

# OPENING ACCESS TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

## ABSTRACT

### **Introduction**

Public libraries are safe and trusted public spaces where everyone is welcome... (Australian Library and Information Association Public Libraries Advisory Committee 2012, p.5).

Unfortunately, this is not always the experience of children with special needs and their families.

With scholarships from ALIA, the State Government of South Australia and Libraries SA I visited eighteen public libraries and two cultural institutions in the United States and Canada. This presentation is the result of that research.

The objectives were to:

- Identify what public libraries are currently doing to improve access for children with special needs and their families.
- Identify the barriers to access for children with special needs from the perspective of the public librarian.
- Identify the barriers public libraries face in addressing the issue of access for this group of the community.
- Make recommendations of strategies that public libraries can employ to improve access for children with special and their families.

## **Method**

A mixed method of qualitative and quantitative approaches was used.

Participants took part in a semi-structured, one-to-one interview and an online questionnaire. The data was analysed and used to develop a model of an inclusive public library.

## **Results**

Results of data showed:

- Library staff attitudes and sensitivities were considered by library staff be the greatest barrier to access for children with special needs and their families.
- Lack of knowledge on how to address access issues for children with special needs was listed as the greatest barrier for libraries.
- Libraries had attempted to address the issue of inclusive programs above all other barriers to access for this group.
- Staff training in disability was listed as having the greatest impact on increasing access.
- In the majority of libraries, management were very supportive of developing an inclusive library.

The research found there were five common elements that libraries focussed on when addressing issues of accessibility for children with special needs and their families. These elements were:

- Collections
- Programs

- Partnerships
- Physical barriers (space and equipment)
- Training.

The elements were used to create an inclusive library model. The foundation of this model is supportive management.

### **Conclusion**

The inclusive libraries model provides an entry point and structure for public libraries wanting to improve access for children with special needs and their families.

## **Introduction**

Accessibility is fundamental to the concept of the public library. It is widely agreed that access to public libraries for people with a disability is an important part of this principle.

One of the key principles of a library is that access is provided equally to all citizens of the community it serves (State Library of Victoria 2009, 1).

Public libraries should be “...safe and trusted public spaces where everyone is welcome...” (Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), Public Libraries Advisory Committee 2012, 5).

Unfortunately, this is not always the experience of children with special needs and their families. The following quote gives an illustration of this.

People with autism are often loud. They may feel the need to touch, pull out or even mouth books. They may have a hard time if a book or video they want to borrow is out on loan. . . librarians in general have no training in helping patrons with developmental challenges. As a result, they often respond negatively to disruptive behaviour. . . (Rudy 2013, para. 1-2).

Public libraries can be intimidating or uncomfortable places for children with special needs.

Accessibility for adults with disabilities is not a new concept to libraries. Hearing and digital format books are available for borrowing in virtually all large public libraries and are good examples. Ramps, elevators and wheelchair accessible desks are also good examples of public libraries addressing physical disabilities. The focus for public libraries has primarily been on physical and sensory disabilities (such as vision and hearing) for adults. A search for accessibility on the web page of many public libraries

illustrates this focus, as do the accessibility policies of public libraries. It is; however, the more hidden disabilities of developmental, intellectual, psychiatric and sensory processing that remain unaddressed by public libraries. The lack of focus on a broader range of disabilities is even more pronounced when considering public library access for children. (Hill, H 2013).

This paper is a discussion of the results of a research project into how public libraries provide access for children with special needs and their family. The paper will discuss phases one and two of the research project. The final phase of the research has not been completed. Phase one involves public librarians with experience in the area of access for children with special needs and their families. Phase two involves public librarians with little to no experience in this area.

The results of phase one will be discussed in detail, which will lead to a preliminary comparison between the results of phases one and two. The comparison will serve to highlight potential areas for focus and development in public libraries.

## **Research Design for Phases One and Two**

### **Methodology**

A mixed method approach was employed. The qualitative research involved semi-structured, one-on-one interviews; using the general interview guide protocols. The quantitative method required participants to answer an online

questionnaire of 41 items. Research was granted ethics approval by the University of South Australia Research Ethics Committee.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Survey Monkey was used to capture the online questionnaire data. The one-on-one interviews were a mixture of hand and voice recorded. Data was compared and coded. Categories and sub-categories were teased out using the codes and then clustered.

### **Research questions**

The research questions guiding the interviews and survey were:

- How, if at all, do public librarians provide access to their library for children with special needs and their families?
- How do public librarians perceive barriers to access for children with special needs and their families?
- What are the barriers for public libraries wanting to increase accessibility for children with special needs and their families?
- Why does the library focus or not focus on increasing accessibility for children with special needs and their families?
- How can public libraries be more accessible for children with special needs and their families?

### **Participants for Phase One of the Research**

Eighteen public librarians, representing 16 public libraries and two cultural institutions, with a focus on accessibility for children with special needs and

their families, were involved in phase one. Due to the concentration of key public librarians in the field, participants were from United States and Canada. Research was undertaken on location.

### **Participants for Phase Two of the Research**

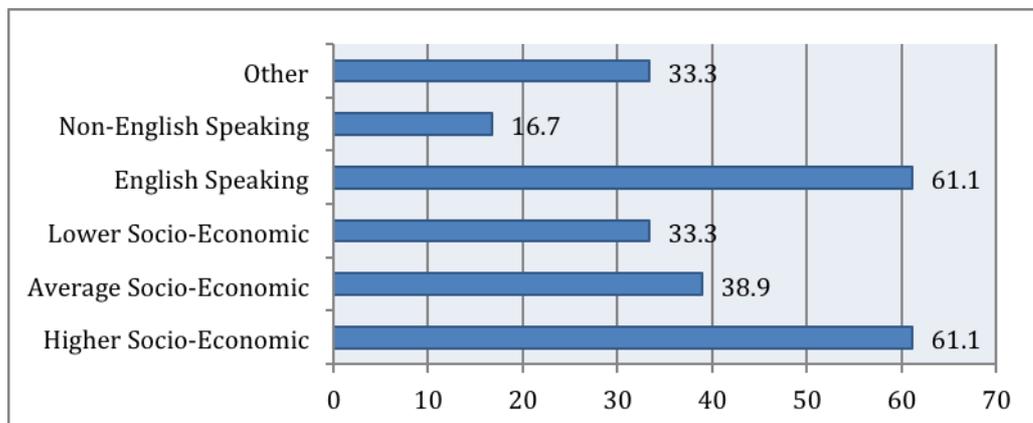
Fifteen librarians from public libraries with limited or no intentional focus on access for children with special needs and their families were involved in the research. Fifteen participants was the point of data saturation. Participants were from Australia and New Zealand.

### **Findings of Phase One of the Research**

#### **About the libraries**

The 18 participants involved in the study answered the online survey and participated in the one-on-one interview. The demographics of the libraries involved are described in chart 1 below.

Chart 1: How would you describe the community your library serves? (Please select all that apply)



\*Table will not equal 100 per cent as respondents were asked to choose all that applied.

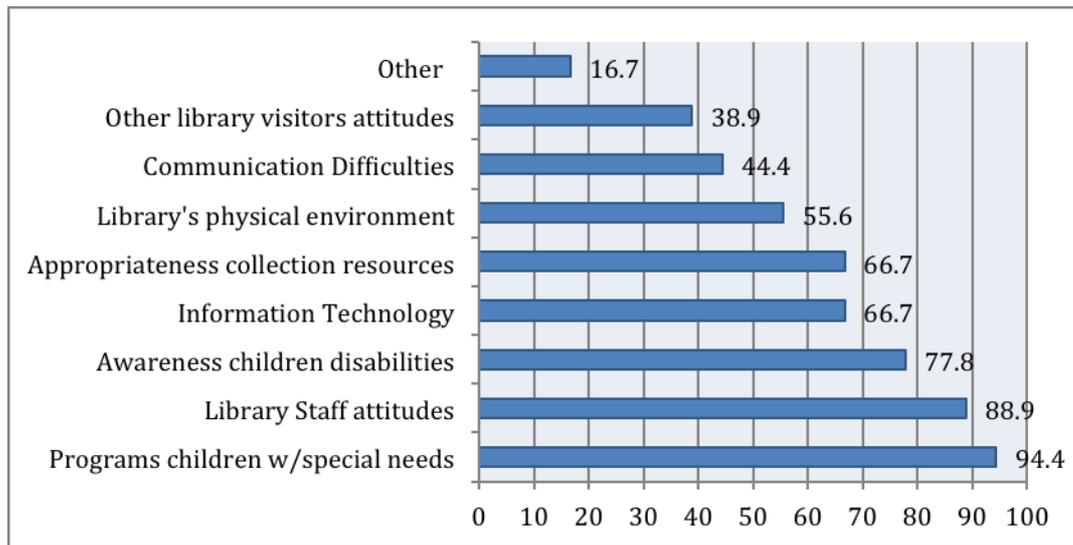
The six libraries that selected the 'other' category, commented their communities were so diverse that no one demographic category could be selected.

**Current public library practices to improve access for children with special needs and their families.**

Participants were asked to describe how their library focusses on improving access for this group of their community. Responses revealed the following categories: staff training, library programs, partnerships, collection development, physical barriers (space and equipment) and marketing. In the online questionnaire, participants were given a list of possible barriers to public library access for children with special needs and their families. They were asked to choose all of the areas that their library had attempted to address, and to include any others not listed. As can be seen in chart 2 the results were similar to those in the interview. The top three barriers that libraries have addressed were:

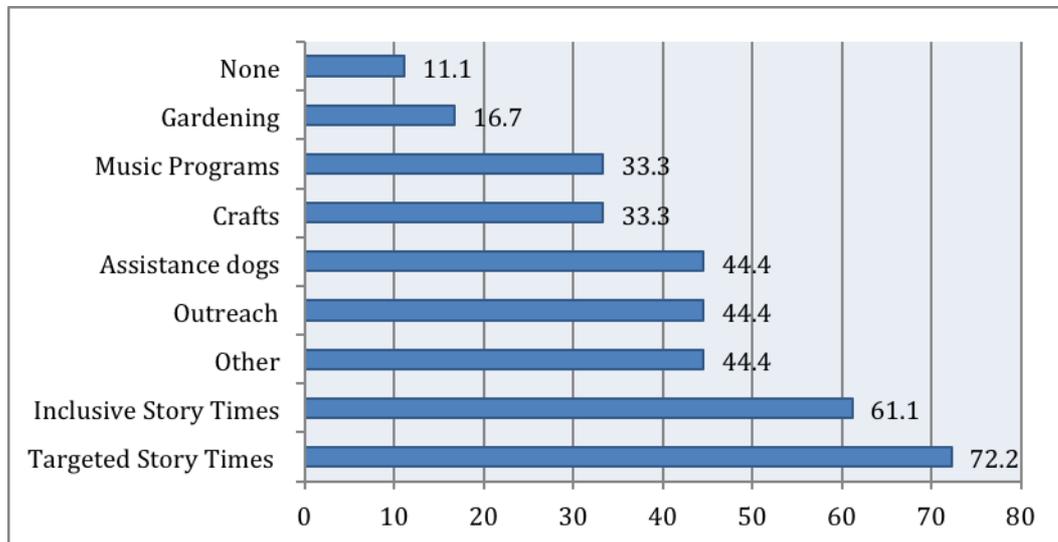
- Library programs.
- Library staff attitudes, sensitivities and awareness.
- Understanding of the characteristics and needs of children with disabilities in their community.

Chart 2: Please select all that apply. Has your library made attempts to address any of the following barriers?



When asked about the kinds of programs that the libraries ran regularly for children with special needs the results showed an even spread of responses. Chart 3 details the most common responses. Participants were also given the opportunity to list other programs that they provided for children with special needs. Of the nine responses given in the 'other' category, activities that focussed on social interaction (for example gaming nights) made up the greatest number (62 per cent) of responses.

Chart 3. Please select all that apply. Does your library offer any of the following library services or programs for children with special needs on a regular basis?



The interviews revealed that there is some discrepancy between public librarians as to whether library programs should be inclusive of all children or targeted only to children with special needs. One participant explained that she saw targeted programs as being, "... the bridge to inclusive programs".

The interviews also revealed that the participants believed that any kind of program could be made suitable if the theories of universal design for learning, universal design for building and multiple intelligences were used to plan the program. Universal design, according to the Center for Universal Design (1997),

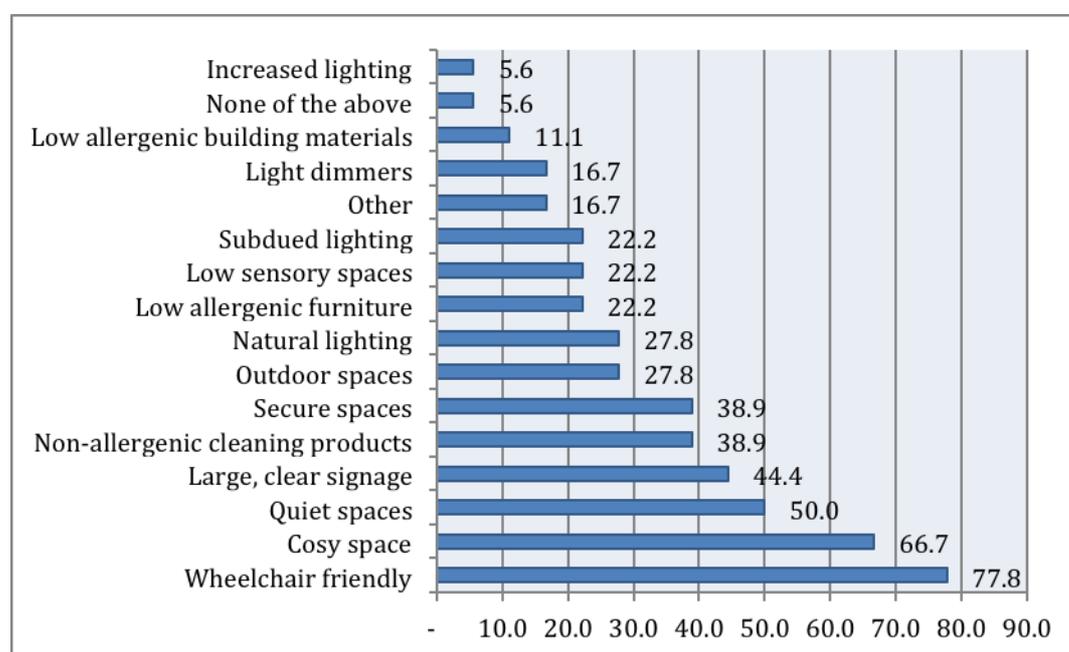
...is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. (p. 2)

The results of the questionnaire reinforce the importance of universal design.

Fifty percent of the participants used universal design for learning when planning a program that included children with special needs, 50 per cent used the theory of multiple intelligences and 37 per cent used universal design for building.

In order to find out what physical environmental changes libraries had made to improve access, participants were asked the question: “Has your library made any of the following changes to the physical environment with the intent to improve access for children with special needs?” The most common response (77 per cent) was, “Ensured the library was wheelchair friendly.” The next most common response (66 per cent) was “Created cosy spaces for children”. Chart 4 shows that the remainder of responses was more evenly spread. The interviews and on-site visits revealed that virtually all libraries used purpose dedicated program rooms to deliver their programs. This enabled them to manipulate the environment to suit the needs of the children attending the sessions.

Chart 4: Has your library made any of the following changes to the physical environment with the intent to improve access for children with special needs? Please select all that apply.



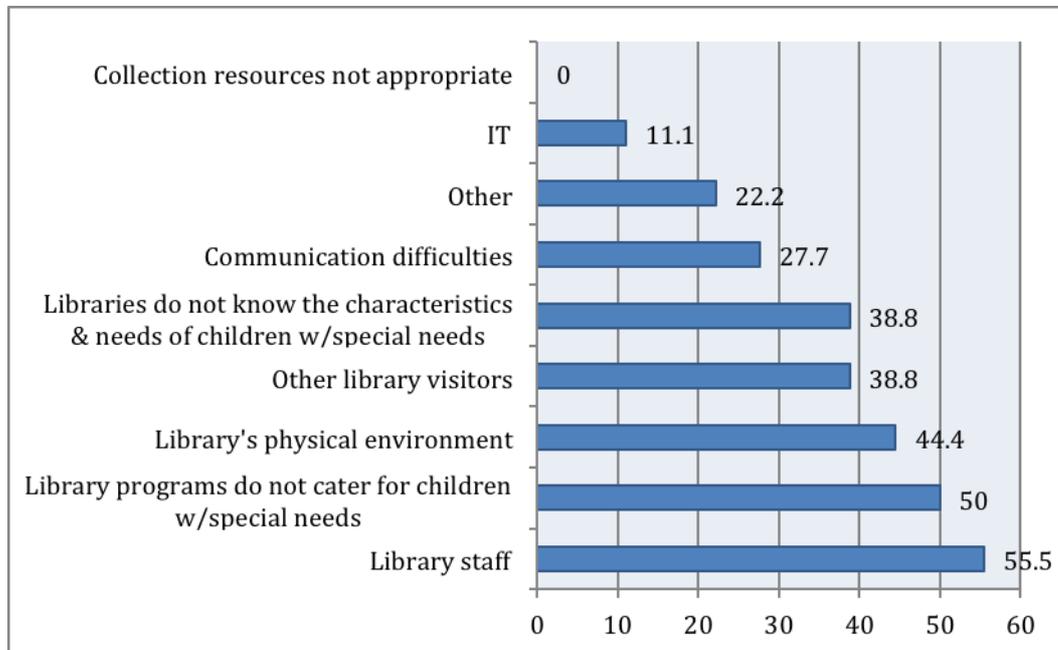
When asked about the future plans for increasing access to their library for children with special needs and their families the responses were varied. The greatest number (38 per cent) responded that they wanted to focus on staff training and development. The next most common response (16 per cent) was introducing or developing technology, in particular iPads for children with special needs to use as a communication aid.

**Barriers to public library access for children with special needs and their families from the perspective of the public librarian.**

Participants were asked what they thought was the greatest barrier to access for children with special needs and their families. They were able to identify up to three barriers. Chart 5 shows that the variance in percentages between responses was marginal. The largest number (55 per cent) of participants

responded that library staff attitudes and sensitivities was one of the greatest barriers.

Chart 5. What do you think are the greatest barriers to access for children with special needs and their families? Please select up to three answers.



*\*Table will not equal 100 per cent as respondents were asked to choose more than one answer.*

When asked what the respondents thought prevented libraries from addressing barriers to access, 77 per cent of respondents identified lack of knowledge on how to address the barrier; 66 per cent described limitations on staffing resources, and 61 per cent identified limitations on financial resources.

Once again the interviews showed similar results. All of the participants felt that the greatest barrier to access was staff attitudes and knowledge. One participant explained, "It not so much that their needs are not being met but that they are not even being considered. Most people don't even know how many people with disabilities there are in their communities or that children have disabilities."

A number of participants also raised the issue of the socio-cultural perceptions associated with literacy and disability. What does literacy for a child with a disability look like? One respondent explained, "...libraries are often seen as books and if you do not believe your child will read, you may not see a purpose to the library".

It is also interesting to note that despite 61 per cent of the questionnaire respondents listing limitations on financial resources as a barrier to libraries focusing on access for this group, it was barely mentioned during the one-on-one interviews. The predominant feeling during the interviews was that issues of funding could be worked around and that you could make improvements within current constraints. Limitations on funding were not seen as a valid excuse for lack of focus on access for children with special needs and their families.

**What prompted the library to focus on increasing accessibility for children with special needs and their families at their library?**

The most common reason (27 per cent) for focusing on accessibility for this group of the community was requests from the families of children with special needs. Only 5 per cent of participants had been prompted by government laws to focus on this area. Interviews with participants revealed a passion and a belief in the importance of increasing access for this group.

## **Recommendations on how to improve accessibility for children with special needs and their families.**

In response to the open-ended question, “What one thing do you think would have the greatest impact on increasing access if it could be implemented?”

The biggest response (38 per cent) was staff training in disability. This response confirms that staff attitudes and sensitivities are considered to be the greatest barrier to access for children with special needs and their families. The next most common response (27 per cent) was reaching out to families of children with special needs. In the interviews all of the participants discussed the importance of partnerships to achieve this. It was interesting to note that 94 per cent of the participants had formed partnerships with external organisations involved with children with special needs and their families.

Finally, when asked about the future plans for increasing access to their library for children with special needs and their families the responses were varied. The greatest number (38 per cent) responded that they wanted to focus on staff training and development. The next most common response (16 per cent) was introducing or developing technology, in particular iPads.

## **Inclusive Libraries Model**

From the analysis of the interviews and questionnaires of phase one of the research six common elements for providing access emerged. These elements were evident to different degrees in the public libraries visited and not all of the libraries had addressed every element. The elements were used

to develop an inclusive libraries model, which could serve as a framework for public libraries wanting to increase access.

The diagram of the model below identifies the key elements: programs, physical barriers (space and equipment), training, partnerships, marketing and collections. These elements are not interdependent, nor do they all have to exist for a library to undertake inclusive practices, however, the more elements a library focusses on the more inclusive it will be.



## **Possible implications for best practice**

The following discussion reveals how the public libraries involved in the study used the aspects of each element to improve access for children with special needs.

### **Management**

Throughout many of the interviews with public librarians the influence of a supportive library director and senior library staff was often referred to. The majority of the librarians (12 out of 16 of the respondents who answered the question relating to management) considered their management to be supportive or very supportive, with only four classifying their management as indifferent or not supportive. A supportive management was shown to be influential in issues of funding. For example, 100 per cent of the libraries with supportive management were able to access library funds for improving accessibility, compared to 50 per cent of those for whom management were considered to be not supportive.

The role of supportive management is also important in regards to developing a disability access and inclusion plan or policy. Although only seven of the eighteen libraries in the study had an access and inclusion plan or policy at council level and only four at a library level; none of the libraries with an unsupportive management had one.

### **Collections**

Of the libraries surveyed 66 per cent had focused on collection development in the context of inclusive library services. The interview and visit to each library revealed that in fact all of the libraries had a collection of materials for children with special needs or their families. There was great diversity in the size and type of material in the collections.

### **Physical Barriers (space and equipment)**

Physical barriers involve creating a library that is accessible, welcoming and comfortable through the physical aspects of the library. In many ways this element is the area that libraries have traditionally focused on when attempting to improve access for people with disabilities. Physical barriers include wheelchair accessibility, adaptive equipment and adjustable furniture. There are other aspects of physical barriers that are not always obvious, including: lighting, flooring, noise levels and accessible toys. Interestingly, only 77 per cent of the libraries in the phase one questionnaire had ensured that their library was wheelchair accessible, despite this being a requirement of the American Disability Act, which applies to the libraries. This element also involves information technology, including software, hardware and web access. The questionnaire showed that 66 per cent of libraries had made changes in this area. The interview and library visits revealed that for many libraries this involved the availability of one computer with adaptations. Very few of the libraries had ensured that their websites were disability friendly, or that they provided easily accessible technology for communication within the library (e.g. iPad, communication board). The survey reinforces this, showing

that only 22 per cent had made their catalogues or websites disability compliant.

### **Partnerships**

The questionnaire reveals that 94 per cent of libraries have developed a partnership with an external individual or organisation that works with children with special needs and their families. Of this group, 88 per cent of the libraries had developed the partnership in order to assist them in understanding the characteristics and needs of children with special needs and their families.

### **Programs**

Programs are an important area of access and inclusion, with 94 per cent of the participants surveyed providing programs for children with special needs. Similarly, 50 per cent indicated that they believed unsuitable programs were a major barrier to access for children with special needs and their families. Interviews highlighted that the programs provided by the libraries were varied in their content, presenters, frequency and audience (inclusive of all children or targeted to those with special needs). There was no one ideal program.

### **Training**

Training was highlighted as being a crucial element of an inclusive library. In the survey 55 per cent of participants believed that staff attitudes and sensitivities was the biggest barrier to visiting a public library for children with special needs and their families. Similarly, the greatest barrier for libraries in

addressing the issue of accessibility, at 78 per cent, was considered to be lack of knowledge on how to.

### **Marketing**

Marketing is an essential way public libraries can put out the 'welcome mat' for children with special needs and their families. Towards the end of the questionnaire respondents were asked if they had any other recommendations for increasing access in to this group of the community, the most common response was in the category of reaching out and promoting to families. Children with special needs and their families do not automatically know they are welcome in a library.

### **Discussion of phase one of the research**

The phase one findings concur with research in previous studies undertaken by Murray (1999) in Australia and Hill (2012) in New York. Both of these studies also highlighted that librarians considered staff training in disability to be a major barrier to library access for children with special needs.

Several other findings are worth noting. In particular, despite only 11 per cent of the respondents identifying technology to be a barrier for children with special needs, 66 per cent of the libraries have addressed the issue of technology for children with special needs. One possible conjecture to why this might be is that technology may be an easier barrier to address than, for example, community attitudes, which 38 per cent of respondents considered to be a barrier. Similarly, 66 per cent of libraries have addressed the

appropriateness of their collections for this user group – yet not one respondent considered this area to be a barrier to access.

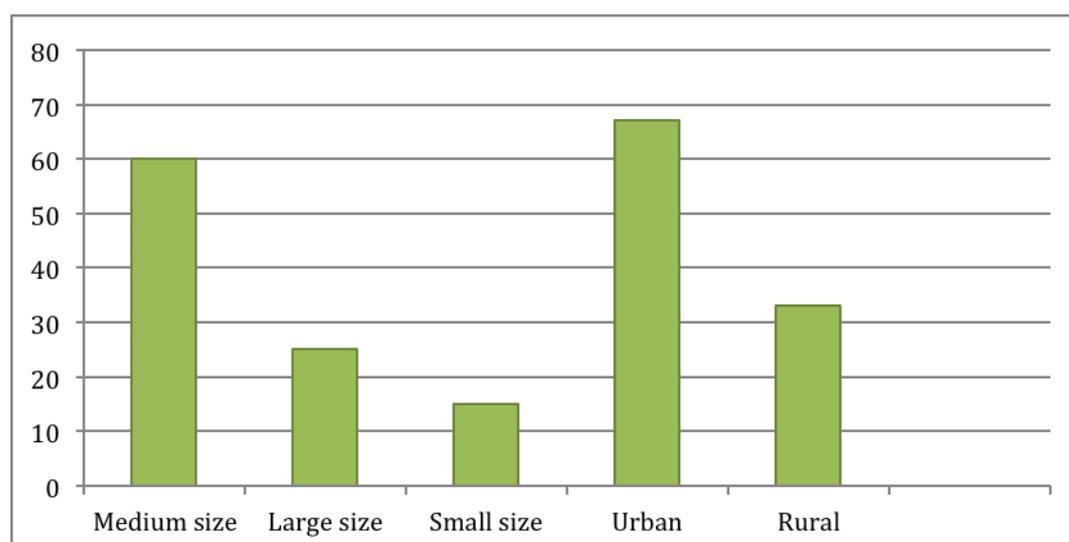
A content analysis of the literature on disability access to libraries by Hill (2013) found that 50 per cent of articles written in a 10-year time frame focussed on the topic of electronic accessibility. It is very interesting that only 11 per cent of the public librarian respondents in this study answered that information technology software, hardware or web design was a barrier to access for this group. Similarly, 50 per cent had provided adjustable seating and positioning to assist with access to technology, yet only 22 per cent had ensured their catalogue and website were disability accessible. None of the respondents named technology as an area that the greatest impact on improving access could be made. This reinforces Hill's (2013) question as to whether research is being undertaken in the relevant areas on the topic of disability access.

## **Phase two of the research**

### **About the libraries**

The 15 librarians involved in phase two of the study answered the online survey questions. Eight of the librarians also participated in a one-on-one interview. Chart 6 below gives a description of the libraries involved. Almost 90 per cent were in communities of predominately English speaking background. Approximately two thirds of the libraries were in average socio-economic areas and the remaining one third were split evenly between lower and higher socio economic.

Chart 6. How would you describe your library? Please select all that apply.



## Preliminary comparisons of phases one and two research results

### Participants

The demographics of the libraries in phase one and two were not that dissimilar. The main differences being:

- Phase two included rural libraries.
- A greater number of communities with non-English speaking backgrounds were in phase one.
- A greater portion of libraries in phase one was in a higher socio-economic area.

### Benefits of accessibility

There was agreement amongst librarians in both research groups that access to public libraries was an issue for children with special needs and their families. Both groups also had very similar understandings of the possible benefits that access could bring to the children and their families, the libraries

and also the general community. For example, in both research groups the top three benefits listed, in order, were the same. These were:

- Social interaction.
- Feelings of being connected to their community.
- Opportunities for life long learning.

Similarly both groups listed:

- Development of inclusive practices.
- Staff development.

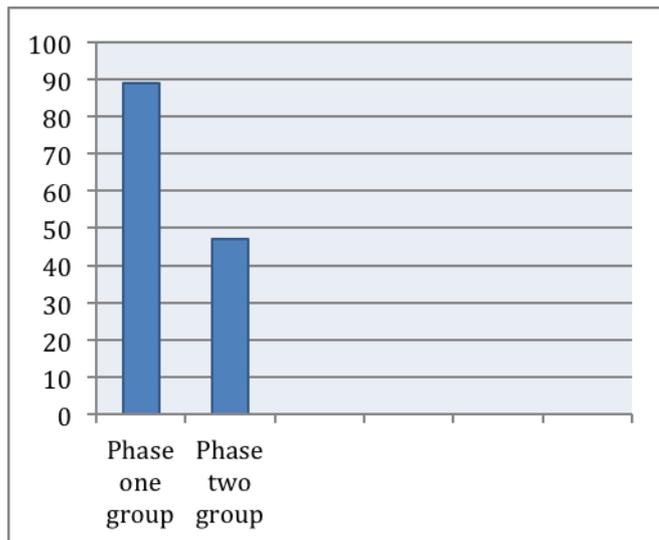
as the top two benefits of access and inclusion for public libraries. The top two benefits for the general community were also the same in both research groups. They were:

- Acceptance of diversity on the community.
- Universal design theory.

### **Legal obligations**

Awareness of laws governing access to public libraries for people with a disability was very different between the two research groups, as illustrated in Chart 7. Lack of awareness of the relevant legal obligations potentially impacts the level of focus that libraries give to access for children with special needs.

Chart 7. Percentage of participants aware of disability or special education laws that govern their library.



### **Barriers for children with special needs and their families**

This survey question revealed a subtle but important difference between the two research groups. The research groups were asked what they thought the greatest barrier to access was for children with special needs and their families. Participants were able to select up to three barriers. The top three responses for each group are listed below.

The phase one group:

- Library staff (attitudes, sensitivities) (56 per cent).
- Library programs do not cater for children with special needs (50 per cent).
- Library's physical environment (44 per cent).

The phase two group:

- Libraries do not know the characteristics and needs of children with disabilities and their families within their community (67 per cent).
- Library's physical environment (53 per cent).
- Library programs do not cater for children with special needs (53 per cent).

Only 20 per cent of the phase two group listed the barrier of 'Library staff'.

This discrepancy is important as it reveals that there may be a lack of insight into how library staff are perceived by children with special needs and their families. An explanation for the difference may be found by looking at the discrepancy in the training that each research group receive in their library. In the phase one group 78 per cent of participants receive training in disability. In the phase two research group it is only 53 per cent. The response to the barrier question may be influenced by an awareness of a lack knowledge. For example, after completing training in disability awareness a librarian may be aware of the concept of 'first person language'. Without this training the librarian may not realise the insensitivity displayed in not using it.

### **Partnerships**

Partnerships are another area of discrepancy between the research groups. For libraries in the phase one research group, partnering is an important part of being an accessible and inclusive library, with 94 per cent having developed a partnership with an individual or organisation that is affiliated with children with special needs and their families. In contrast, only 46 per cent of the phase two research group have developed a partnership.

The importance of partnerships is revealed when participants are asked to indicate how their library has attempted to, 'understand the needs and characteristics of children with special needs and their families'. In the phase one group, 94 per cent of the libraries have developed partnerships to achieve this. In the phase two group only 47 per cent of the libraries have used partnerships. These results also highlight the issue around the question of,

‘What is the greatest barrier for families?’ If libraries do not know their users, there is a level of ignorance that inevitably impacts the attitudes and sensitivities of library staff.

### **Marketing**

Marketing also revealed some interesting differences between the two participant groups. Participants were asked ‘What one thing do you think would have the greatest impact on increasing access if it could be implemented?’ The top two responses for phase one participants were:

- Training in disability (39 per cent).
- Marketing (28 per cent).

The top responses for the phase two group were:

- Physical environment (33 per cent).
- Targeted programs (20 per cent).
- Marketing (20 per cent).

These results reveal a greater level of discrepancy when analysed in context to the in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews with the phase two group reveal a general belief that members of the library community, including those with disabilities, know that they are welcome in a library; and if they need any accommodations, they will ask a staff person for it and the library will adapt accordingly.

Unfortunately, this is not always the reality. It can take a lot of self-confidence and strength to ask for accommodations to be made if they are needed. It

would be much easier if libraries promoted their willingness to assist this user group.

### **What prevents libraries from addressing barriers to access for children with special needs and their families?**

When asked what the respondents thought prevented libraries from addressing barriers to access, the top three results were very similar between the phase one and two groups. The phase one group gave the following responses:

- Lack of knowledge on how to address the barrier (77 per cent.)
- Limitations on staffing resources (66 per cent).
- Limitations on financial resources (61 per cent).

The phase two top responses were:

- Lack of knowledge on how to address the barrier (80 per cent).
- Limitations on staffing resources (46 per cent).
- Lack of awareness of the problem (53 per cent).

These results indicate a need and desire for more understanding and knowledge on how to address the issues of access and inclusion for children with special need and their families.

### **Limitations of the paper**

The limitation of this paper is that it focusses on the perspective of the public librarian and does not involve children with special needs and their families.

Research from the perspective of children with special needs and their families is vital to informing the effectiveness of the inclusive libraries model

discussed in this paper. Involving children with special needs and their families is also fundamental to discovering attitudes, beliefs and understandings about libraries and literacy from the perspective of this group of the community. Phase three of this research project will involve this participant type.

## **Conclusion**

A preliminary comparison between the two research groups highlight potential areas for development if public libraries are going to increase access for children with special needs and their families. These areas include:

- Attitudes and sensitivities of public librarians toward children with special needs and their families.
- Marketing library services to children with special needs and their families.
- Awareness of the importance of developing partnerships with individuals and organisations in the disability sector.

Despite these areas of weakness, both of the research groups were passionate about the role libraries play in providing access for children with special needs and their families. As one participant expressed, “Librarians are the access warriors”.

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