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Bringing stories into homes: An exploration of books shared in virtual storytime programs[1]

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Introduction

Public libraries have long served as essential community resources providing access to information; linking individuals with government resources and community services; and providing programming to expand learning, cultivate curiosity, and connect individuals (Garmer, 2014). In response to the COVID-19 crisis, nearly all public libraries in the United States closed buildings and discontinued in-person services; however, libraries' roles in providing for communities did not cease. Rather, most public libraries continued, expanded, or added services, with nearly two-thirds of public libraries offering virtual programming (Public Library Association, 2020). Storytime programs, a cornerstone of public library programming valued by library administrators for attracting and fostering long-term library users and for being the most highly attended programs libraries offer (Author, 2019; Miller, Zickuhr, Rainie, and Purcell, 2013), also shifted to virtual delivery modalities in public libraries large and small and in communities of all sizes (Krabbenhoft, 2020). As one of the few literacy-focused, freely available resources for children and families during the height of the pandemic when social isolation was the norm throughout the U.S, public libraries were able to bring literacy into the home environments of families of all types through virtual storytime programs. Little is known about what content or topics were covered during VSTs in the height of the pandemic. To that end, this study investigates the nature of the books shared through public library virtual storytime programs to shed light on what is already typically depicted and what content could be added to expand and enrich the minds of children.

Theoretical framework

Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) proposes that child development is best conceptualized as a child situated within the center of four nested and interacting contextual systems that in combination with the child's own innate qualities, proximal processes or interactions, and time affect progress and learning. Within this frame, the contexts in which a child is directly involved as an interacting member, such as the child's home, informal

playgroups, and school or daycare class have traditionally been considered microsystems, and mesosystems encompass the intersections of two or more microsystems. Exosystems consist of those contexts where the child is not a direct member, but which incidentally affect the child through indirect means. Finally, the macrosystem consists of social and cultural factors such as language, norms, and economic and political factors.

During the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns, the demarcations of micro- and meso-systems blurred as activities that had previously constituted separate microsystems were brought together through virtual tools which not only transformed the home environment, routines, and individuals' roles within the home, but also the composition of proximal processes within that environment (Moura, Nacimento, and Ferreira, 2021, p.384). Within children's homes, public library virtual storytime programs oscillated in a realm between micro and mesosystems as children's participation shifted between independent activities and interactions with the librarian and other participants and family-based participation, depending upon the involvement of caregivers and other members of the household. Books shared during virtual storytime programs not only serve to facilitate proximal processes within the storytimes themselves, but they also have the potential to affect children's subsequent interactions as the children may or may not refer to and/or read the books with caregivers and/or other household members at later times. Unpacking what content is conveyed during VSTs is an initial critical step towards understanding the complex nature of these interactions.

Research questions
This study investigated the following research questions.
RQ1: What types of book genres are shared in virtual storytime programs?
RQ2: What are the key topics of the books shared in virtual storytime programs?

Methodology
We randomly selected one state in each of the nine U.S. Census Bureau divisions (2021), and working with state library agencies, we invited all public libraries in each of those nine states to serve as sites for this study. Of the 68 libraries whose personnel expressed interest, 25 directors signed formal approvals. For 24 of those library systems, we observed and digitally recorded four virtual storytime programs, and for one library system, we observed and digitally recorded two virtual storytime programs. For each of the 98 virtual storytime programs, based on visual information and supported by expressed input from the virtual storytime providers, we identified 173 books shared. We then used the Library of Congress and WorldCat catalogs to collect subject terms for each. We were unable to collect subject terms for two books; thus, we eliminated them from the study. Based on genre classifications employed in previous studies (e.g. Kociubuk and

Campana, 2019; Pentimonti et al., 2011), we analyzed and sorted the books into one of three categories: storybook, non-narrative informational, mixed informational which consisted of informational material presented through a narrative or unconventional structure (e.g. verse, riddle, etc.), and other which consisted of poetry, songs and folklore. Additionally, utilizing thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) we coded the subject terms into key topics.

Research Results

Across the 171 books analyzed for this study, the most frequently read genre was storybooks (n = 153; 89.47%), followed by mixed (n = 10; 5.85%), informational (n = 5; 2.92%), and other (n = 3; 1.75%). Key topics of the books shared were as follows: animals; feelings and emotions; basic concepts; nature; health and wellness; family relations; and civic life.

Discussion

Exposure to and familiarity with different genres support children's learning and development in different ways, and topics of those books facilitate children's world knowledge and instill a foundation for subsequent learning. Prior studies of books shared with young children in both public library storytimes (Author, 2021; Kociubuk et al., 2019) and preschool classrooms (Duke, 2000; Pentimonti et al, 2011; Yopp and Yopp, 2006) suggest that children's exposure to various genres and a diversity of identities and ideas is limited. Animals have long occupied a major role in books for young children (Author, 2021; Williams, 2014); thus, it's not surprising that animals were a key topic in the books shared during virtual storytime programs. Importantly, during a time of uncertainty and isolation, librarians shared books that supported children's social-emotional development, health and well-being, and relationships with family. Findings from this study suggest that librarians are expanding children's exposure via the books they are currently selecting for storytime programs, but that they might continue to include this as an area for further development as they continue to refine and improve their practices. For example, a number of library leaders have called upon librarians to conduct diversity of audits of their collections and programs (Fort, 2019; Naik and Payne, 2022; Roos, 2020), while scrutinizing the representations reflected in collections and programming resources, librarians might also consider taking an additional step to ensure greater diversity in terms of genre representation and topics addressed.

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