



MELTON EXPLORES READING PROGRAMS FOR PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

SUSIE PRESTNEY reports on how the Pierre Gorman Award has allowed Melton City Council to provide lifelong learning opportunities for adults with learning disabilities and also provided professional development opportunities to library staff.

The Library Board of Victoria supports professional development and leadership in the Victorian public library sector through a range of scholarships and awards administered by State Library Victoria. Earlier this year, Melton City Council proudly received the biennial Pierre Gorman Award 'to improve access to or delivery of library and information services for people with disabilities'. The program was sparked by enquiries for social and creative programs for adults with intellectual disabilities, and the limited opportunities we could offer at the time. In line with community requests, the project pitched for the award, with an entry focused on improving access to library programs for adults whose dominant impairment is cognitive, developmental or intellectual – broadly referred to as learning disabilities.

Research revealed that an accessible and successful method for engaging people with learning disabilities in public library programs is shared reading. In emergent literacy settings, shared reading is an evidence-based approach that builds on storytime as an experience. Just as storytime is an engaging and fun activity that boosts early literacy development, shared reading for adults focuses on the social interaction and meaning-making that happens when people read together.

Campaspe Regional Library, building on its work as a previous Pierre Gorman Award recipient, offers a regular

shared reading program for adults with learning disabilities based on the US model, Next Chapter Book Club (NCBC). NCBC promotes interactive, small group reading experiences for social connection and creativity. A key premise is that beyond the direct literacy benefits, shared reading contributes to personal wellbeing, helps build relationships, and increases engagement with the community.

A complementary program called Sensory Book Clubs (SBC) has been developed by UK charity, Openstorytellers. SBC aims to make classic works of literature accessible for people with learning disabilities by combining sights, sounds, smells and textures with original text to animate the story. Openstorytellers has developed resources to support shared reading engagement with literary classics and is currently working on sensory adaptations of contemporary novels so that book club members can be brought into conversations around best-sellers and prize-winning reads.

With funding from the Pierre Gorman Foundation, and professional support from Campaspe's Community Outreach Coordinator, Melton City Libraries is taking a collaborative approach to bringing shared reading programs for adults with learning disabilities to Victorian public libraries. A call for expressions of interest has been made to the sector for membership of a 12-month project working group to organise NCBC and SBC implementation and development. The working group will also develop a toolkit of resources for staff so that ultimately, adults of all abilities can participate in programs, and engage, learn and grow as valued members of their local library. In the process, our own capacity to develop new skills, reboot our creative thinking, and challenge the inclusivity of our engagement with community will be tested, stretched and reimagined. We look forward to sharing the results. 🌀

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