



MORE THAN ONE WAY TO TELL A STORY

Storytelling is a great way to introduce children to the world of books and reading. But when you want to grab the attention of children with diverse needs, it's not a case of a one-size-fits-all approach, as **KIM SHAW** and **SIMON ELLABY** report.

The State Library of Queensland recently hosted the 12th Australian Library History Forum, with a focus on the topic of the library as a home for diverse voices. The organisers of the forum note how Australian libraries have, in recent decades, become more sensitive to the diversity of the communities they serve, and as a result have strived with renewed energy to ensure they are accessible and relevant to all users.

An example of this renewed energy can be seen in recent research on libraries and children with special needs. Of particular note is the work of Jo Kaeding from South Australia, who is a champion of access and inclusion and storytelling in public libraries.

We have a history in library and education settings, and our own research focuses on what we perceive as the next logical step, building on the work of people like Kaeding and looking at the act of storytelling for children with special needs. This focus developed organically as a result of the overwhelming response to the unique

storytelling techniques Simon has developed over a 12-year history as a storyteller in public libraries, including his storytelling for children with special needs and his current role as a special education teacher.

There is a growing awareness that the same storytelling techniques that are successful with a general audience of children may not be adequate for sessions with a high proportion of children with special needs.



A friendly welcome to State Library of Victoria's Play Pod



The fun and interactive Play Pod at the State Library of Victoria

There is a need for greater dynamism, colour and movement, and a range of flexible storytelling techniques to gain and keep the attention of children with special needs. At times the stories may need to be quieter, and at other times louder or shorter. It may be necessary to change the point of focus, to use Auslan or a wider range of vocal tones. We have identified a need for a pedagogy of special-needs storytelling – a set of skills for storytellers to enable them to meet the specific demands of special-needs storytelling. We know there is a demand for these skills because of the overwhelmingly positive responses Simon receives whenever he presents professional development sessions on storytelling techniques to library, education and childcare workers.

In libraries, there is now a strong desire to make it easier to access library spaces, the collection, and the technology through adaptive equipment and specialised spaces. Libraries, and in particular young people’s services within libraries, are aware of the need to create suitable sensory, quiet (or loud) and accessible spaces. An example of a great interactive space for young children is the State Library of Victoria’s Play Pod. Significant progress is also being made by Amaze – the peak body in Victoria for people on the autism spectrum and their supporters – through the creation of guidelines for inclusive storytelling.

Nonetheless, it remains difficult to find information about how to tell stories in a way that fully engages clients with special needs. There are great examples of professional and engaging storytime sessions for young people with special needs, and there exists a strong sense of the importance of inclusion and access. The next logical step is the development of a broad set of professional storytelling skills – a pedagogy for performance – that will equip storytellers with the skills to engage, entertain, and educate all library clients, including those with special needs, through the act of storytelling. 🌟

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