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Storytime Programs as Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors? Addressing Children's Needs through Diverse Book Selection

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ABSTRACT

Much research suggests that exposure to diverse books that feature the lived experiences of people with marginalized or underrepresented identities influences how children perceive their own value and the significance of others who do and do not look like them. Library associations have recently called for greater attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion to be reflected across all aspects of library services and programs. The purpose of this study was to examine the print materials used in public library storytime programs to identify the extent to which storytime exposes children to diverse people. Results indicate that, across all categories examined, books shared in storytimes are lacking in terms of diversity. The authors conclude that librarians need to be much more intentional in their efforts to diversify services and programs.

Historically, children's librarians have championed diversity and inclusion. Many express genuine passion toward developing collections that encompass multiple perspectives and that expose children to manifold ideas and peoples (Ishizuka 2018). Recently, a groundswell of interest in ensuring opportunities for all children to see themselves in the pages of books (We Need Diverse Books 2020) has shaken the library community. Given this cry for better representation in the publishing industry, it seems natural that librarians would promote diverse books through readers advisory and library programs designed for children and youth.

Libraries have long provided storytime programming for young children. Storytimes are among the most popular and frequently attended programs offered in public libraries (Miller et al. 2013; Joo and Cahill 2019). In addition to designing storytime programs to support school

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readiness, librarians hope that storytimes will inspire children's imaginations, foster reading appreciation, and reduce feelings of isolation (Peterson 2012; Goulding and Crump 2017).

The books and materials librarians choose and use in storytime programs naturally influence the extent to which those goals are met. Book genre and subject matter of texts influence children's learning outcomes (Price, Bradley, and Smith 2012; Neuman, Kaefer, and Pinkham 2016). Equally important, the representation of the characters in the books selected affects the extent to which children are able to view themselves, their friends, and their families. In turn, this perspective shapes the child participants' identities (Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001) and their interest in literacy (Delbridge 2018).

Although much attention has been placed on the lack of diversity in the children's book publishing industry (Horning et al. 2015; Huyck and Dahlen 2019), as far as we are aware, no studies have examined the ways that librarians share diverse books through programs with young children. This study examined the extent to which storytime programs expose children to diverse people.

Why Diverse Books

Diverse books reflect the reality of living in the twenty-first century, with people from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds and with various disabilities, gender identities, and LGBTQIA+ orientations living and working together. A collection of books should include "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors"—enabling children to view characters who reflect their own identities, who open windows to others who are different, and who provide doors to new experiences and realities (Bishop 1990). As mirrors, diverse books can help children with marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds foster a love of reading, as they are able to view characters whose experiences and problems relate to their own (Bishop 1990; Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001; Wopperer 2011). This frequency in and interest toward reading not only leads to enhanced reading comprehension (Winkler 2015; Bulatowicz 2017) but also positions children to develop an empowering view of themselves, their value to society (Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001; Wopperer 2011; Winkler 2015), and their agency as readers (McGill-Franzen, Lanford, and Adams 2002). This positive view of their own culture may, in turn, lead to higher self-esteem (Al-Hazza and Bucher 2008; Husband 2018) and may help children feel more welcome (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 2013). Conversely, when children are not exposed to diverse literature, they may feel undervalued or develop internalized prejudices (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 2013; Bulatowicz 2017).

Reading diverse books benefits not only children with marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds but all children, including those from predominantly represented populations, for whom diverse books are especially important (Bishop 1990; Husband 2018). In this way, diverse books serve as windows; they assist children in understanding and appreciating others' cultures (Al-Hazza and Bucher 2008; Braden and Rodriguez 2016). Books that realistically portray characters

with disabilities, for example, may help typically developing children have accurate understandings about and positive feelings toward individuals with disabilities (Dyches et al. 2018). Furthermore, when children from predominantly represented populations read about only their own cultures, they can adopt the false belief that their own backgrounds, cultures, and experiences are more important than those of others (Braden and Rodriguez 2016; Short 2018).

Children's encounters with diverse books help them build empathy (Ishizuka 2018) and lay the groundwork for developing social justice expertise, such as how to identify, resist, and combat racism (Winkler 2015; Segal and Wagaman 2017; Husband 2018). Children as young as 3 years old exhibit racial biases (Williams and Steele 2019). These biases and resultant formation of stereotypes may be reduced or eliminated by exposure to counterstereotypical images, such as illustrations in picture books and social justice–oriented teaching with diverse books (Comber 2015; Gonzalez, Steele and Baron 2017; Husband 2018). Children who read diverse books may grow in awareness and acceptance of, for example, children with disabilities (Wopperer 2011) and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Van Horn 2015).

Current Diverse Book Landscape

Despite the benefits of books representing multiple peoples and perspectives, a notable lack of representation continues to be reflected in children's book publishing. Only 23% of children's books published in 2018 featured traditionally underrepresented or marginalized groups: 10% about or with African or African American people, 1% about or with American Indian or First Nations people, 7% about or with Asia Pacific or Asia Pacific American people, and 5% about or with Latinx people (Huyck and Dahlen 2019). Kathy G. Short (2018) points out that the number of books published for children about Persian Americans and Arab Americans is so low that they are not even included as a category.

Beyond the domains of race and ethnicity, books published for children tend to be unbalanced in representing the diversity that children are likely to encounter in their communities and schools. A survey of children's books published in 2016 and 2017 found only a small number with a main or supporting character living with a developmental disability (Dyches et al. 2018). Melanie D. Koss's (2015) analysis of picture books revealed a gender imbalance. Eliza G. Braden and Sanjuana J. Rodriguez (2016) found that even picture books with Latinx content are likely to be written exclusively in English.

Diverse Books in Library Efforts

Libraries and librarians have a long history of promoting diversity in collections and services. Recent calls for increased diversity include some common themes. One theme is the recognition that finding diverse books may be difficult (Williams and Deyoe 2014; Krueger and Lee 2016; Ishizuka 2018), especially if looking for culturally authentic representations without stereotypes (Yoo-Lee et al. 2014; Norris Blackson 2015; Warsinske 2016). A recurring theme

is the low percentage of children's books published with culturally diverse characters (Naidoo 2014; Warsinske 2016; Campbell 2017). Another theme, and a compelling reason for diversity in libraries, is the increasing percentage of culturally diverse people in the United States (Yoo-Lee et al. 2014; Norris Blackson 2015; Krueger and Lee 2016). A final theme is diversity as a core value of the American Library Association (ALA 2017a) and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC; Williams and Deyoe 2014; Krueger and Lee 2016; Warsinske 2016). These calls for diversity situate the need for diverse books in children's collections and in storytimes.

Given the focus placed on diverse books and librarians championing the call for diverse books, research is needed to help librarians understand the extent to which library programs and services reflect this value. Empirical investigation is particularly important given the perspective of some that the library and information science (LIS) community has sufficiently addressed the issue (Jaeger, Sarin, and Peterson 2015).

This study seeks to uncover the extent to which storytime programs for preschool children integrate diverse books.

Research Question

This study investigated the following research question: How do books shared in public library storytimes vary in terms of representations of diversity?

Methods

Study Context

The current study, nested in a larger, multistate investigation of public library storytime programs designed for children ages 3–5 years old, examined the print materials used in storytimes to identify the extent to which storytime exposes children to diverse people. We invited all public libraries within 135 counties in three states to participate. Then we drew a stratified random sample of 36 libraries based on population of the legal service area and rural/urban designation. One library dropped out of the study. Based on the location code ascribed by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2016), participating libraries are relatively evenly distributed across community size categories: 12 urban areas, 12 suburban areas, and 11 rural areas.

The preparation and years of experience of the storytime providers (henceforth "librarians," although not all were formally trained to be librarians) varied widely. Approximately one-third ($n = 13$) hold a master's degree from an LIS program, and two others were enrolled in an LIS master's degree program at the time of the study. More than 85% of the participants have a college degree. Participants range widely in years of experience in children's services, with some participants having only months of experience and another having served as a children's librarian for more than 32 years ($M = 8.49$ years). More than half of participants (57.1%) had 5 years or more of experience. Two of the librarians self-identified as male and all others as female. We did not collect information about librarians' race or ethnicity.

Data Collection

Our research team observed and video-recorded two storytimes at each participating library. Because no children or adult caregivers were present at two of the programs, this analysis is based on a total of 68 storytime sessions provided at 35 public libraries. During the observations, researchers took field notes that included the title and author of each book shared, and field notes were verified using the recordings. Across those 68 storytime sessions, 160 books were shared. The number of books shared at each session ranged from one to five with an average of 2.35. Because the full content of the books was not clear in most of the video recordings, we used two other sources for the analysis: video recordings of read-alouds posted online, each of which shows the full content of the respective books, and print copies of the books.

Analytic Strategy

Utilizing systematic content analysis procedures, we selectively adopted and modified an a priori coding system based on the framework and dimensions of diversity of Thomas Crisp and colleagues' (2016) exploration of books in preschool classrooms. Specifically, we analyzed the following seven dimensions of diversity: (*a*) parallel populations; (*b*) categories of books; (*c*) gender of leading characters; (*d*) sexual identity; (*e*) disabilities, developmental differences, and chronic illnesses; (*f*) religion; and (*g*) language,. In addition, we categorized the books according to type of main character (e.g., person, animal) or, for nonfiction books, topic.

We relied exclusively on the text and illustrations for the analysis, focusing on the leading characters (or subjects in the case of nonfiction). We coded books as representing one or more parallel populations if they contained representations of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups that have been traditionally marginalized in the United States (e.g., African American/Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian). Following the scheme developed by the Crisp team (2016) and relying on the extending categories created by Rudine Sims Bishop (cited in Crisp et al. 2016), we also coded books according to the following categories: (*a*) multicultural (note: the Crisp study used the term "melting pot"), as depicting people across the rainbow of identities without explicitly acknowledging it; (*b*) social conscience, promoting acceptance and/or tolerance of different groups; and (*c*) culturally conscious, written with the primary goal of representing the experiences of traditionally underrepresented or marginalized groups. For gender, we relied on textual features, coding for binary gender only if a gender-normative noun or pronoun was applied to a character (e.g., brother, girl, him, she); if gender were not distinctively discernible, we used the code *ungendered*. Books were coded for sexual identity only if a leading character displayed a romantic and/or sexual attraction to another character. We categorized according to the frequency and nature of leading characters with disabilities, developmental differences, and chronic illness. Finally, a book was coded for religion if the text or illustrations reflected any specific religious tradition, symbol, or language.

Team members involved with the coding process were trained to use the research instruments, and they independently coded a randomly selected sample of 10% of the data set. They compared results, discussed differences, and reached consensus on discrepancies. After coding another randomly selected sample of 10% of the data set, the category *genre* that had initially been included in the analysis was dropped because coders could not reach agreement independently.

Results

Leading Characters and Subjects

First, we identified the focus of the books—as leading characters, for fiction, or as the primary subject for nonfiction—using the following four categories: person, animal, object, and other. Six of the books had main characters that fell into two categories, and two had characters in three categories. One book, *The Foggy Forest* (Sharratt 2008) had characters in all four categories. As displayed in figure 1, animals are a primary focus or are main characters in the majority of books shared in storytime (89, 55.6%), and human characters take the lead in approximately one-third of the books (55, 34.4%).

Parallel Populations and Extent Categories of Diversity

Next, we investigated representations of parallel populations in storytime books. Of the 160 books examined, only two (1.3%) depict a parallel population. Even if the percentage of books representing parallel populations is factored using only those books featuring humans as leading characters, the percentage is still only 3.6%.

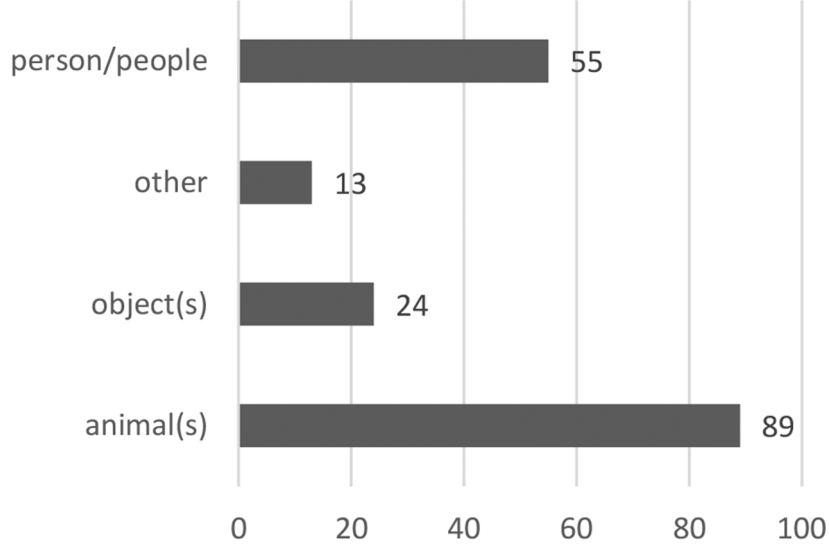

Figure 1. Leading characters or subjects

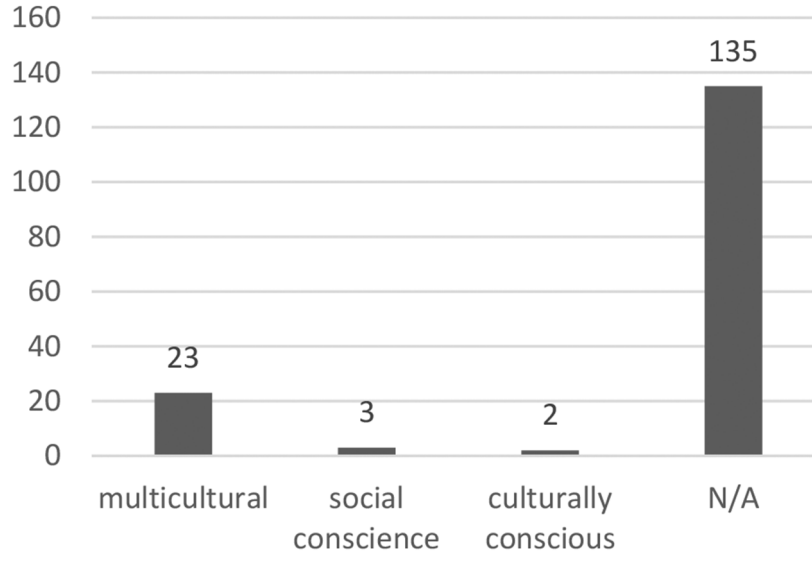

Figure 2. Categories of books. N/A = not applicable.

We then analyzed the content of books across the categories of multicultural, culturally conscious, and social conscience. When a book did not fit within any of the categories, it was coded as not applicable. As illustrated in figure 2, the majority of storytime books (84.4%) did not fit into any of these categories; 23 (14.4%) were categorized as multicultural, reflecting an implicit representation of cultural identity; 3 were coded as social conscience (1.9%); and 2 were coded as culturally conscious (1.3%). Three books were classified as multiple categories. The book *The Girl Who Heard Colors* (by Marie Harris), for example, was coded as both multicultural and culturally conscious.

Gender of Leading Characters

Next, we investigated the gender identities of leading characters. Nine books have multiple leading characters with different genders: eight with both female and male characters and one book with all three categories. As reflected in figure 3, slightly more than half of the books feature ungendered characters (52.5%), 51 books feature male leading characters (31.9%) and 35 books have female leading characters (21.9%).

Sexual Identity

Only one book, *Worm Loves Worm* (Austrian 2016), features characters with a romantic or sexual attraction or relationship. Because the characters in question were ungendered, and because worms are biologically hermaphrodites, we categorized the book as "other."

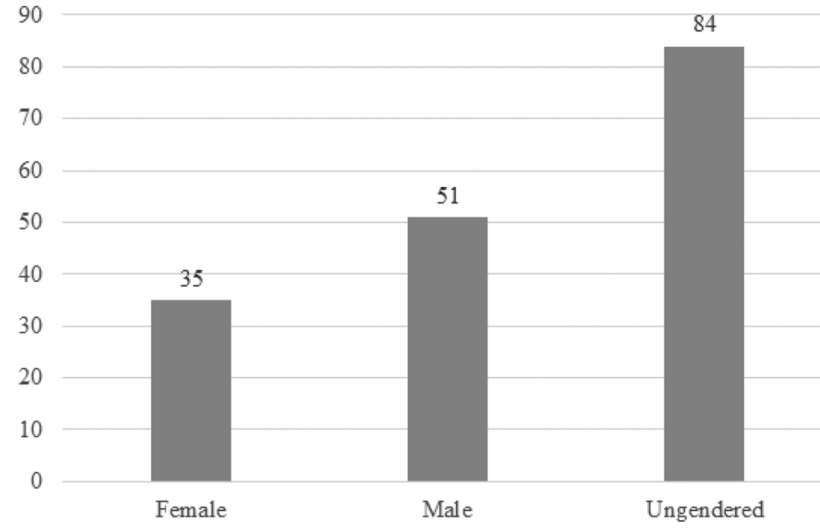

Figure 3. Gender of leading characters

Disabilities, Developmental Differences, and Chronic Illnesses

As displayed in figure 4, eight books featured one or more characters with disabilities, developmental differences, and/or chronic illnesses (5.0%). Seven (4.4%) of those depicted characters wear eyeglasses. One book featured a leading character with a cognitive difference.

Religion

As reflected in figure 5, six books (3.8%) reflect religious traditions and/or symbols: all six depict Christianity. To be more specific, all are about Christmas (and/or Santa Claus) as a holiday rather than as a religious tradition or representation of the beliefs associated with Christmas or Christianity. *Biggest Smallest Christmas Present* (Muncaster 2016), for example, illustrates the gift-giving aspects of Santa Claus rather than any religious tradition. No books depicted any other religion or other religious holiday events.

Language

The final category of this analysis was representation of language. All books shared were written in English only.

Discussion

This content analysis focused on eight categories of representation in books shared in public library storytimes. The results suggest that across all categories, books shared in public library storytimes are lacking in terms of diversity. We examined the presence of anthropomorphic

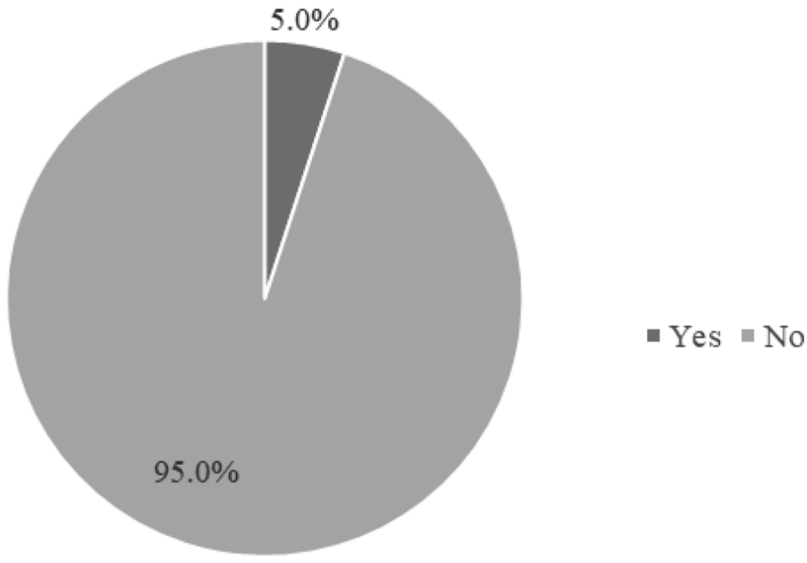

Figure 4. Representation of disabilities, developmental differences, and chronic illnesses

characters because some researchers have argued that, absent human characteristics, they enable children from all backgrounds to identify and see themselves (Markowsky 1975; Williams 2014). Others have raised questions about disparities in nonwhite representations in children's publishing based on the numbers of books with nonhuman characters (Horning 2013). Animals, objects, and other nonhuman things (e.g., aliens) are the primary focus or main character in nearly two-thirds (65.6%) of the books shared in storytimes—a much higher proportion than the 27% reported for children's books in general (Huyck and Dahlen 2019) or the 49.4% of picture books published each year (Horning 2016).

We next examined the presence of parallel populations. Of the 160 books examined, only 2 portrayed a parallel population (1.3%), and both depicted American Indians. Given that approximately 30% of picture books published each year feature nonwhite, human characters (Koss 2015; Horning 2016), the representation of nonwhite people featured in storytime books is dismally low and problematic. Of equal concern is that the representations are not culturally authentic and even considered offensive to the population they are intended to represent. *Ten Hungry Turkeys* (Balsley 2018), one of the two books, depicts turkeys stereotypically portrayed as American Indians. The other book, *One Little, Two Little, Three Little Pilgrims* (Hennessy 1999) is a Thanksgiving story about the pilgrims and the Wampanoag American Indians. It is not told from the perspective of that population and is included on a list of "Not recommended books about Thanksgiving" because of the inaccurate representation of Native peoples (Reese 2014). Even if a percentage is calculated based on books with human characters—which is problematic,

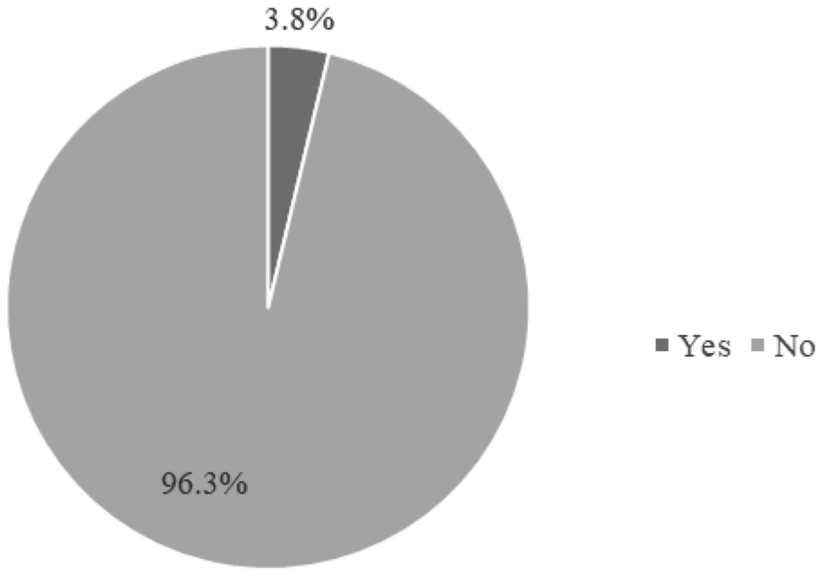

Figure 5. Depictions of religion

given that one of the two books featuring a parallel population features anthropomorphic characters—the percentage is still only 3.6%. It is unclear if librarians are not selecting diverse books for storytime programs because the children's collection itself is limited (Williams and Deyoe 2014) or if other factors are at play.

Regarding the extending category of "multicultural," 23 books (41.8%) with human characters depicted people across the rainbow of identities without acknowledging it. This percentage is similar to Koss's (2015) examination of picture books classified as "culturally neutral" but differs starkly from Kathleen T. Horning's (2016) finding that 14.2% of characters of picture books were categorized as "brown-skinned, ethnicity unclear." Although this finding might be perceived as promising, some scholars question "whether these books truly serve as . . . 'mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors'" (Horning et al. 2019).

Nearly half of the books shared in storytime featured ungendered characters, but among those with gendered characters, the percentage with male characters (31.9%) was considerably higher than the percentage with female characters (21.9%). This finding is more balanced than that reported for all picture books (Koss 2015; Horning 2016) and for the books available in preschool classrooms (Crisp et al. 2016).

Five percent of books shared in storytime depict characters with disabilities, developmental differences, and chronic illnesses. This percentage is nearly twice that of books available in preschool classrooms (Crisp et al. 2016), which used the same coding scheme as the current study. In addition, it is greater than that typically found in picture books (Koss 2015; Horning

2016). However, all but one of these books feature characters with eyeglasses, and no books featured leading characters with other physical disabilities or chronic illnesses (e.g., asthma, diabetes). One book featured a leading character with a cognitive difference.

Findings in both the categories of religion and language signal limited attention to the representations and needs of children from traditionally underrepresented groups. Specifically, all books were written in English only, and the books that depict religion-affiliated celebrations all focus on the Christian holiday of Christmas. Given the timing of data collection (August–January), the inclusion of books featuring the Christmas holiday might not seem unusual. Nevertheless, the absence of books featuring traditions or depictions of other major religions such as Islam or Judaism—both of which have major holidays during this same time frame—is troubling, even if librarians should avoid placing too much emphasis on holidays and taking a more holistic approach to integrating diverse books in programs throughout the entire year (Kurz 2012; Naidoo 2014).

Members of the library profession aspire to be "instrumental in creating a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive society" (ALA 2017b). They have cast light on the lack of diversity within children's publishing (Horning et al. 2015; Huyck and Dahlen 2019), and they sounded calls for greater representation of diverse people (Naidoo 2014; Krueger and Lee 2016). Consequently, we were surprised that books shared in storytime were not more diverse and inclusive of traditionally underrepresented populations. Do these findings signal that librarians are simply paying lip service to issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion?

Librarians are encouraged to be intentional in planning storytime programs. Typically, however, that intentionality is aimed at incorporation of strategies to advance literacy learning (Mills et al. 2017; Ghoting 2019). Furthermore, the selection of books for storytime is generally based on the librarians' perception of how well books will be enjoyed by participants. Choices take into account participants' genders and interests, as well as language background, but not usually their ethnicity (Carroll 2015). Specific book-selection factors often mentioned by those who provide practical storytime advice include (*a*) quality and visibility of illustrations; (*b*) interactive and participatory elements; (*c*) developmental appropriateness and length; (*d*) pacing, simplicity, and clarity of the narrative; (*e*) rhythm and flow of the language; (*f*) theme reflecting the interests and experiences of children; (*g*) humor; and (*h*) personal favorites (Fitzgerald 2014; Stewart 2015; Reading Rockets, Walker, and Salvadore 2016). Rarely mentioned as a factor for read-aloud book selection is the representation of diversity (Krabbenhoft 2018). Nevertheless, Terry Husband (2018) argues that read-aloud contexts are ideal for teaching young children about race, racism, and racial justice.

Findings from this study coupled with other studies in public and school library programs (Bulatowicz 2017; Mortensen 2019) demonstrate limited promotion of diverse books. They give further credence to the assertion that the LIS community (Jaeger et al. 2015), and children's librarians specifically (Hill 2017), needs to continue to target issues of diversity, equity, and

inclusion, given limitations across LIS practices (Mehra and Gray 2020). Undeniably, the LIS field needs to be much more intentional in ensuring that actions mirror professed beliefs and strategic directions (ALA 2017a).

A diverse collection is a necessary but insufficient factor in ensuring representation of different groups and cultures. Librarians must actively promote diverse materials in the programs they offer, the lists of books they recommend, and the promotional displays they create. Librarians' diversity audits of their own programs using a framework similar to that used in this study may serve as eye-opening reality checks (Fort 2019) that storytime programs are not serving as windows, mirrors, or sliding glass doors (Bishop 1990).

Limitations

Several limitations within this study should be noted. This study was conducted in one region of the country at one point in time. The sampling frame for this study included all public libraries within a region that spanned three states and included multiple underserved groups including racially and ethnically diverse populations, second-language learners, urban and rural populations, and Appalachian communities (US Census Bureau 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Appalachian Regional Commission 2021). It is possible that storytimes in different regions of the United States or in other countries may differ in their representations of diversity. Although this systematic content analysis study used an existing and validated framework (Crisp et al. 2016), all coders share a similar white middle-class background. It is possible that results might have been more striking if coded by others from traditionally underrepresented populations. In addition, issues of class and representations of characters across the socioeconomic spectrum are characteristics of diverse books that we did not undertake in this study but are worthy of attention in future studies. Finally, we used sources other than the observational videos of the storytimes themselves for the content analysis; it is possible that the editions of some of the books analyzed differed from those actually shared.

Conclusion

If children's librarians are to demonstrate "respect for diversity and inclusion of cultural values, and continually [develop] cultural awareness and understanding of self and others" (ALSC 2020), it is necessary to "show a commitment to diversity, inclusion and social justice . . . by providing services, programmes and resources that reflect the particular needs of those communities" (IFLA 2018, 12). It is incumbent on LIS educators, associations, and providers of professional development to continuously push issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion to the forefront of the profession. Librarians have an obligation to provide culturally responsive programming that enables children to see themselves and a full rainbow of others in the books shared and the experiences and opportunities promoted.

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