



Patrons with developmental disabilities: a needs assessment survey

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Patrons with
developmental
disabilities

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Received 10 May 2008
Reviewed 11 June 2008

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to determine the library usage, attitudes, and needs of an underserved population – persons with developmental disabilities – and to offer insights to librarians as to how to serve this population better.

Design/methodology/approach – After examining demographic information and national and state statistics, two surveys were conducted with adults with developmental disabilities as the sample population. These surveys included a variety of questions involving library usage and information needs.

Findings – Adults with developmental disabilities do go to public libraries and are entitled to the same quality services provided to all patrons. The surveys show that the primary materials sought by persons with developmental disabilities are books; 78 percent of the clients surveyed go for books compared with 55 percent of the general public. Thirty-five percent of the clients did not know that libraries offer music and movies to check out, and 96 percent said they did not use the computers.

Research limitations/implications – These surveys were by nature limited by geographical scope and the intellectual capabilities of those surveyed. Similar surveys in other regions could expand the possibilities of future research.

Practical implications – Information gathered from this survey can aid librarians in assisting patrons with developmental disabilities. Suggestions for possible actions are given. These results can also help open a dialogue between librarians and professionals in social services who may not see the library as the valuable resource it is.

Originality/value – According to a literature review included in this article, there has been little research on serving this population. These surveys are the first of their scope, and can lead to better service through better understanding.

Keywords Disabilities, Mental illness, Personal needs, Information exchange, Public libraries, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Using Adams County, Colorado as a sample population, this study will attempt to determine the information needs of persons with developmental disabilities and offer suggestions to public librarians as to how to serve these needs better. Statistics concerning developmental disabilities in the United States and in Adams County, CO are presented, and demographic information of the sample population is examined. Then two surveys are conducted with adults with developmental disabilities as the survey population. These surveys include a variety of questions involving library usage and needs. After analysis of the survey outcomes, suggestions for library response are offered.



Definitions

According to the Arc, the nation's leading advocacy center for the developmentally disabled, mental retardation "is characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills" (Arc, 2004). However, the titles and definitions used for this population are in continuous flux. Lichten and Simon (2007) suggest that a standard definition is a matter of life and death (do you execute criminals with mental retardation?). They suggest a new type of IQ test called a Total Quotient (TQ) that takes in both IQ and standardized adaptive functioning scores that could be used for determining mental retardation. Currently, the official definition in the United States is expressed by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAID), formerly the American Association on Mental Retardation. According to the AAID, mental retardation:

... is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before the age of 18. A complete and accurate understanding of mental retardation involves realizing that mental retardation refers to a particular state of functioning that begins in childhood, has many dimensions, and is affected positively by individualized supports (AAID, 2005).

Basically, the diagnosis of a developmental disability is dependent upon more than an IQ score. A person with a developmental disability will generally have an IQ of below 70-75, but even a person with a higher IQ may not have the adaptive skills to live independently. While the correct medical terminology for this type of disability is still "mental retardation", and the AAID also suggests the term "intellectual disability", this author uses the phrase "developmental disability", or DD, because it is the professional standard in the state of Colorado, where this study takes place.

According to the 1990 United States census, approximately 6.2 to 7.5 million people have mental retardation. This is approximately 3 percent of the general population. In Colorado, the numbers are just as substantial. In Adams County, Colorado, the non-profit agency North Metro Community Services (NMCS) is the single entry point for persons with developmental disabilities (DD) who are seeking services. North Metro Community Services currently has approximately 2132 clients who are eligible for services. 1200 of these individuals receive some kind of services. These services range from basic living supports such as the issuing of bus passes or the services of a personal assistant to comprehensive services that include residential and day program services. While many are receiving services, there are still more than 600 people on the waiting list. North Metro screens 35-40 applications per month, and from that number, about 27 are found eligible for services.

These statistics make developmental disabilities 25 times more common than blindness. However, adaptive equipment for the blind is far more likely to be found in a public library than adaptive equipment specifically designated for persons with DD. Dennis Norlin's (1995, p. 186) findings corroborate this:

If public libraries think almost exclusively in terms of serving people who are visually impaired, hearing impaired, or orthopedically challenged, and if social service professionals...almost never think of public libraries as community resources, it is not surprising that there are few examples of public library services [for people with developmental disabilities].

Literature review

Library literature is teeming with articles about assisting patrons with physical disabilities and patrons with mental illnesses; however, information on dealing with patrons with developmental disabilities is limited at best. Linda Lucas Walling and Marilyn M. Irwin edited the only thorough guide to assisting patrons with developmental disabilities in 1995 entitled *Information Services for People with Developmental Disabilities: The Library Manager's Handbook* (Walling and Irwin, 2003). This guide deals with general issues such as community living, employment, and transportation as well as specific library services. Articles in the book address working with children with developmental disabilities within the realm of the school media center, helping adults with DD meet their information needs, and assisting students with DD in academic libraries. In the realm of adaptive equipment, a study in Australia by the State Library of Victoria and the Information and Telecommunications Needs Research Group (Williamson *et al.*, 2000) provides still relevant research on the role of libraries in providing online services to people with disabilities.

The one thing missing in these and other literature on this topic, which consists primarily of another article by Walling (2001) and a very basic guide published by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (1999), is information gathering including the patrons themselves. Dennis Norlin (1995) performed a limited interview of 14 adults with developmental disabilities in 1989. He also piloted a project to track library use by adults with DD after brief bibliographic instruction sessions. From this project, he determined that "too little research has been conducted on this topic" (Norlin, 1995, p. 192).

This study intends to continue the research that Norlin began by considerably expanding the interview group. Because there is little current research in this topic, this study will attempt to determine the information needs of patrons with DD and if libraries have improved ways of serving those needs.

Sample demographics

In order to understand this population better, a demographic survey of the sample used in this particular project was examined. This sample was taken from the day program of North Metro Community Services, which provides employment and community integration opportunities for approximately 374 adults with developmental disabilities. This demographic survey was taken in December of 2006 when there were only 337 clients in day program, however, the general characteristics remain similar. All of the clients served by NMCS have a diagnosis of mental retardation. Along with this diagnosis, 40 percent of clients are also diagnosed with a mental illness of some type. In the social services field, this is known as dual diagnosis. Twenty-three percent of clients also have some form of physical disability, and 26 percent also have epilepsy.

The majority of clients (56 percent) at NMCS live in a host home situation (clients live with and are provided for by families who are paid by NMCS), while 29 percent live with family members. Only 5 percent of clients live independently. These numbers demonstrate that this population has a high level of assistance needs, and that most of the population does not live independently. The distribution of sex within the project mirrors that of NMCS in general with about 4 percent more males than females.

Survey 1

Methodology

In the course of this project, two surveys were conducted. The surveyor conducted a trial survey of 47 clients at NMCS in 2006 in order to refine questions and the survey process. The questions and summary from the 2006 survey are included as Appendix 1. This survey will be referred to as Survey 1. The original plan for this survey was to take a true random sample, but the obstacles to this were many. Some of the clients at NMCS have such severe disabilities that they are not able to communicate verbally or understand well enough to respond to the questions on the survey. Therefore, a true random would leave too many surveys unanswered.

For this first attempt, the surveyor devised a survey consisting of five simple questions that would determine some of the clients' library habits and preferences. The methodology for Survey 1 was quite simple; the survey was conducted with clients who were in the building during the day. During a normal day at NMCS, many groups go out to access the community, leaving the surveyor little access to them. However, there are some groups that return for lunch, and NMCS also has an in-house workshop catering to a wide variety of clients.

This workshop is known as the Workfloor, and it is a production facility where clients work with their peers on employment contracts. The clients who work on the Workfloor are of varied functioning abilities, but they all have the ability to work fairly independently and can understand and carry out instructions. Interviews were conducted before work and during lunch so as not to interfere with daily operations of the Workfloor.

For the survey, the clients would be approached and asked if they would participate in a survey about going to the library. If the client answered yes, the questions would be presented. Each client would then be asked to sign the bottom of the survey, which contains a brief release statement stating that the survey is for educational purposes only and that names will not be used.

Survey 2

Methodology

For the second survey, the methodology was changed in order to present a more representative sample of the clients at NMCS. Another goal was to survey as many clients as possible. In order to reach these goals, the infrastructure of North Metro's own client organization was used. The clients at NMCS are divided into teams based on functioning ability and individual needs and desires.

With the assistance of each team's manager, the surveyor was able to determine which clients could be interviewed from each team. In this way, the survey could present a well-rounded group including all NMCS Day Program clients that could possibly answer the survey. In the process of about four weeks, the surveyor and other staff were able to interview 98 clients.

In Survey 2, both the questions and the interviewing technique were tweaked based on discoveries made in Survey 1 and a more thorough examination of techniques for interviewing people with DD. Survey 2 and its summary are included as Appendix 2. Interviewing this population presents a number of difficulties in itself. People with DD tend to acquiesce in an attempt to give a "right" answer when they are questioned. Wyngaarden (1981) suggests that interviews take place in a casual atmosphere so that pressure to come up with that "right" answer is relieved. Questions must be kept simple; people with DD do not do well with abstract concepts, so keeping the questions concrete is important. Considering these findings, Survey 2 included questions that

were more open-ended and eliminated questions that included lists of selections. These modifications are explained more thoroughly in the following section.

Outcomes

The first question on both surveys is “Do you ever go to the library?” Sixty-nine percent of the clients in Survey 2 answered that they do go to the library sometimes compared to 55 percent from Survey 1. The higher percentage in the second survey could be attributed to the wider scope of the survey, which resulted in a higher functioning level of clients surveyed. Fifty-six percent said that they can read, although some said they could only read a little. Their own estimate of their reading ability is rather high, but the clients interviewed were among those with a higher functioning level at NMCS, so a high percentage was expected.

In Survey 2, instead of asking “Why do you go to the library?” and offering a list of choices, the surveyor asked, “What do you like to do or get at the library?” and then followed up with more detailed questions if necessary. With no leading choices, 78 percent said that they go to the library to get books. When given a list of suggestions in the first survey, the clients were 9 percent more likely to answer that they go to the library to find books. This may simply be because that is the answer that “seems to be the most correct”. The results from Survey 2, using a completely open-ended question, are more valid in that respect. In Survey 2 twelve percent said they go to the library to get magazines and 10 percent said movies and music. Breaking the question down even farther, 13 percent of clients said that they like books about animals, 9 percent like cartoon or picture books, 7 percent like sports books, and 6 percent like mysteries. Other answers were: histories, books about celebrities, westerns, romances, and cookbooks.

Again, the second survey was revised when asking why clients do not go to the library; the question was presented in an open-ended manner in Survey 2. Of those clients who said they do not go to the library, 20 percent said that they do not have the time to go to the library, and 13 percent said they are working when they are not at Day Program. It is important to note that the majority of these clients cannot access the community on their own; since they must depend on others, it is really somebody else who must have time to take them to the library.

The surveyor asked some new questions about the clients’ perception of libraries and librarians in the second survey. When asked if they knew that they could get movies and music at the library (for free), 65 percent of clients said yes, but many of those who answered no were quite excited to find out that they could obtain those items at the library.

In the first survey, one question was, “Do you feel comfortable asking for help in the library?” Of the clients 77 percent answered yes to that question. That question may have been too abstract for the clients, so when the question was revised, it offered a situation that was not hypothetical. In the second survey, after the surveyor first described a librarian (the person at the big information desk in the middle of the library), the question became: “Have you ever asked a librarian for help?” Only 68 percent said yes, which is a far more credible answer.

The final question in the second survey was, “What do you think libraries could do to make things easier for you?” This question proved extremely difficult for the clients to answer and required a great deal of prompting, so it was deleted from the survey.

In Survey 2, data was compiled concerning the age and sex of the clients who responded to the survey to determine if those aspects have any impact on library

usage. In the realm of age, library usage is steady at around 70-79 percent except for in the very youngest and very oldest of the age ranges surveyed. From the ages of 18-25 only 45 percent reported going to the library, and in the range of age 56 and up, 43 percent reported library usage. While about the same number of men versus women took the survey, 75 percent of women responded that they went to the library compared to 62 percent of men.

Conclusions

After analyzing the results of this survey, it is safe to assume that adults with developmental disabilities do go to public libraries and are, therefore, entitled to the same quality services provided to all patrons. OCLC's, 2005 survey *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, which polled 3,300 people across the world on their library habits and perceptions, will be used to compare the results of this survey to the library habits of the general public. The percentage of people with DD who have gone to a library is far smaller than that of the public; while 69 percent of people with DD said they go to the library, 96 percent of OCLC's respondents said they had (OCLC, 2005, p. 1-1). The reasons for this discrepancy could be numerous, but one very basic reason could be that people with DD or those who care for them do not view the library as a viable resource. Some clients made this clear when they said that they do not need anything from the library or that they cannot read. They may believe that if they cannot read, there is nothing for them at the library. Another reason could be that people with DD primarily depend on others to take them to the library or anywhere else they want to go. If social service providers or families do not see the library as a resource, they are not likely to take clients or family members with DD there.

People with DD are going to the library for recreational purposes. The surveys demonstrate that clients are not searching for information dealing with problems relating to their disabilities, such as information on self-advocacy, employment options, etc. However, their families and caregivers might be. Therefore, libraries should be sure that collections include not only information for people with DD, but information *about* people with DD and the options offered to them in the community.

These surveys show that the primary materials sought by persons with DD are books; 78 percent of the clients surveyed go for books compared with 55 percent of the general public (OCLC, 2005, p. 2-1). Most likely, this is because people with DD either do not know about other library services or are led to believe that they cannot use them. As one of the clients noted when asked if he used the computers, "they aren't for us". Thirty-five percent of the clients did not know that libraries offer music and movies to check out, and 96 percent said they do not use the computers. It is important to make patrons aware of adaptive equipment, computer programs, and multi-media materials that can be adapted for use by people with DD.

Collection development

Even though most libraries have not planned a collection specifically for patrons with developmental disabilities, most library collections already contain items that could be used for this purpose. Here are some examples, loosely based on suggestions from *Serving an Invisible Population* (Holmes, 2007, pp. 37-8):

- One should not assume that people with developmental disabilities want to read children's books, but some do. Many people with DD enjoy the sensory input found primarily in children's books.

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- Findings in the survey suggest that many people with DD enjoy reading non-fiction, particularly books about animals, sports, and history. The Young Adult section of the library is a good place to look for non-fiction works with a lower reading level. Many also appreciate YA chapter books for their simple story lines.
 - Audio books are another option for people with DD who cannot read well, but would like to read some of the more popular fiction or non-fiction titles.
 - For people with DD who have poor eyesight or simple reading difficulties, large print materials should be made accessible.
 - The kinds of materials that would be most appropriate for this population are often referred to as “high-low” or “hi-lo”, meaning high content and low reading level or vocabulary. However, many of the books in this genre are directed at “reluctant” teen readers, so be aware of child-like content in some of these works. Appendix 3 contains a brief list of bibliographies of high/low books that may be useful in beginning a collection. While some of these bibliographies are out of date, they still present a good idea of the direction in which a collection should move.
 - English as a Second Language or Adult Basic Education collections are other areas to check for suitable materials.

Overcoming barriers

Upon entering a public library, a person with developmental disabilities is faced with a number of barriers, both physical and intellectual. As noted in the demographic survey, many people with DD have physical disabilities. Aside from basic physical barriers, numerous individuals with DD also deal with mental illness and behavioral issues. Even simple communication can be a hurdle for people with DD and those attempting to assist them.

Physical barriers can be overcome by ensuring the library’s compliance with ADA regulations. Every library should have adjustable computer tables that can accommodate any size wheelchair and should be equipped with appropriate ramps and/or elevators. Librarians should be aware of and capable of assisting with any adaptive equipment the library offers.

In many ways, working with individuals with DD can be intimidating, even frightening for some, particularly if the patron displays unusual behaviors. Librarians sometimes jump to conclusions, immediately deeming these individuals as “problem patrons”, but they need not be. Most such behaviors are not purposeful actions, but are rather results of mental illnesses or the effects of medications used to control those illnesses. Some of these behaviors and side-effects might include: loud verbalization, self-injurious behavior, self-talk, shuffling feet, drooling, and uncontrollable jaw/tongue movements. One common assumption is that individuals displaying such behavior are easily agitated and tend to become violent. This is rarely the case, but if a person with DD does become agitated, there are numerous ways to de-escalate the situation, and there are articles in library literature that would be applicable, such as Collier’s (2003) “Deinstitutionalization of people with mental illness”, and Wollam and Wessel’s (2003) “Recognizing and effectively managing mental illness in the library”.

Communication is easily the most significant barrier facing patrons with DD and the librarians who wish to serve them. The majority of people with DD have some

degree of difficulty speaking, some need to communicate with the help of devices such as a Dynavox, which speaks words or short sentences when the individual pushes particular buttons, and some people with DD are partly or completely non-verbal and communicate through gestures or noises. In general, librarians should be aware of themselves to ensure that they are not treating people with DD differently.

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When speaking to or about people with disabilities, use “people first” language, which refers to the individual first, and then, if necessary, the disability. For example, this study is about people with mental retardation, not retarded people. Also avoid language that makes people feel like tragic martyrs; they are simply living their lives. The young man has not been stricken with Cerebral Palsy, and the woman is not confined to her wheelchair. He has CP and she uses a wheelchair to assist her in daily tasks.

Easily, the most common mistake people make around adults with DD is assuming that they are like children and treating them accordingly. Always treat adults like adults; they will not appreciate being patronized. One need not speak loudly or slowly for a patron with DD to understand. The surveys showed that a number of people with DD can and do enjoy reading, so librarians should not assume that a person who has obvious developmental disabilities cannot read and should be taken to the children’s department.

Active listening techniques are important when communicating with persons with DD who have difficulty speaking. Be patient; the individual is most likely used to being misunderstood and will often be quite patient himself/herself. Do not attempt to finish sentences, but do repeat what you think you heard. If you absolutely cannot understand what a patron is saying, it is appropriate to apologize and tell her/him that you would like to help, but you cannot understand. It is best to be honest; if a person pretends to understand, the patron with DD will most often realize this and feel patronized. Librarians should simply conduct an effective reference interview with patience and perseverance, and they will be successful when working with persons with DD.

Adaptive equipment

As noted before, most libraries do not have equipment that is specifically designated for use by persons with DD. However, there is a wide range of adaptive equipment used for a variety of disabilities that could be adapted for use with this population as well as equipment and programs designed for this use. In “Levelling the playing field: the role of libraries in providing online services for people with disabilities”, Williamson *et al.* (2000, p. 8) tested different types of equipment and software with participants with disabilities ranging from intellectual, visual, physical, and auditory. They suggest the following criteria to be considered when choosing technology:

- Ability to enlarge fonts, buttons, dialog and drop-down boxes, and scroll bars.
- Keyboards which offer large letters, QWERTY and ABC arrangement, and choice of flat or raised positions.
- Simplified browser format or keyboard adapted commands.
- A trackball which is stable and solid with click buttons not too far from the ball. A ball which is not too high.

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- An audio browser which is sufficiently useful for users who are blind, but which is sufficiently simple for support to be provided in busy public settings.

In addition, according to Williamson *et al.* libraries would want to avoid equipment that looks like a toy, which could be considered patronizing, and keyboards that are too unlike a standard keyboard.

The equipment and software that was deemed successful in Williamson *et al.*'s 2000 study is still valid, and in all cases has been updated and improved over the years. The following are their selections for the most useful technologies a public library could offer for patrons with DD. Enhancing Internet Access (EIA) is "a specialized Web browser, suitable for touchscreen systems, with fully integrated web awareness, assessment and training modules" (www.elr.com.au/eiad/). This browser also has a pop-up keyboard that can be used instead of a standard keyboard.

The most useful keyboard was Intellikeys (www.intellikeys.com), which is a large keyboard with overlays for various disabilities. Custom overlays are also available. Trackballs are the best alternative for persons without the coordination necessary to use a standard mouse.

In addition to these findings, there are other technologies that may be used to assist persons with DD in libraries. Software that reads computer screens or detects speech, such as PW Web Speak (www.soundlinks.com/pwgen.htm) and Dragon Naturally Speaking (www.nuance.com) can be successfully used for people with a wide range of disabilities. As technology progresses, there will undoubtedly be new and exciting ways to assist patrons with DD in libraries, so it is important for librarians to be up-to-date and thoroughly trained on available equipment.

The next step

As libraries strive to create programs to assist underserved populations, people with DD should not be left out simply because they are not as visible as some other populations. This study serves as proof that libraries can be a valuable resource for people with DD, and a partnership between librarians and social service agencies could create ways to bring those resources to the people who need them. The only way to create this type of partnership is to open up a dialogue between social service organizations and public libraries.

Librarians in public libraries will often see groups of adults with DD coming in to the library with staff supervision during the day as a part of a community access program such as those offered by NMCS. If that is the case, librarians can take that opportunity to interact with the staff and the clients to offer activities that are library-specific or to plan trainings on using adaptive equipment. Staff at these agencies are often not well-trained on using libraries themselves and would benefit from the assistance of a librarian. Without guidance, some groups may end up in a meeting room watching movies or doing crafts while the agencies believe they are working on valuable educational skills.

Another way to build relationships with social service agencies is to simply contact those in the area to offer the library's services. A starting point across the United States is the Arc (www.thearc.org). The Arc's website links to chapters across the country and provides further links to agencies that provide services to people with DD. Librarians can offer a variety of services to this population, including trainings on

using the library, specially adapted book clubs, computer and simplified bibliographic instruction courses, and even summer reading clubs.

Reciprocally, librarians could then ask for trainers in the social services field to come present sensitivity courses for librarians and staff to help them better assist patrons with a variety of disabilities.

For the last few decades in the United States, people with developmental disabilities have been struggling to become a part of their own communities. As deinstitutionalization has become the norm, clients such as those at NMCS have moved out of the shadows and into the general public with greater frequency. Agencies like NMCS attempt to integrate people with DD with programs that involve clients in community activities such as volunteering and gaining socialization skills at local recreation centers and public libraries. As this population reaches out, librarians should be prepared to offer quality services, including an array of multi-media reading materials, programs, and adaptive equipment. By building relationships with social service agencies, librarians can shed light on this previously unseen population and help make them more at home in their communities.

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Appendix 1

1. Do you ever go to the library?

Yes: 26 = 55% No: 21 = 45%

2. Do you like going to the library?

Yes: 26 = 100%

If yes, why do you go?

Books/Magazines: 18 = 69%
Comments: Mysteries, sports, picture books (4), food, history

Videos/tapes/cds: 3

To use computers: 2

If no, why don't you go?

Can't find materials: 8 = 31%

Don't need anything from the library: 5

Too busy: 2

Other: No library card, I can't read, it's too boring

3. Do you feel comfortable asking for help in the library?

Yes: 20 = 77% No: 6 = 23%

4. Do you use the computers to look for things?

Yes: 1 = 4% No: 25 = 96%

Comments: The computers "aren't for me"

5. Have you ever left the library because you couldn't find what you were looking for?

Yes: 15 = 58% No: 11 = 42%

Figure A1.
Library survey summary
2006 (47 total surveyed)

1. Do you ever go to the library? Yes 68 = 69% No 30 = 31%

2. Do you know how to read? Yes 55 = 56% No 43 = 44%

3. If yes, what do you like to do or get at the library?

53 said books = 78%

8-magazines = 12%

5-music = 7%

2-movies = 3%

4. If no, why don't you like to go to the library?

6-no time = 20%

4-working = 13%

After that, the answers were varied: too boring, don't like it, can't read, no way to get there, or I don't know why.

5. What kind of books/magazines do you like to get at the library?

9-animals = 13%

8-cartoons/picture books = 12%

7-sports = 10%

6-mystery = 9%

5-history = 7%

5-movie stars = 7%

Then westerns, romance, cookbooks

6. Did you know that you can get movies or music at the library?

Yes 44 = 65% No 24 = 35%

7. What do you think the librarian's job is?

21-Help look up/find books = 31%

17-check out books/give library cards = 25%

12-make sure people return books = 18%

8-shelve books = 12%

7-shush people/ make sure they behave = 10%

Working at computers and doing secretarial work. = 4%

8. Have you ever asked a librarian to help you? Yes 46 = 68% No 22 = 32%

9. What do you think libraries could do to make things easier for you?

Deleted this question.

I understand that this survey is being used for educational purposes only. No names will be used.

Signature: _____

Appendix 3. High-low bibliographies

Graves, M. (1979), *Easy Reading*, International Reading Association, Newark, NJ.

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