Indexes to children's information books

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Summarises the final report of the Society of Indexers/ Liverpool John Moores University research into children and indexes and includes recommendations for inclusion and presentation of indexes in children's information books.

The Society of Indexers/ Liverpool John Moores University investigation of indexes to children's information books, supported financially by the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, came to an end in July 1997 and the report of the study is now with the British Library. Questionnaires were received from 98 indexers, librarians, parents and teachers and 16 publishers. Work was also done with 154 children in four schools in Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Leicestershire.

It was decided to focus on indexes for children at National Curriculum Key Stage 2 (age 7-11, school years 3-6). This is an important period in the education process, as it is a time when children are developing judgement and poise, becoming increasingly independent of adults and deeply interested in finding out about things (Lee 1984).

highlights from the work with children

- There was a high awareness among the children of what an index is and how it differs from a contents table
- Subheadings tended not to be used by children
- The majority found cross-references difficult to understand
- Having located an index term, many children found scanning the page for the relevant reference a very difficult and lengthy process
- Some children, especially the younger ones (aged 7-8) were initially confused by the page numbers in the index: a number asked “what does 7 minus 10 make?” when faced with the page range 7-10. Because of this, one of the report’s recommendations is that hyphens should be avoided when indicating page ranges: ‘7, 8, 9, 10’ should be used rather than ‘7-10’

publishers' views

Although all the publishers participating in the investigation stated that children's information books should have indexes, some describing them as ‘essential’ and ‘invaluable’, fewer than one third stated that they always included an index.

- Reasons given for not including an index included 'not for school market', ‘editor is restricted’, ‘lack of time’, ‘lack of space’, ‘activity book’, ‘minimal text’ and ‘arrangement of book’
- Indexes were seen by many individual respondents as crucial parts of a book, giving quick and easy access to information that is scattered throughout the text: 93.8% of respondents felt that there were negative effects of having no index in a child's information book, many of them pointing out that it would be impossible to find all relevant information or specific facts and that useful information would probably be missed without an index
- 70.5% of respondents stated that lack of an index would prevent them from purchasing a children’s information book
- Eight of the sixteen participating publishers never used a professional indexer. The other eight would occasionally use a professional indexer, mainly for larger works
- The general tendency was for the editor to compile the index
- Some publishers felt that the author is the right person to compile the index, as did two parents: one wonders whether these publishers and parents are aware of the skills involved in indexing! One publisher would not trust an author to provide an index. Several librarians commented that professional indexers should be used

selected conclusions

The report concludes that an index is not only an invaluable retrieval tool but also has many educational benefits, including the encouragement of independent learning and effective use of time and the modelling of orderly, systematic approaches to learning and information retrieval.

The National Curriculum has had some impact on the use of book indexes by children at Key Stage 2, through making the teaching of index use a curriculum requirement, and children are being taught to use indexes at school. Improvements can be made in this area, however, and further implementation of the National Curriculum requirements, resulting in more teaching of index use, would be beneficial.

The immense variety in the presentation of indexes is one of the factors making index use difficult for some children. Many children's books contain indexes that are badly designed, often with little space, no sections and small type. Many indexes were found to contain long strings of page references, inappropriate terminology, omissions and errors. Cross-references, often not understood by children, were sometimes used when multiple entries would have been more appropriate.

selected recommendations

The first of 21 recommendations in the report is:

- all children's information books should contain indexes.
- Indexes should be compiled by professional indexers, and there should be communication between the indexer, publisher, editor and author
- Children should be taught how to use indexes at school
Indexes to children’s information books

and encouraged to use them at school and elsewhere in order to develop necessary and valuable retrieval skills

- Children’s indexes should not be seen as simplified versions of adult indexes, but compiled with the capabilities of the child in mind
- Consistency and the avoidance of ‘passing references’ to topics are even more important in children’s indexes than in indexes for adults. Introductory notes should be informal and user-friendly, using appropriate terminology and a suitable heading to make them prominent
- Indexes should be allocated a page or pages of their own and not fitted onto a final page of text as though an afterthought
- Printing the entire alphabet, in upper and lower case, on the same page as the index, would serve as a helpful reference point
- Sections and section headers, to denote and highlight groups of words starting with the same letter, are recommended to aid children in locating index terms

The children who were involved in the work with schools thought that every information book should have an index and generally thought indexes to be helpful, but using an index could be a slow process for children and any unnecessary hindrance should be avoided.

Further information about the research and publication of the results may be obtained from Professor Ken Bakewell, 9 Greenacre Road, Liverpool L25 OLD (Tel. 0151-486 4137).

Reference


Ken Bakewell is Professor Emeritus at Liverpool John Moores University, and a former President of the Society of Indexers. Paula Mathews was research assistant to the project.

Developing a guide to indexing services

The idea for a guide to indexing services was inspired by a “Commissioning Checklist” produced by the Canberra Society of Editors in 1994. This four-page publication is intended to assist those commissioning an editor’s services. It covers project definition, selection of appropriate services, and the various levels of edit (with clear explanations of what is involved in each task) which can be commissioned. It is a useful tool not only for publishers and clients, but as an introduction to those contemplating professional editing work.

The ACT Region Branch of the Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI) felt that a similar publication covering indexing services would be valuable for clients and practitioners. It would make clients aware of choices available to them in the types of indexes that can be created, and of the tasks involved in various types of indexing. It would give potential indexers an idea of what to expect of indexing work. It could act as the basis for, or justification of, the indexing rates for freelance work which the Society produces at regular intervals. It could also be a working document for clarifying the skills necessary for indexing tasks, and therefore the types of training required to ensure that these skills are successfully acquired. Our intention is to produce a guide which specifies the core and peripheral tasks and skills involved in different types of indexing. Once a type of indexing is defined, identifying the tasks involved and skills needed is relatively straightforward.

However, determining when a form of indexing is unique enough to demand different skills from its practitioners requires a knowledge of the wide range of indexing undertaken. We feel that to ensure that most types of indexing are considered, we need input from a good cross section of indexers. We are particularly interested to know if they feel the type of indexing they do requires different skills or specialised knowledge.

For example, database indexers (ie those who index for automated information services) follow standard rules for bibliographic descriptions of the documents in hand; have a strong subject emphasis; rely heavily on thesauri and other authority lists for consistency; and deal with many documents, usually of a similar subject nature, for the same job.

Back-of-book indexers follow standard rules for punctuation, filing and layout; rely on the terminology of the author rather than on standardised word lists; and deal with one document without reference to others in its field.

Different skills and work practices may also exist for other types of indexing, or for subgroups within the two categories noted. For example, are special skills or tasks involved in legal indexing; audiovisual, picture or photo indexing; genealogical indexing; newspaper indexing; cumulative indexes for journal titles; or indexing for electronic media like the internet?

It was on this basis that the ACT Region Branch applied for, and was awarded, an AusSI research grant. The purpose of the grant is to produce the guide to services, based on the information obtained from practitioners about the types of work they do and the skills and tasks involved.

It was initially our intention to gather this information through a Canberra-based workshop; however, in order to canvass the widest viewpoints from our members we are encouraging each AusSI Branch or Group to hold one of their regular meetings on this topic, between now and March 1998. The ACT Region Branch will provide background information and focus questions for the groups, but the emphasis of the meeting and the types of indexing and skills covered will be up to each group. We are hoping that each Branch or Group’s responses can be coordinated by nominated representatives, whose collective task will be to develop the guide from the information provided.

We would also be interested in any feedback from overseas indexers. The task of defining the nature and breadth of our profession is one which I’m sure has engaged us all at various times, and we in Australia would be happy to reap the wisdom of those who have trod this path before!

To pursue this topic, please contact: Lynn Farkas (c/- Datascape Information Pty Ltd, GPO Box 1870, Canberra ACT 2601, e-mail jgllspie@pcug.org.au

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