
HYDER, Eileen. *Reading groups, libraries and social inclusion: experiences of blind and partially sighted people*. Farnham: Ashgate. 2013. 102 pages. ISBN-13 1 978 1 4094 4798 6. £60.00

I have been facilitating reading groups within my local community since 2006, not something commonly associated as being linked to academic library work however it is something I love doing and being involved with. Due to my interest in reading groups I was very excited when I saw the title of this book. It seemed to cover elements of the subject I am passionate about – reading and reading groups helping to deliver aspects of the social inclusion agenda. When the book arrived for me to read I was a little taken aback, the book looked very academic and this was partially confirmed by the fact that it is the direct result of a doctoral research project. After reading the blurb on the back of the book and being a little daunted from looking at the cover design I opened the book and was very pleasantly surprised to find the text engaging and personable rather than the dry academic feel implied by the cover.

The introduction to the book is a good opening setting out what the book will cover, the way in which it will be written and providing some definitions for terms that will be used throughout the book. From the start Hyder was honest and frank; she even admits that before carrying out this research she was very negative about the concept of reading groups. Perhaps not the natural starting point for a book about them, however as the introduction advances it is clear that attending a reading group for Visually Impaired People (VIPs) made her reconsider her stereotyped presumptions on reading groups. The book focuses on VIP reading groups; however a lot of the ideas discussed within it are applicable to all reading groups. The introduction focuses on summarising the research on reading groups that already exists, setting into context the climate in which Hyder's research was carried out and enabling the reader to have a sense of commonality about the types, evolution and role of the library in the reading group arena. Hyder then sets out the research she undertook, "a longitudinal study of a VIP group" (Hyder, 2013, 7). The research project followed a new VIP group being set up at a library and using a participatory ethnographical approach to carrying out the research. This meant that Hyder was herself a participant in the reading group but also carried out interviews and observational activities to fully investigate the project. Hyder adopted this approach as opposed to only observing in part due to the nature of the group. Being a VIP group, Hyder attending but not participating changed the nature of the research:

Pete's comment was a reminder of the importance of verbal cues for blind and partially sighted people; if I had simply observed, this could almost have been constructed as covert research.

(Hyder, 2013, 10)

The second chapter of the book focused on the reading histories of the group participants. These were all narratives telling the stories of five of the participants in the VIP group. I really enjoyed reading this chapter as it brought to life the characters and personalities of the participating, turning them from being purely research subjects to being living breathing people. Hyder was keen to ensure the

reading histories were told in the words of the participants and to ensure anonymity the participants each chose a pseudonym. One aspect of this chapter that I found fascinating and really loved was the fact that “different fonts are used for each participant to symbolise the importance of presenting them as individuals” (Hyder, 2013, 15). It was genuinely insightful to read the histories, and opened my eyes to some of the considerations required for a VIP group, including the wide range of different experiences the group have. These reading histories also set the ground for the discussions in the rest of the book relating to the definition of reading, the difficulties faced by VIPs and the way that they view themselves. Whilst reading the book I enjoyed this chapter, however at the end of it I was left thinking that it would have been better to separate the reading histories and distribute them throughout the rest of the book rather than having a chapter dedicated to them. My reasoning for this is that despite the differing fonts I feel a little muddled between the different participants and their experiences, due to reading them one after the other.

The third chapter focuses on the barriers faced by the participants of the VIP reading group, including equality and availability of books in a suitable format (Braille, large print and audio book), and listening versus reading. This latter debate made me consider my own prejudice against audio books as not really counting as ‘reading’. Another aspect of this debate related to the narrators impact on the interpretation and enjoyment of listening to an audio book. Does this intervention of a narrator means that the listener is no longer reading independently due to the interpretation placed on the text by the narrator or does it simply require the listener to focus more and draw their own conclusions?

Given the issues which surround listening as a form of reading, it is interesting, therefore, to reflect on how his impacts on readers, such as the Newell group members, in terms of the practical aspects of reading as well as emotional or psychological aspects.

(Hyder, 2013, 42)

Chapter four links reading groups and public libraries into the social justice and social inclusion agendas. The debate that stood out to me most from this chapter is whether the creation of VIP reading groups actually works against the inclusion agenda. The chapter discusses lots of aspects of this and one suggestion I liked was rather than labelling groups as VIP or non-VIP was to run “Talking Book or Listening Groups” (Hyder, 2013, 54) thus opening the groups to anyone interested in listening via audio book not just VIPs.

Chapter five focuses on reading groups as a lifelong learning opportunity, the VIP group at the centre of this book is no different from other groups in providing a sociable environment in which ideas can be discussed openly. There are some issues prevalent in a VIP group that may not be present in a sighted group, for example not being aware of who else is in the room without careful facilitation. The conclusion of this chapter sums up my own thoughts on reading groups and their benefits.

In terms of acquiring knowledge and information, the reading group provides an opportunity to learn about a wider range of books, authors and genres than

individuals might do in their private reading. This is particularly significant for blind and partially sighted people whose access to texts is not straightforward.

(Hyder, 2013, 82)

The final chapter gives an overview of the bigger picture by looking at the experiences of VIP readers across the world, rather than just looking at the UK experiences. Hyder gives examples from Australia, South Africa, Belgium, and Croatia. She then concludes the book by revisiting the debate from chapter four about discrete or integrated reading groups finishing with the sensible conclusion that it very much depends on the preferences of the individuals involved.

Having read this book, I now feel far more informed about not only reading groups but the issues faced by VIPs and would recommend this book to anyone involved in running reading groups, working with VIPs or who are interested in the idea of setting up groups of this nature. I also think it would be of interest to anyone with a passion for encouraging reading in any setting.

Fiona MacLellan
Academic Librarian
The University of Northampton
Fiona.MacLellan@northampton.ac.uk