

## Dogs and opera help literacy – really?

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### Abstract:

*This paper will describe some of the programs that have been delivered by Yarra Plenty Regional Library in Melbourne Australia to reach out to those members of the community who might not otherwise think of the library as a place they would want to go or whose services they would use. The Reading Rover is a mini mobile library that delivers regular programs at community centres and other venues to encourage parents to read to their babies and young children. Mill Park library has made special connections to families with children on the Autism spectrum, running programs and providing quiet spaces where these children and their parents feel welcomed and accepted. Doggy tales is a program now running at 4 branches where specially accredited dogs sit patiently and without judgement as children read to them out loud. After receiving a grant we have spent 2 years developing special programs for deaf people and are excited about a signed opera performance by Opera Australia that will be staged at one of our branches. And there is a storytime for adults program aimed at people who don't read for pleasure designed to help them discover that reading is a rewarding and enjoyable pastime.*

**Keywords:** Literacy, outreach, deaf, autism, reading dogs

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### About YPRL

Yarra Plenty Regional Library (YPRL) is a library system in the northeast of Melbourne serving a population of 366,460 over three municipalities covering metropolitan, urban fringe and rural areas. The demographics of the region are varied – from the diverse City of Whittlesea which is home to migrants from over 140 countries and is a growth area for Melbourne; to Banyule City Council which includes wealthy residential areas as well as one of the most significant Somali communities; and Nillumbik Shire which is a green wedge for the sprawling Greater Melbourne and includes urban areas and remote and tranquil bush properties.

## **The strategic issues**

Public libraries foster a love of reading and literacy development among people of all ages. However we are aware that not all members of our community are being catered for in reading and literacy programs. Generally people with special needs have lower literacy levels. The challenge is how to reach out to special groups in the community to enhance reading and literacy and to encourage people of all abilities to use their local library by offering them appropriate programs.

## **Analysis**

Libraries are generally in a strong position to provide programming and activities for all ages and abilities. Our most important strength is the enthusiasm and creativity of our staff, who have brought their own life experiences, expertise and knowledge to develop and implement programs. We have many partnerships in place and are confident about forming new ones with relevant organisations. Often there are grants available to develop and pilot new initiatives. Our libraries are seen by the community as inclusive, safe places.

However there can be a lack of awareness by the library of special groups in the community and their needs. These groups can lack visibility because they are not aware of what libraries can offer and therefore they do not use libraries. Staff are not always comfortable interacting with people with special needs and additional training is required.

There are also constraints in expanding programs to reach special groups, in particular resourcing and funding. Often it is necessary to go outside the library to reach these target groups.

This paper describes some of the programs and activities undertaken by Yarra Plenty Regional Library to make our services more welcoming and inclusive. For each particular program there is a description of the need; the audience; funding and partnerships; and stories about the impact.

## **Special groups**

### 1. Families with preschool children where the parents have low educational levels

Data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) indicates that 17% of Australian children of pre-school age are 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' in language and cognitive skills.<sup>1</sup> According to *The state of Victoria's children 2012: early childhood: A report on how Victoria's young children are faring* from the Victorian Department of Childhood and Early Development<sup>2</sup>, the best opportunity to improve learning outcomes is frequent reading to children which pays off for later outcomes.

Reading has particular importance for the development of learning behaviours. Children read to more frequently at age 4-5 achieve higher scores on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests for both Reading and Numeracy in Year 3 (age 8 to 9). These differences in reading and cognitive skills are not related to the child's family background or home environment but are the direct result of how frequently they have been read to prior to starting school.<sup>3</sup>

*The Reading Rover* delivers pre literacy programs to hard to reach and vulnerable children and its inspiration is the Columbus Metropolitan Libraries' Reading Corps program. The Reading Rover aims to create a community of:

1. Informed families who understand how important it is to read to their children
2. Confident families who know how to read stories for learning and understanding
3. Involved families who read and talk to children regularly.

Through their families, the program supports children to develop strong pre and early literacy skills for school readiness and a love of stories, songs, books and reading. Vulnerable, disengaged and isolated children aged 0-5 and their families/caregivers in our region are the target audience.

The library is taken out of our buildings and into the community to prepare children for kindergarten and school. A trained early literacy staff member organises a program of regular visits to community spaces where parents and children are gaining valuable ready to read skills. A van was purchased and is brightly and attractively decorated to promote the service throughout the community. Tubs of picture books are able to be easily moved around and the van doubles as a mini pop up library where parents can borrow books for their children.

The program delivered out of the Reading Rover is called "Read with Me." It is more like a training program than a regular storytime, targeted mainly at parents. The facilitator reads just one or two stories, there is a "shared reading" session (where parents/caregivers will read to children one-on-one) and there is a focus on information sharing. Each session of the 4 – 6 week program is structured around the delivery of early literacy tips and techniques. There are also a number of songs, rhymes and linked activities. Emphasis is on what parents/caregivers can do at home. Sessions are designed to be simple and to be great fun for all. Families are encouraged to connect with the library and to attend storytimes.

Funding from the program was achieved through a grant from a philanthropic organisation and also a timely budget surplus. Partnerships have been developed with our Member Councils and other community organisations to provide the venues for the program.

While specific performance indicators have been developed to measure the impact of the Reading Rover, the most powerful results are through the stories we hear back from the program.

One parent was at the session with two children. She was early and stayed late to help clean up. Her little one has a language delay and probably concerned about the level of attachment to me, as a stranger. She is known to Maternal and Child Health and to the centre coordinator, who told me that if I do nothing else than get this mum to a session, I've done a wonderful thing. She is quite isolated and her little girl would, I imagine, be a challenge to parent. It was wonderful to see her taking books home and it will be a privilege to give her a library card!

*Donna, Reading Rover Coordinator*

## 2. Reluctant readers – primary age

National testing shows that 22% of Year 9 students in Victoria were at or below national minimum standards for reading (NAPLAN 2014). If students become confident readers in their primary years, they are much more likely to become proficient adult readers.

R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) began in 1999 in Salt Lake City. The program utilises therapy animals to help children improve their reading and communication skills and also teaches them to love books and reading. Results are significant, participating children make enormous strides in reading and communication skills while building self-esteem, confidence and social skills.

In celebration of the National Year of Reading 2012, YPRL developed a program using a dog to assist children to improve their reading and literacy skills based on the R.E.A.D. program. The program, named Doggy Tales, provides children with a non-judgemental, comforting and safe canine audience as they practice their reading and also develops children's verbal communication skills and presents reading as a joyful experience. The pilot program was run out of the Diamond Valley Library and features Lachlan the Reading Dog and his handler and staff member Marlies Irvine-Tammes. Lachlan has become a media star and is the mascot for the Premiers' Reading Challenge, a state-wide literacy program run by the Victorian Government and we now have reading dogs at four of our branches with the aim of having one at each branch.

This program is funded out of normal operations, as it is run by volunteers it is not an expensive program. The program also received a heart-warming donation from the Diamond Valley Special Development School of \$300. The teacher explained that the students had raised money through a walkathon and wanted to give something back to the community and they chose our reading dog program to donate to.

Zolde and I have been working on the program for five months. I have found this experience both rewarding and satisfying. Zolde is very enthusiastic too. She greets everyone with a wagging tale and loves to go up to staff for a pat and maybe a treat.

We have a lot of regular kids that come every week. One little boy at Eltham library ran in the library with this huge smile and blurted out that he didn't want to be late so he run to me with his book open ready to go. We have a lot of fun reading. We become very enthusiastic about the story and have a giggle. Overall the experience is one of creating a safe non-threatening non-judgemental motivated reading session. I want the kids to go away with spirits lifted and feeling good about them.

*Lynne (Volunteer)*

My daughter Lillian has been reading with the reading dog at the Diamond Valley Library for the past months. She enjoys these sessions and tries her very best at reading. She is normally quite a reluctant reader so I am finding these sessions extremely helpful and encouraging for her. Thank you for enabling us to take part in these sessions.

*Ceri (Mother)*

One of our local schools recommended to a parent that they bring their child to the library to participate in this program. The child has made great progress and is much more confident after reading to Ralphy.

*Staff member Rosanna*

### 3. Adults with low literacy levels

YPRL offers many programs and events aimed at committed library patrons. Literature and literacy based programs attract community members who mostly have a love of reading, understand how libraries work and are generally committed to introducing their children to

the concept of reading for pleasure. However the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey 2006 found that 46% of working age Australians struggled with everyday tasks such as reading newspapers, making sense of timetables or filling out forms. We wanted a way to reach out to these community members to encourage them to improve their reading skills.

*Live Reads on the Road* was launched last year. The aim of the program is to introduce reluctant or disengaged adult readers and non-library users to the benefits of reading and libraries through the power of storytelling. We are aware that some community members, particularly those who do not have good literacy skills, are not comfortable coming to a library, so this project involved partnering with community organisations to take storytellers out to people attending other programs at these facilities. Adult storytimes were held monthly, over a 12 month period, rotating through each municipality with celebrity storytellers and library staff. Community members attending these storytimes were encouraged to join the library service.

Funding for the program was through the library's local priorities grant funding and carried out in partnership with Eltham Health Centre, St. Clare Primary school, Thomastown West Primary School, Livingston Centre and Banyule Community Health.

The Banyule Community Health – Knit 'n Natter invited the library back for a second visit. The audience there was particularly responsive; talking about the stories after the reading was finished. Livingston also seemed to enjoy it very much and asked for a return visit. Attendees of the program at both centres later visited the library.

Eltham Health Centre hosted storytimes for a couple of Dementia and PAG groups. Staff indicated that some people had attended the Health Centre's other programs for many weeks but had not been as responsive as when they joined the storytime sessions. Staff were very enthusiastic for the program to continue as it had a very positive effect on participants.

The storytime sessions, irrespective of audience, evolved and segued into conversations, memory sharing and story sharing amongst the participants. "The Power of Storytelling!"

#### 4. Deaf community

A study by VicDeaf showed that the northwest region of Melbourne has the largest signing population in Victoria. Banyule, one of our Member Councils, has the highest rate of hearing impairment in Victoria.

The library has run a number of programs specifically catering to deaf people. Auslan storytimes are held monthly at one of our branches and these attract people from a wide geographical area. A number of performances of *The Grimstones*, a puppet theatre conceived and performed by a deaf performer, have appealed to and been greatly enjoyed by both hearing and deaf alike. Recently we hosted Opera Australia with their production of *Hansel and Gretel*; this was a wonderful show that played to 270 children and their parents. As well as the joy of live opera, the performance was enhanced by Auslan shadow interpretation which provided a unique and highly valuable experience for the members of the deaf community who were there.

In 2012 YPRL was the recipient of the Pierre Gorman Award, which provides funding for projects for people with disabilities. Our project was called Connected Communities - Auslan

and Voice Unite. The funding allowed us to run a number of special programs designed especially for deaf people as well as developing a staff training module for use by all Victorian public libraries.

Auslan is so expressive; the kids get so much more out of storytime with Auslan accompanying it. I would come to all Auslan storytimes with my kids. My daughter learns Auslan and Auslan storytime extends her learning. My 3 year old loves Auslan too!

*Feedback from a parent at Auslan Storytime*

One parent came up to me afterwards and told me she was amazed that her son actually got up of his own accord and did the performance. He is usually very shy and would not have volunteered himself to get up in front of a huge crowd like that. She was delighted with the session, but even more delighted that her son showed such initiative without being prompted.

*Parent feedback following Polyglot puppet show*

## 5. Autism Spectrum

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental condition which affects the ability of the individual in two main areas: social communication and interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities. It affects the way that individuals are able to interact with other people, and they often find the world a confusing place. ASD affects around 1 in every 100-110 people. This equates to around 55,000 Victorians and around 250,000 Australians.

At our Mill Park Branch special attention is being paid to encouraging families with children on the spectrum to feel welcome and included. Programs such as sensitive storytimes, the reading tent, Sensitive Santa, Lego club and raspberry pi sessions are held to cater specifically for those on the spectrum. The collection also contains specialist materials for parents.

“I never want to do anything other than play on my iPad and computer. I cannot play sport, ride a bike or hold a pen properly because of my Asperger’s. I do not fit in with a lot of the kids at school. When I started doing the Raspberry Pi workshops at the library, I felt immediately comfortable with like-minded people. I normally stutter at school for fear of saying the wrong thing and being disliked, but with this group, we think similarly, we have the same social difficulties and my stutter is gone. I am good at computers, and love learning how to make my own computer games. I have now learnt how traffic lights work through basic coding and now feel very excited that this is something I might be able to do as a job in my adult hood. Before these classes, I was very fearful that I would not be able to find a job that I could do. I look forward to each class and what I can learn next.”

*Jake aged 11, diagnosed with Aspergers*

## **Conclusion**

The theme of this session is No-one left behind. Yarra Plenty Regional Library has reacted to the needs of special sections of our community to provide innovative, interesting and valued programs and services to enhance literacy, reading and inclusion.

## **References**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/readtoyoungchild.pdf> p 1