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## **Children with special needs education in libraries: the case of Lithuanian Library for the Blind**

Lithuanian Library for the Blind is a library of national significance, a unique library in Lithuanian library system aiming to provide people with print disabilities with books and information; a library with the largest collections of publications in special formats, and the country's largest publisher of special format materials. Lithuanian Library for the Blind is implementing a project *Story box* that is dedicated to disabled children to improve their understanding of the social environment they live in. There are two stories written by famous Lithuanian writer and illustrator Kęstutis Kasparavičius called *Jar* and *Tea club* in the centre of the project. Librarians tell these stories for the children with various disorders and disabilities by using tactile objects which were created specifically for this project to illustrate their characters. Children with autism, visual disability, learning difficulties and other not only watch the performance, but also have an opportunity to touch the tactile objects and in that way are engaged into activity. The aim of this presentation is to introduce the methodology and findings of the research *Story box – for the children with autism or other disorders: the case of Lithuanian Library for the Blind* (researchers Dr. Rasa Januševičienė and Fausta Kepalienė, 2017). The research findings showed that *Story box* performances are a proper method to teach disabled children different social skills as well as to educate them how to communicate with others. However, during the activities the participation of special teachers and psychologists that work with disabled children is needed. This research is the first try to investigate the possibilities of libraries to work with children with autism disorder.

**Keywords: library, children, disorders, tactile, performance**

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### **Introduction**

Lithuanian Library for the Blind is implementing a project “Story box” dedicated to improving the understanding of disabled children about the social environment they live in. In the centre of the project are two stories called “Jar” and “Tea club”, written by the famous Lithuanian children writer and illustrator Kestutis Kasparavicius. Librarians tell these stories for the children by using tactile objects specifically created for this project to illustrate the characters of the stories.

Children not only watch the performance but also have an opportunity to touch the tactile objects and, in this way, are included in the action. The aim of this presentation is to introduce the methodology and findings of the research “Story box – for the children with autism or other disorders. The case of Lithuanian Library for the Blind”.

### **Methodology and research questions**

The research was done using observation method to find out if “Story box” as a method to learn social skills is suitable for children with autism and what conditions are important so that this method could be used in the most effective way (the aim of the research). The observation method as a purposefully organised perception of the environment and phenomena (Kardelis, 2002) was very useful to find out how do children with autism disorder perceive the social environment that surrounds them and how library organised activities can help them to interact with others. In librarianship this method is frequently chosen while researching how and what information in everyday life is used (Baker, 2006). The respondents of the observations were 375 children with autism or other disorders from five different special education centres in Lithuania (most of the respondents were children with autism disorder, but there also were children with complex disability). So there were 5 observations organised. Children were participating in the “Story box” activities (performance and creative workshops) while researchers observed and recorded their verbal and non-verbal reactions, degree of engagement, how the environment where the action took place affected the children’s behaviour, and other relevant information. The main research questions were: 1) how do children react to the performances: what are the verbal or / and verbal reactions? 2) what is the level of their engagement into activities? 3) what is the impact of the environment that the activities take place?

### **Research Results**

There were positive reactions to the “Story box” performances – children were eager to listen to them and also were keen on touching tactile objects that were used during the occupation. Children showed different nonverbal reactions: some of them laughed watching anecdotal situations while others expressed light outrage. There also were verbal reactions – children commented on what they see or hear during the performances (the stories made them remember their own experiences which they wanted to share with others), willingly answered to the questions that was asked during the occupation. However, there were few children with difficult, complex disability who didn’t react to what was going on in any forms. After the performances the majority of the audience were eager to participate in the creative workshop that was proposed to them (to paint a cup of tea of their dreams). Participation in the creative workshops are useful because it helps to strengthen and fix the experience that children get from the performances, moreover children socialize more freely and openly while they are engaged into creative activity.

### **Conclusion**

The research findings showed that “Story box” performances are a proper method to engage children with autism or other disorders and children are eager to participate in the activities. However, the participation of special teachers and psychologists that work with children is needed and preparations for the performance should be made. It is important to have an information about the environment that the performances and creative workshops are going to be

organised (if there is a possibility it is very useful to organise the activities outside because it helps children to relax), how many children will participate (the optimal is a group of 20-25 children), what disorders do they have. A detailed plan should be made before the occupations considering the circumstances, for example children with autism disorder are irritated by loud sounds, so it is important to avoid noise during occupations and talk quietly. This research is the first step to try to evaluate the possibilities of libraries work with children with autism disorder in Lithuania.

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