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Including Autistic Teens in Libraries

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INCLUDING AUTISTIC TEENS IN LIBRARIES*

Aisling Smith

Abstract

This article discusses the needs of autistic teenagers with low support needs and how best to cultivate and promote inclusivity in libraries to better serve this vulnerable sector of the community. Librarians should endeavour to understand the difficulties they encounter and how to minimize factors that might exacerbate these issues if autistic adolescents are to feel welcome and accepted.

Understanding Autism and Autistic Teens

AsIAM, Ireland's national autistic charity explains autism as "a neurological difference that many people are born with which affects how they experience the world around them and how they communicate with others". Autistic people are not abnormal, they "just think or communicate differently than neurotypical people" (AsIAM – What is autism, 2021a). Autistic self-advocates claim that using person centred language when referring to the autistic community invalidates autistic people as it creates an impression that autism is an illness or something that can be overcome (Anderson, 2018; AsIAM, 2021c; Grandin & Panek, 2014; Lawrence, 2013; Tumlin, 2019). Autism is not a temporary affliction, it affects every aspect of a person's life so just as one does not refer to a deaf person as a person with deafness, one should not refer to an autistic person as a person with autism. The prevalence of one or more co-morbid clinical psychiatric disorders especially anxiety related conditions, is very high amongst autistic children and adolescent (Sharma et al., 2018; Van Steensel et al, 2011; Van Steensel & Heeman, 2017) Both autistic adults and children experience high levels of anxiety" (AsIAM – Autism and anxiety management strategies, 2021b) while not always severe enough to be classified as a clinical condition. Autistic people often have difficulty understanding what is actually being said to them as they tend to be very literal (Lawson, 2012; Lund, 2018). Lawson (2012) explains that an autistic person might appear rude by not responding promptly or appearing to ignore a question, but it is a coping strategy as they might not know how to answer correctly and have become too anxious to speak. Whilst in the past libraries were places where patrons had to be quiet, nowadays libraries are busy places with bright lights and lots of activities and events for various interest groups, making it very daunting for autistic users as they do not know what to expect or how they should behave (Edwards, 2018; Grandin and Panek, 2013). Autism can cause individuals to be either "over- or under-sensitive to sensory stimuli such as lights, colours, sounds, smells, touch and taste and have difficulty in filtering desirable from undesirable input" (Andrews, 2016, p109) sometimes leading to becoming overwhelmed and meltdowns.

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Erikson (1959) describes adolescence as a developmental stage associated with confusion and identity crisis as adolescents are constantly having to change while receiving mixed societal signals but have still to learn the ways of the adult world and what is expected of them. Autistic people can find change extremely difficult; a tendency towards literal thinking means that implied meanings and instructions can be hard to comprehend, making this developmental stage even more difficult. Trimmer et al., (2017) argue that while egocentricity and the inability or difficulty to view things from another's viewpoint is characteristic of autism, this difficulty with cognitive empathy is often misconstrued as a lack of emotional empathy or feelings in general. This demonstrates how stereotyping and generalisations attributed to autism can lead to an emphasis on the differences and problems and a failure to appreciate that in many aspects, autistic teens are just like their neurotypical peers.

Autistic youth with low support needs are very aware of their differences and these "feelings of being different could be detrimental to their sense of self when connected with lack of social competence" (Mogensen and Mason, 2015, p. 262). Their study found that revealing their autism to other teens can create great anxiety for autistic young people as it often leads to stigmatisation, othering and being treated differently by one's peers further exacerbating their pre-existing anxiety. These fears of stigmatisation appear to be validated as research indicates that there is a mental illness stigma amongst teens in general (Hanlon & Swords, 2020; O'Driscoll et al, 2012,

O'Driscoll et al, 2015). Autistic adolescents experience significantly higher rates of loneliness than their non-autistic peers (Deckers et al., 2017; Lasgaard et al., 2009; Schiltz et al., 2021). Loneliness stems from feeling excluded and not belonging and should not be confused with autistic tendencies to limit social interaction or be alone (Schiltz et al., 2021). Kasari and Sterling (2013) suggest that loneliness becomes more salient to autistic adolescents due to repeated negative social experiences and the differences between them and their peers becoming more apparent. Schiltz et al., (2021) found a positive link between loneliness in autistic young people and high rates of social anxiety and depression highlighting the need for society to find "ways to best support social connectedness for the mental well-being of autistic young adults" (p. 545).

Irish Public libraries, teen services and autism friendly measures

Providing programmes and services for young adults appears to be challenging for libraries not just in Ireland but worldwide (McGrath et al., 2010; Boeglen & Cherrington-Stoddart, 2017; Wittig, Martin & Stock, 2014). Irish libraries offer a plethora of events and programmes for young children and adults but there are few if any events for children over the age of ten. In the sole Irish study concerning public libraries and teens, it was, there were no dedicated youth librarians and young people were not prioritised as a user group (McGrath et al., 2010) and this can be considered still to be the status



quo. Reasons given for the dearth of teen services were lack of training, space, and the perception that young people would not engage with library events or programmes. Feedback from teen focus groups and questionnaires however indicated that young people wanted to be actively involved in event planning and provided with access to creative pursuits in libraries.

Irish libraries need more funding to access training and provide extra staff if they are to support young people including those with disabilities, by consulting them in programme development and acting on their suggestions, availing of interagency collaboration and co-ordination, and developing empathy and understanding of their needs. Irish libraries received funding for autism friendly initiatives such as sensory rooms and toys (O’Brien, 2019) but these would be targeting children and those with high support needs rather than teens with low support needs who want to be accepted like their neurotypical peers. Many library authorities have started working with AslAm to become certified as autism friendly and it is envisaged for the future that all public libraries will be deemed autism friendly, but this will take time and is dependent on future staffing and finance. DEIS schools serving disadvantaged areas have a greater percentage of autistic students as they have more funding regarding special needs assistants and often include autism units to provide supports for autistic students in mainstream education. The JCSP librarian project was set up to support underachieving students in disadvantaged schools, but expansion of the project was put on hold in 2007 with just 30 schools in the programme and no indication of further expansion. Research has highlighted the benefits of school libraries. (Peyton, 2018; Stripling, 2013; Henefer, 2008) including preparing students for using academic libraries. With most students from disadvantaged areas or schools arriving in third level without having had the benefit of a qualified school librarian they are at an immediate disadvantage to many of their fellow students. Collaboration with local schools and other youth organisations would help to secure youth participation in library programming especially if recognised in the school record, such as An Gaisce, and would help encourage and support participation by autistic teens.

Covid 19 compelled libraries to make changes to their physical environment and services at short notice, which demonstrated that changes can easily be introduced when required to meet patrons’ needs. Many of these changes if retained would be most beneficial to those on the spectrum, such as separated desks, partitions, clear signage, clearly marked designated spaces. Knowing what the rules are and being able to predict what will happen is reassuring and comforting and encourages those with autism and anxiety to engage. By maintaining clear signage resembling that used regarding Covid 19 regulations, in demarcating zones, event times and library user guidelines would help libraries become more accommodating to those on the spectrum and many others who might be neurodiverse. Restrictions and lockdowns caused by Covid 19 have necessitated librarians to become more creative in how to deliver their services to the community and many resulting changes have proved most beneficial to more vulnerable members of society. The resulting ubiquitous use of Zoom and online learning and the availability of online borrowing of reading material and audiobooks via BorrowBox will help provide a more inclusive service in the future. Covid 19 and lockdown experiences have generated empathy for those on the spectrum as it has caused people to experience life in ways those on the spectrum might on a continual basis and this will hopefully lead to greater consideration and inclusion on the part of the general public in future (Adam Harris, personal communication, February 25, 2021).

Conclusion

AslAm advocate that by becoming more responsive and innovative in embracing autism and neurodiversity, public libraries will become more productive and ensure their place in society in the future. By following the principles of universal design for new builds and renovations, implementing autism friendly measures, and developing inclusive teen-led services and programmes for teens; Irish libraries will be able to serve young autistic people with low support needs in a ubiquitous and imperceptible manner. This will result in a better service for all teens and other members of society as well. Much can easily be done to make the physical environment more autism friendly but it is paramount that librarians display positive attitudes towards

autistic patrons if libraries are to be truly autism friendly. Kindness and empathy of librarians and society is crucial in promoting inclusion (Philips & Anderson, 2019). For autistic young people who have no access to or need of significant supports in their lives, having a safe and understanding place to go where they are valued and accepted as any other member of society can mean the difference in life satisfaction and negative mental health. Autistic teens must be considered as teens foremost and libraries should consider all teens as valued customers of the library and a deserving user group who have past been neglected rather than a nuisance (McGrath et al, 2010; Peyton, 2018). Agosto advises librarians that “each time they interact with teens, they are influencing their life-long perceptions of and attitudes towards libraries and librarians” (2016, p.349) and positive perceptions will help to secure the future of public library and their important place in society.

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