

Summer Reading Club: Inviting accessibility

By Cynthia Ford.

This summer a library Outreach Services worker asked whether the BC Summer Reading Club was “accessible”? It was an interesting question. Experientially, and anecdotally, I know library staff throughout the province welcome all children to the SRC. They remind kids, and parents of pre-readers, that listening to a story “counts”, whether it’s an audio book or a real live human doing the reading. So, I answered with a cautious ‘yes’.

But then I wondered: what exactly is accessibility in an SRC context? What barriers might exist? How can we, as library workers, as a summer reading program, be more explicit about accessibility?

To explore these questions, I met with Tess Prendergast. Smart, engaging, and passionate about bringing kids and libraries together, Prendergast brings both theoretical knowledge and real-world experience to the conversation. She is a children’s librarian with the Vancouver Public Library who’s registered probably thousands of summer readers, and she just happens to be a doctoral student in UBC’s Department of Language & Literacy Education. Prendergast’s research focuses on early literacy in the lives of children labeled with disabilities. She is also the parent of a child labeled with disabilities.

Identify Barriers

CF: When we talk about reading and “accessibility”, it’s often around print-impairment or vision disabilities—

TP: Disability is an umbrella term. Just because you have a disability, doesn’t mean you are going to have problems with print or reading or cognition or anything. There are so many more barriers than just print!

CF: So let’s talk about some of those.

TP: Why embarrass themselves? It’s not easy for people say to total strangers “my son is in grade 4, he has dyslexia, he’s now reading at a grade 1 level.”

The BC Summer Reading Club (<http://kidsrc.bclibrary.ca/>) encourages children to read books throughout the summer vacation. In operation since 1991, the BC SRC now reaches more than 85,000 children in over 200 communities and neighbourhoods. The club is sponsored by the British Columbia Library Association, with funding assistance from Libraries and Literacy, Ministry of Education, the RBC, and BC libraries.

These kids are not going to voluntarily come to SRC. Their parents are probably not going to put them in if it’s a real struggle.

CF: If they do come in, how do we help?

TP: We need to say: “We’re going to help you find something that works for you.” And not make it an interaction where they have to keep divulging about their challenges at school. They need to be celebrated for what they’re reading.

I had a 10-year-old come to the library. He’d heard he had to read 50 books over the summer and he was absolutely petrified. And I said, “no, no, you don’t have to read 50 books, you can read one book all summer!” And the relief!

CF: So the potential for misunderstanding how a program like the Summer Reading Club works is a barrier.

TP: There are some very antiquated notions around reading: “SRC reading needs to be print-based, needs to be sustained over a period of time, needs to be for pleasure, needs to be fiction”...as opposed to whatever they want to read, like WWII history! We have to be careful of not messaging that the only way you’re going to succeed in SRC is by reading Secret Garden!

CF: It’s ok to read non-fiction!

TP: Fiction vs. non-fiction can be a cultural issue and we need to be very careful. If you say, "Oh, this Dad would just not let his kid take this book out", it may be because he was not schooled with fiction as a way of learning. It's completely unfamiliar to him and he feels like he can't participate. So let's give the family something that will fit, instead of getting offended that this family doesn't read fiction or picture books. No child in the world died because they never got to read picture books. It really is important that families find respect for the ways that they choose to raise their kids.

CF: How would you address oral storytelling? Say a grandparent is telling a story, as opposed to reading one...would that count?

TP: I would count it. That's the thing. Look at the name: it's the summer reading club. We have very narrow notions of what that is. With all the new media and ways of being able to express ourselves, I think we need to agree that the old definition of reading is not enough. We can still call it the SRC, but we need to be OK with what reading involves. Reading is a sharing of language, the exchange of ideas. It's a huge deal...people are doing their PhDs on this!

CF: In the SRC "all reading counts, all formats count"! As a program message, how do we articulate that more explicitly?

TP: Don't have it as a "little dot" at the bottom of your messaging. Have it way up above! I can tell you that messaging around early learning is extraordinarily geared to mainstream "typical" kids. And it needs to be interrupted. Parents of kids who are not "typical" start to ignore those messages. Why wouldn't they?

Create Opportunities For Accommodation

CF: How do we define opportunity?

TP: Opportunity is a way to participate. It's access to an activity that everyone else gets to do.

Let's say you have a kid who for whatever reason struggles with reading. You want an activity that has an opportunity for some kind of accommodation around whatever the difficulty is. For example, let's say a child with extreme ADHD cannot read for 20 minutes, non-stop, a day. It's got nothing to do with their willingness to do that, their neurology will not allow them to do that.

So you accommodate that by saying "Set yourself a goal that is a hard for you, but achievable, and do it

in these pieces." You have made it so they've got an achievable goal that works with their abilities, not their disabilities.

I like that the SRC means you don't have to read every single day over the summer and 15-20 minutes seems achievable across a wide population, as long as it's explained that it can be accommodated around the individual child.

Explicitly Invite Inclusion

CF: It can be challenging for staff to get through the SRC spiel as it is. Given the realities, how do we clearly communicate the program is inclusive, accessible?

TP: Well, I think if they show up at your desk and their ready to sign up, they're already made it through certain barriers.

I think we are doing an exceptional job of serving and meeting the needs of the kids that we're seeing. We need to think hard about who we're not seeing.

CF: What do we say to those kids?

TP: We want to communicate that participation in the SRC is positive, that no one's testing them. At all! We don't do reading levels.

I like that we do [SRC] activities that are fun, that are hands-on, that they can succeed at. Starts to sound clichéd that we keep going on about fun, but if you think about how human beings do things, fun is what drives our behaviour. We talk about engagement. Kids don't come home from kindergarten and say, "I was really engaged today." They say, I came home and I had fun!"

Even though we get sick of saying the actual word "fun", we really need to be OK with that as the be-all-and-end-all. Because that does all the cognitive and learning things we want.

CF: Because ultimately it triggers that intrinsic piece...

TP: Exactly! We don't need to be blathering on to the kids about how reading in the summer is going to help them with school...they don't want to think about school. They're done! They need a break.

They will advance their reading because more experience with reading will help them become better readers. That's common sense! If kids spend time reading in the summer, they're less likely to

"slide". No teacher wants a kid to 'skill and drill' all summer.

CF: So where do we find the kids who aren't looking for us?

TP: Partnerships with whoever is helping them, that's where. We need to be able to say to a learning disabilities association, "We want everyone to participate. Can we work together to make this happen? What would work for you guys?"

CF: So going into the communities and getting it first hand.

TP: Talk to people who actually have a learning disability, "What would've worked for you?" Find an insider. You need informants! Find someone who has say, Down syndrome, who is a self-advocate. Ask, "Did you ever participate in something like that in your community?" And they'll say, "No way, are you kidding me?" "What would have made it work?" "Well, an invitation would have helped."

CF: Perhaps we assume that invitation is there...

TP: We need to stop assuming that because we have an attitude of inclusion we are actually being inclusive in our practices. Being inclusive should be thought of as an active verb.

CF: We have good intentions...

TP: Of course we do. But we don't actually know how to do it because we haven't learned how. And what happens is that people do nothing because they don't want to make a mistake. I don't blame them!

If we really mean, "everyone is welcome", then we admit: "I actually don't know how to make everyone feel included so I'm going to ask". Sometimes it can be very hard to get in. We just keep trying different ways. Saying "oh, they don't want us there anyways isn't good enough."

CF: Can one program be accessible to everyone?

TP: Yes, I think so. But it has to be engineered from the start. You can't just go "I think we're going to be inclusive today!"

And we need to accept that the ways people participate may not be the ways we thought they would or should. Maybe they're not motivated by a reading book and sticker, but can they still come to the LEGO party? Yes!

Currently, the same kids who are well-resourced in their families and their development are the ones who are most benefiting from SRC. They don't have developmental problems. They're typical-- most kids are typical -- which is great!

CF: But we want to respond to greater diversity: cultural, linguistic, neuro.

TP: That's what I mean. When we're talking diversity, we're literally talking everything.

For example, we don't necessarily think of First Nations in terms of linguistic diversity, although many First Nations are working hard to revive their language. We need to be responsive to that.

If a child were to say, "This is how we're doing our SRC: our elder is telling a story every night," that would be fantastic. "Of course you're getting a medal!" But I'd also be completely surprised if you even got them to sign up. That's the important piece, that relationship. You must have had a very trusting relationship with that community

CF: The kind of inclusion you've been describing. I think most library workers readily bring that sort of inclusive attitude.

TP: We're not going to find a librarian who says, "I'm sorry, a kid with dyslexia still needs to read print and a kid with ADHD still needs to sit for 20 minutes." I think you'd find someone who says, "I need to know what I need to do to make this work."

CF: How do we know if we are getting it right?

TP: People get excited about numbers. It's just counting, it's not research. You want narrative, qualitative research. Hear everything there is to hear and pull out the strongest themes. And no tests!

CF: If we set aside the idea of "summer slide", what value does the SRC offer to all these children?

TP: I get the education piece -- we want to give kids the opportunity to maintain the level of reading -- I do understand that. But what I guess I think is even more valuable is that they are participating in something that is meaningful.

This comes down to what our core values are: That you're part of a community. You should be attached to all of these resources and the library can do that for you. Scholars call it literate citizenship.



Because you are, you have a place. That's why.

THE BC SRC seeks to be a "place" that is accessible and welcoming to all children and their families. Help us learn to make that invitation more explicit and the

opportunities more accommodating. We welcome your thoughts at bcsrc@bclibrary.ca

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