

Citizens of the world? Children's exposure to representations of diversity, topics, text genres, and complex ideas prior to kindergarten entry

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Introduction

There is currently a groundswell of interest in diverse books though children's librarians have long championed diversity and inclusion (Horning, 2015). School and public librarians are genuinely passionate about exposing children to all of the world's glorious wonders and people's by diversifying library collections (Ishizuka, 2018). Thus, it seems natural that they would also expose the children they serve to a wide array of representations of diverse people, topics, and ideas through program offerings.

Statement of the research problem

Public library storytime programs support school readiness and educate parents about meaningful ways to interact with their children (Cahill et al., in press; Becker, 2012; Burger & Landerholm, 1991; Campana et al., 2016; de Vries, 2008; McKechnie, 2006; Mills et al., 2018; Smardo, 1984; Williams, 1998). While materials used in these programs should expose children to diverse cultures, ideas, and text formats, it is unclear if that assumption holds true.

The aim of this study was to answer the following overarching research question. To what extent do public library storytime programs designed for preschoolers expose children to diverse people, topics, ideas, and text structures?

Literature Review

Storytimes are a mainstay of public library programming. Caregivers, and the children under their care, choose to attend storytimes for a variety of reasons, but prime among those are to prepare

children for school and to develop a love of reading (Peterson, 2012). Similarly, librarians plan storytimes to support school readiness, develop a love of reading, inspire children's imaginations, and reduce feelings of isolation among caregivers and their young children (deVries, 2008; Goulding & Crump, 2017; Kewish, 1979; McKenzie & Stooke, 2012; Peterson, 2012; Celano & Neuman, 2001).

Naturally, the books and materials librarians choose and use in storytimes influence the extent to which the goals of both the attendees and the librarians are met. Both the genre (Pappas, 1991; Price, Bradley & Smith, 2012; Price, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009) and the subject matter of books affect children's vocabulary (Gonzalez et al., 2011; Leung, 2008; Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2016) and content knowledge (Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2016). Moreover, the representation of characters in the books selected influences the extent to which children are able to view themselves and others who are different from them, thereby affecting children's views of themselves (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001) and their interest in literacy endeavors overall (Delbridge, 2018).

Examinations of books shared in U.S. homes suggest a preference for narrative text structure (Crain-Thoreson, Dahlin, & Powell, 2001; Kam & Matthewson, 2017) while investigations of books shared and available in U.S. classrooms indicate limited representations of diversity and text formats (Crisp et al., 2016; Duke, 2000; McGill-Franzen, Lanford & Adams, 2002; McNair, 2008; Mesmer, 2016; Pentimonti, Zucker, & Justice, 2011; Pentimonti, Zucker, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010) as well as concerns about the extent to which they support vocabulary development (Mesmer, 2016). However, it is not currently clear if books shared in library programs expose children more broadly to representations of diversity, topics, text genres and formats, and/or complex ideas.

Methodology

The current study, nested in a larger, multi-state investigation of public library storytime programs designed for children ages 3- to 5-years-old, examined the print materials used in storytimes to identify the extent to which storytime exposes children to diverse people, topics, ideas, and text structures.

Sample and data collection

We invited all public libraries in the 135 counties in the three states that fall within the sampling frame for this study to participate, and then we drew a stratified random sample of 36 libraries based upon population of the legal service area and rural/urban designation. Our research team observed and video recorded 68 storytime sessions provided by 35 public libraries and identified the 131 books shared.

Data analysis

Using content analysis methods coupled with analyses of metadata culled from the Library of Congress and World Cat catalogs, Novelist database, and Goodreads website, and textual analyses of the written texts of each of the books, we identified the genre and format, subject matter, representations of diversity, and text complexity of each of the materials.

Findings

Though currently only preliminary, our findings point to some concerns about the representations of diversity, topics, text genres and formats, and complex ideas in the materials used in public library storytime programs. Preliminary findings from this study mirror those of its classroom counterparts. First, books shared during storytime provided limited representations of children of color. Further, very few were written and/or illustrated by non-White authors and illustrators. There was a high

prevalence of books with and about animals; and seasonal, holiday and friendship themes. Finally, storytime programs provided limited exposure to information text.

Implications and Conclusions

If school librarians are committed to global education (Hicks, 2009), “to develop information literate students who are responsible and ethical participants in society” (International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), 2015 p. 7) by empowering them to demonstrate global perspectives and “an understanding of and commitment to inclusiveness and respect for diversity” (American Association of School Librarians (AASL), 2018), it is important for school librarians to recognize that children may be coming to school with limited exposure to diverse people, topics, ideas, and text structures. Thus, it is incumbent upon school librarians to collaborate with classroom teachers, administrators, and other school stakeholders to ensure that the curriculum as a whole “support[s] teaching and learning for all” (IFLA, 2015, p. 28) and that specific lessons and programs that the school librarian plans and teaches/offers, either alone or in collaboration with other educators, also reflects diversity in terms of representations of people, ideas, topics, and formats. Finally, it is imperative that the collections of the school libraries enable and support open and flexible access to digital and print materials that position children to gain the perspectives and knowledge of the diversity the world has to offer (AASL, 2018; IFLA, 2015).

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