

# Access and equity for teens with reading difficulties

In terms of human evolution, reading is a relatively new cultural invention. VS Ramamchandran, a neuroscientist well known in the public sphere, is quoted as saying:

“Language comprehension and production evolved in connection with hearing, probably 150,000 years ago and to some extent is ‘hard wired’; whereas writing is 5,000 to 7,000 years old – partially going piggyback on the same circuits, but partially involving new brain structures like the left angular gyrus...”. (Colapinto 2012)

A lot has been written about how we learn to read and how best to teach children to read. Debates continue with regards to best practice but generally speaking most Australian children learn to read by the time they reach secondary school.

But what about those secondary students who still struggle to read?

To some extent librarians are at the coalface of this issue. We are often the first port of call for teachers with students struggling to get through their prescribed novels, or failing to comprehend content gathered during online research sessions.

Librarians are adept at addressing these concerns as they walk through our doors, but the kind of reach that will help us sleep better at night will only come from a comprehensive whole-school solution; one that can expose all students to our special services, whether they walk through our doors or not. This is a huge undertaking, though, and even after a working structure is in-place, it can take a long time for innovation to become an organic part of the school. So meanwhile, what can we do? My suggestion is to treat this new year, 2017, as a ‘starting point’, and get on top of the following key points:

1. What is a 'reading difficulty'?
2. Which resources and services to offer?
3. Who is struggling to read in your school?
4. Communication channels.

I will touch briefly on each of these.

## What is a 'reading difficulty'

In simple terms, reading can be described according to five constituent parts (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development 2000):

1. Phoneme awareness
2. Phonics,
3. Fluency
4. Vocabulary
5. Comprehension

A reading difficulty or disability will always impact one or more of these components.

There are numerous biological and environmental factors that contribute to reading difficulties. In the case of learning disabilities (as distinct from learning ‘difficulties’ which are solely environmentally derived), full competency may or may not be possible.

Reading difficulties can remain undetected for years or even indefinitely. Dyslexia, for instance, is often referred to as a ‘hidden disability’, since it’s symptoms are not always obvious. Left undetected, students often develop compensatory strategies and ‘cover up’ techniques to assist them with the difficulties involved with travelling through school (Reid 2011, p.3).

### ***Common causes of reading difficulties***

#### **Optilexia**

Reading by sight rather than by ‘decoding’ (i.e. looking at the word as an image). Often goes unnoticed until around Year 1 –2.

#### **Eye tracking difficulty**

A weakness in the neural feedback loop that controls muscle movement in the eyes. Difficulties focusing on individual words.

#### **Irlen Syndrome**

The brain isn’t able to properly process visual information. Black text on a white background can appear to move or jitter on the page. The student is sensitive to light (headaches). Spectacles with coloured lenses often help.

#### **Working memory problems**

Can decode but has difficulty with comprehension due to poor retention of recently read words/sentences/numbers. This is a big issue when learning to read.

#### **Fluency block**

The student cannot easily read connected text rapidly and smoothly. Conscious attention is paid to the mechanics of the task (such as decoding) and, as such, reading is not ‘automatic’.

#### **Attention deficit**

Poor concentration skills mean the student is easily distracted by external and internal stimuli.

#### **Stress loops**

Thinking shuts down as a result of stress. This can cause emotional outbursts and a general fear or dislike of books and reading.

### ***Neurodiversity and ‘norms’***

The concept of neurodiversity suggests that because all brains differ in their structure and function, it is unreasonable to view a brain that deviates from the ‘agreed norm’ as pathologically disordered, or its owner as defective (Sandman-Hurley 2013). As educators, this is worth reflecting on, as it reminds us of the transient nature of norms. Furthermore, the extent to which a reading difficulty becomes a disability, depends largely on those cultural norms that relate to the importance of literacy (Riddick 2001).

## Which resources and services?

Continual advancements in technology, scientific research, and learning theory, have made access and equity for teens with reading difficulties less of a problem today, but there is still a divide. In our democratic education system this ultimately manifests as discrimination. School libraries can find it tricky to address the disparity, since assistive technology is often expensive, many ‘students in need’ are not funded, and Australia’s complex and sometimes inhibitive copyright laws make access and equity for special needs students a ‘nightmare’. However, as pioneers of access and equity, librarians can improve things for struggling readers by thinking outside the box, forming alliances and rummaging through the labyrinth of non-for-profit groups who might assist.

Some useful resources and services I utilise:

### **Vision Australia**

Offers audio CDA, DAISY and audio files such as mp3, large print, braille, tactile diagrams and bold print graphics electronic text.

### **Queensland Narrating Service**

One of a handful of non-profit organisations in Australia which produce audio material for people with print disabilities. Send them the book and they will narrate and record it for you. It can take many weeks but will only cost you the price of return mail and their small handling fee.

### **Project Gutenberg**

Free ebooks – mostly good for old classics.

### **LibriVox**

Free public domain audiobooks read by volunteers from around the world. Can be hit and miss, but worth a look.

## *DIY audiobooks?*

If an audio copy of a text is not commercially available you may be allowed to produce one yourself, but you will need to assess the use against the ‘Flexible Dealing’ criteria here:

<http://www.smartcopying.edu.au/information-sheets/tafe/flexible-dealing>

Additionally, take note of the following points:

1. You must be using the copyright material for the purposes of giving educational instruction.
2. Your use must be non-commercial.
3. The circumstances of your use must be a special case.
4. Your use must not conflict with the normal exploitation of the copyright material you are using.
5. Your use must not unreasonably prejudice the copyright owner.

*Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities* have released production guidelines for DIY audiobooks.

Instructions are given for matters relating to equipment, narration, technical aspects of production, labelling, packaging, audio indexing and copyright. View this on their website.

## *Listening is not cheating*

When offering audiobook versions of texts, some librarians receive the complaint that listening is “cheating”. The insinuation here is that no ‘hard work’ has been done to receive the ‘reward’ (i.e. the content). This is a strange way

to think about reading considering that we want students to view reading as an enjoyable pastime – not hard work! Like so many complaints that have roots in the ‘old ways are best’ mindset, we need to remind people that access and equity in education means one size does not fit all. The literary value of a hardcopy book is not in dispute, and audiobooks and printed books are *different things*. Audiobooks are a great way to increase students’ engagement with stories. This holds true irrespective of reading ability. Personally speaking, I have witnessed several students’ academic lives being turned around as a direct result of access to audiobooks. All of a sudden, finishing a novel becomes *possible*.

### ***Apps and browser extensions***

There is a multitude of inexpensive and sometimes free software available to transform text into speech (TTS), and vice versa (voice recognition technology). The appearance of text and other online content can be altered to make it more readable. For students with Dyslexia or Irlen Syndrome, coloured screen overlays (physical or digital) can be extremely effective. The Irlen Institute produces many options for purchase, including an app. Your best option for assistive technology is to visit blogs and read reviews, then try some out for yourself.

### **Who is struggling in your school?**

Your school’s learning strategies team can paint you a picture of the volume and variety of

needs in your school. Hard statistics help, and so do anecdotal accounts. Write it all down and watch the progress as you implement your strategies through the year.

### ***Culture of inclusiveness***

You may like to review the culture of inclusiveness at your school. This includes wellbeing policy and particular teachers who advocate strongly for differentiated curriculum and equal access. One of the strongest measures a school can take towards inclusiveness is to provide students with access to a qualified librarian and a school library. This needs to be recognised by executive. School libraries should be viewed as necessities, not luxuries.

### **Communication channels**

The impact of a school library depends on more than the value of what it offers. Which teachers will carry your torch? A school-wide improvement in access and equity for struggling readers will require many hands on deck, but if you cannot get that level of collaboration, just do what you can. A small change can make a big difference. The capacity of a school library to fill the cracks that struggling readers fall through, is immense.

### **References**

Colapinto, J. (2012). [Website]. The pleasures of being read to. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved online <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-pleasures-of-being-read-to>>

- National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (2000). *Report of the national reading panel*. (NIH Publication No. 00-4754). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Reid, G. (2011). (2nd ed.) *Dyslexia: A Complete Guide for Parents and Those Who Help Them*. [Ebook] Wiley, ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Riddick, B. (2001). Dyslexia and inclusion: Time for a social model of disability perspective? *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 11(3): 223-236.
- Sandman-Hurley, K. [TED-Ed]. (2013, Jul 15). *What is dyslexia?* [Video File]. Retrieved via <https://youtu.be/zafiGBrFkRM>