner also has a letter sticker. All the student has to do is match the letters – all the “A” magazines go in “A” pockets, for example. Processing the new magazines means removing all the advertising cards and stamping the front and back cover, first page, table of contents, page 10, and last page. Tidying the shelves means, for example, putting the encyclopedias in numerical order, or picking up loose books from the stacks and bringing them to the Circulation Desk. Because I'm a teacher and the placement is in a school library, I also build in resource time to work on literacy and numeracy skills as well as reading periods. Social skills and appropriate behaviour are always concerns so, for example, we work on shaking hands instead of hugging. I personalize the program for each student. The students tell me they enjoy working in the library and their academic, social, and vocational skills improve.

I also try to support the rest of the students' programs. For example, I've participated in communication skills development programs.

The library program supports and enhances learning for all students. I've worked hard to ensure that "all students" includes our PIP students.

The Resources

Resources are a challenge, partly because of lack of funds and partly because of a lack of resources. Finding resources that are both academically appropriate and age appropriate is a problem, especially resources for the more academically capable PIP students, who are very sensitive about anything that might mark them as different from their peers in the mainstream. As a general rule of thumb, I've found it helpful to "think primary; avoid cute."

Borrow resources whenever possible, from the public library (on your own library card, unfortunately), elementary school libraries, or centralized board resource collections. This allows you to provide resources at no cost to your school library, which is especially useful if you're not certain the unit in question will be offered regularly. If the unit does become a regular feature of your program, then you'll have had an opportunity to "test drive" resources before spending scarce budget dollars.

Create your own resources, using either standard software (e.g. Microsoft Publisher) or specialized software (e.g. Boardmaker). Boardmaker is a program that allows users to make visual communication tools. I've used Boardmaker to create a "school library story", worksheets, instruction sheets, communication boards, puzzles, and signs. It's easy to use and has all sorts of potential. Ask your special education department head or your board's Speech and Language Pathology staff about Boardmaker.

Students can create resources too. Instead of the standard research essay, report, or short story assignment, students can be challenged to write stories or non-fiction books explaining various concepts in a manner accessible to their peers in the Planning for Independence Program. Students in a technology class (such as construction) could make wooden puzzles or game boards, with graphics designed by Visual Arts students. The possibilities are endless, and such assignments certainly qualify as authentic assessment and help create an inclusive school.

If you really want to create an inclusive school library, then you will have to invest some money in collection development. Unfortunately, finding suitable resources can be a problem. Non-fiction written for 8 to 12 year olds can be suitable for students reading below grade level, including, with support, the more academically capable PIP students. These students might also be able to use high/low fiction for young adults, such as the Orca Soundings titles. For those

students reading at the kindergarten to grade two level, I've added "pre-chapter" books to the collection (e.g. DK Readers) as well as books written for primary students, although age appropriateness becomes an even greater issue at lower reading levels. Some of our PIP students can't read, so I've also added items such as pre-school level wooden puzzles to the collection. While I can't provide all the resources any student might want or need, I do try to provide something for each student.

Cataloguing and shelving decisions are important. The goal is to make the resources easy to find while avoiding the creation of a PIP "library within a library".

Professional Development for School Library Staff

Although attitude is the single most critical factor in the creation of an inclusive school library, there is a need for ongoing professional development. Everyone involved has know about and be comfortable dealing with any behaviour, communication, or medical issues a student might have. For example, it's worth learning how to write social stories for students with autism, and it's important to know how to use any assistive technology or alternative or augmentative communication system a student might use. Ultimately, the goal is to empower the students by helping them to function as independently as possible. All members of the school library staff should be made aware of medical issues (e.g.

seizures), and how to recognize and deal with any problems. Naturally, confidentiality is an issue, however, it's not fair to anyone to permit a situation in which a student might be put at risk because information wasn't shared. Special education staff members should be able to provide informal training and it's also worth asking to be included when in-service sessions are offered. The goal, always, is to learn enough to support the personal growth and learning of every student.

It is possible to work toward the creation of an inclusive school library even with the budget, staffing, and time restrictions so many of us face. The single most important factor is attitude. Do what you can with what you have. Be creative. And, above all, be welcoming. It's worth it – for you, for the students with developmental disabilities, and for everyone else in the school. We talk about the school library as the hub of learning for the school. Wheels don't work well when some of the spokes aren't attached to the hub.

I'm always willing to "talk library" and to share ideas and work. Feel free to contact me if you think I can be of any help in your efforts to more fully involve students with developmental disabilities in your high school library, or if you have great ideas and resources I might be able to use.

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