

Serving Dyslexic Patrons

A Proposal for the Augusta, Kansas Public Library

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Abstract

Library services to patrons with reading disabilities seem to be an oxymoron. Lack of accommodations, in terms of both services and materials, to this group of individuals needs to be addressed by every library. Proposed services for the Augusta Public Library create such accommodations without drawing extra attention to these individuals who often do not want to self-identify as having a learning disability.

Keywords: dyslexia, library, reading disability

Introduction

Augusta, Kansas, is a small town about 20 miles east of Wichita. With about 8,000 residents and its proximity to the mid-sized city, the town has a suburban feel. It is located in Butler County, which has a median household income of \$54,000; the household income in Augusta varies greatly, but the average pay is slightly lower than the county's. Augusta is not a diverse city; 93.5% of Butler County's population is white, and the same can be inferred to be true for the cities within its borders, give or take a little. Around 90% of the residents have high school diplomas, and 24% have Bachelor's degrees.

Currently, the Augusta Public Library has a fair sized collection, though a number of books could be considered out of date. There are adult, young adult, junior, and children's sections. The library offers computer and internet access to patrons; these are almost always in use during normal library hours, especially on evenings and weekends. This library offers what most patrons think of as "normal" library services: check out, access to reference sources, magazines, children's story times, and computer use.

APL does not offer any special services or accommodations for patrons who have learning disabilities. This is a problem because a significant portion of the population either struggles with a disability or knows someone who does. Unfortunately, this is a problem not unique to Augusta, Kansas, and all libraries have improvements to make in serving this group of patrons.

Population

Around the globe, reading disabilities are a touchy subject. People do not bring it up because they are afraid to offend. People do not bring it up because they do not want to self-identify and be judged. People do not bring it up because they are unsure of what to say or are

unaware that such issues even exist. Unfortunately, this very lack of conversation has created a lack of public services for individuals who deal with dyslexia on a daily basis, especially outside of schools. Fortunately, public libraries are in a position to change this situation; they can begin with several basic steps.

Dyslexia is a neurologically-based learning disability. Researchers have determined that, for those who are affected, these “neurological differences interfere with the brain’s ability to process the units of sound called ‘phonemes’” (Gorman, 1999, p. 1). This disability can be difficult to identify and understand because it is not visible. Vogel and Reder explain the disability well:

First, dyslexia occurs on a continuum from mild to severe impairment. Second, it is a language-based, auditory processing difficulty that persists even in people who have learned to read and comprehend with accuracy. Third, even for those individuals with dyslexia who have learned to read and comprehend, rapid and accurate decoding of unfamiliar, multisyllabic, and/or foreign language words remain inaccurate and rate of decoding often remains slow. Although they remain slow readers, with appropriate instruction some will become good comprehenders, especially when reading materials in their area of expertise (1998, p. 18).

While these individuals struggle with decoding the written word and, therefore, reading, they are not less intelligent than others. They do not need materials or books to be “dumbed down” or simplified in order for them to understand. Instead, they need services and tools to make the available materials more accessible. People with dyslexia typically have high oral comprehension; it is the task of decoding, especially when tired, that challenges and interferes

with their understanding of a text. Decoding is the process of extracting meaning from the letters and words on a page, essentially translating symbols into language.

Patrons with dyslexia need a librarian who understands their challenges. Having an understanding and caring individual at the circulation desk increases comfort of patrons in the library and makes them more likely to return again and again to utilize library services.

More people are affected by this issue than most individuals realize. “It is estimated that dyslexia affects 8%-10% of the world’s population” (Nielsen & Irvall, 2006, p. 1). This is a significant percentage of the population, and one can infer that close to the same percentage of any library’s community is affected by this learning disability. However, it is not only those who have been diagnosed who will desire services. Family members, teachers, and employers will also want access to information, increasing the percentage of the library population who wishes for related materials.

People with dyslexia need services such as clear, simple brochures and websites about library services that convey important information, audio books, text to speech software, and understanding librarians. Many people with dyslexia hesitate to self-identify because of the stigma attached to learning disabilities. This means that it should be clear that there are services and materials available even though they are not necessarily marked. Individuals with dyslexia are very intelligent; they simply struggle with reading. This makes materials, services, and tools for them especially important; librarians need to carefully consider what is made available to individuals with dyslexia. These patrons deal with an unseen disability; there is a stigma attached to learning disabilities which says or implies that those who are affected by them are less intelligent than others. Though some adaptations can be made for dyslexics, librarians must be careful to never send this message, overtly or otherwise.

So what?

When researching for their report, “Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia,” Nielsen and Irvall were told by an individual with dyslexia, ““I don’t visit the library, because I don’t want any more failures”” (2001, p. 5). Many individuals with dyslexia avoid libraries. They see these institutions as reminders of previous failures – failures to read and comprehend, failures to achieve, failures to fit in. Whether or not public libraries were actually a part of these failures is irrelevant because libraries and reading are inextricably woven together. The simple fact is that public libraries must work to be part of the success of individuals with dyslexia in order to reverse these emotions and perceptions.

As stated earlier, approximately 8-10% of the world’s population is affected by dyslexia. This is a significant portion of the population, meaning it is important that librarians be prepared to offer quality services to this group of patrons. Between patrons who have been diagnosed with dyslexia and their family members who also seek to understand it, the likelihood that any given library will need to serve people seeking information about dyslexia and services for those who are affected by it is relatively high. In addition, there may be teachers in the community who wish to learn more about how to help their students or employers who have hired someone affected who would like to understand better how to work with them.

In fact, this idea is supported by research. “In a 1995 Roper-Starch national survey, 51 percent of the public said they would go to their public libraries for information about learning disabilities” (Gorman, 1999, p. 1). Though it is slightly dated, the study reveals the need for libraries to offer services and materials for people with this information need, whether they are directly affected or they simply want to learn more about the subject.

Services

Many of the services proposed in this section will also benefit patrons not affected by dyslexia. In addition to a number of materials that can be purchased, there are several strategies that librarians can use to make patrons with dyslexia, as well as any other patron, feel comfortable in the library. "Lists of general strategies have been offered... Such lists are useful in helping the educator create a learning environment that is characterized by 1) a positive and supportive climate, 2) minimal distraction, 3) appropriate levels of structure and feedback, and 4) tailored to the learning style preferences of learners" (Vogel & Reder, 1998, p. 81). This list is not exclusive to educators in schools. Librarians are also educators, and if they keep these strategies in mind they can serve all patrons well and will be more likely to meet their needs.

The least expensive material that libraries can provide patrons with dyslexia is a free download of Natural Reader software. This is text-to-speech software that reads aloud text from websites or computer documents. It will aid dyslexic patrons by taking away the stress of decoding written text. They can hear the words and this support will increase their understanding of what they are reading. The library should also provide headphones for patrons to check out when they are using this software, to ensure that it does not attract unnecessary attention or distract other patrons.

The library can also begin to purchase audio books in addition to print materials. There is currently a small collection but not nearly enough. Again, this will enable patrons with reading difficulties to enjoy available books without the struggle they normally face when reading. This could, in turn, increase library circulation by increasing their desire and motivation to read for pleasure. The catalog should already identify whether the library has both audio and print materials available that can be checked out together. The library could also begin to include, perhaps in the summary or description in the catalog, a clear statement or symbol of

whether both types of materials are available for any given text. In the children's section, libraries can package audio and picture books together if both are available in the collection.

Another cost-effective accommodation that libraries can make is to simply revise their current brochures and websites. They need to be concise and simple; patrons should be able to find the information they need quickly without reading through long or cumbersome descriptions. Navigation on the website should be easy and intuitive. This can be done over an extended time period, when the employee who normally updates the website is able to make time to work on it.

Books about dyslexia can also be purchased with funds. There are currently only two books in the APL catalog related to dyslexia; they are both junior fiction. The Augusta Public Library has no nonfiction or adult fiction books on the subject. Therefore, several additional resources could be bought in order to meet the needs of the community that have already been demonstrated.

Budget

Some expenses will be ongoing and should be a portion of the yearly budget. Others will be one-time costs to begin the accommodations or make updates. The chart on the following page outlines the proposed budget needs in order to first implement the project. Some of these will be ongoing expenses if the library chooses to continue to increase their accommodation of these needs.

The website update would take a number of hours of employee time. Whoever already manages and updates the website should be able to do this; however, it will take time. A basic update may take close to 10 hours for the main page and links. A more intense overhaul can be done over time, as each page of the website is updated.

Item	Description	Approximate price	Quantity	Total Price
Natural Reader	Text-to-speech software	\$0	1	\$0
Headphones	Patrons use to make use of Natural Reader	\$15/each	5	\$75
Audio books	Books on CD	\$20/each	10	\$200
Additional brochures	Easy to read, simple explanations of services	\$0.25/color copy	100	\$25
Package audio books with print	Need clear plastic bags in which to place book and audio book	\$5/bag	10	\$50
Books on dyslexia	The library needs to increase this segment of the collection	\$500		\$500
Total cost				\$850

With a total cost of less than \$1000, this plan is budget-friendly for any library, especially the Augusta Public Library, which has a limited budget to begin with, especially with the poor economy. Spreading out the plan over the course of a year will make it possible for the library to make all these improvements without having to search for additional funding.

Evaluation

The most important tell as to whether or not this proposal is working would be the circulation numbers for the materials purchased. If the audio books, packages of audio and picture books, and materials related to dyslexia are being checked out regularly, they are obviously in demand, and their purchase was worthwhile. Another indicator of success would be the number of brochures that need to be printed and replaced as well as the visitor count on the website.

APL could create a basic survey and request that patrons complete it anonymously. The survey would be more about basic and general library services than about dyslexia-related services. Questions could include:

- What library services do you use?

- What services would you like the library to offer?
- What type of books do you normally check out?
- How often do you listen to audio books? Would this increase if there were more available for check out?

These simple questions, if answered honestly by a variety of individuals, can be quite telling.

Asking what services patrons would like to see the library offer will not only provide ideas for how to improve, but will also show whether or not there are services that need more publicity.

Evaluation should be done periodically in order to determine whether or not the services continue to be used and whether usage is increasing or decreasing. For the first year, the library should evaluate this plan quarterly. After that, checking in approximately every six months will be sufficient.

Summary

Dyslexic individuals, especially those who have not achieved much success with reading, often avoid libraries. Their difficulties with decoding words make them feel like outsiders in a world of words. Librarians can make them feel more welcome and make their library experience less threatening by creating clear brochures and an easy-to-navigate website. They must also evaluate their online catalog to ensure maximum understanding with minimal effort. Library staff can accommodate the needs of individuals with reading difficulties with text-to-speech software and audio books. These changes will benefit all patrons regardless of whether they have a learning disability and will make the library a more comfortable and helpful place for those who do struggle.

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