

Obstacles and Opportunities

Inclusive Programming Goes Virtual

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According to a Public Library Association survey, in the spring of 2020, 99 percent of public libraries reported closing their doors, and schools stood vacant.¹ Virtual connections became critical, and librarians faced a raft of both obstacles and opportunities. Children's librarians across the country rose to the challenge and created innovative solutions. As we cautiously return to in-person programming, many recognize the value of retaining the effective practices we developed in the midst of a crisis.

School librarians responded to closures, facilitating the shift to online instruction and keeping the school community engaged with innovative and educational programming. In Texas, middle school librarian Amanda Jones live-streamed virtual field trips on the library's Facebook page, starting with "visiting" Versailles and exploring destinations like Nepal and Tanzania. Her Journey with Jones project has gone on to include explorations of a range of curricular topics and historical periods, enriching and enlivening the virtual classroom.²

Public libraries nimbly transformed children's services, moving storytimes, sing-alongs, and crafting sessions online via virtual tools. By deliberately developing inclusive programming, public libraries have worked to counter the disproportional impact the pandemic is having on communities of color and marginalized groups. The Richland Library in Columbia, SC, developed its Dinner Table Talks blog³ to support families addressing racial justice issues.

As the pandemic hit at the University of South Carolina, Dr. Nicole Cooke, the Augusta Baker Endowed Chair for the School of Information Science, was already hosting virtual lectures and discussions for students and professionals, including the Augusta Baker Diversity Lecture series.⁴ As this type of online connection became more and more essential in all educational settings, the team began to consider how to provide similar programming for children. That is when AB Kids came to be.

In fall 2021, Cooke and Valerie Byrd Fort from the South Carolina Center for Community Literacy introduced *The Augusta Baker Storytelling Experience: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programming for Children of All Ages* (AB Kids). This series is part of the Augusta Baker Endowed Chair programming at the University of South Carolina (USC).⁵



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The series is named in honor of Augusta Braxton Baker, a beloved children's librarian and storyteller who made South Carolina her home after a 37-year career at the New York Public Library. The first African American Coordinator of Children's Services within the New York Public Library system, she worked tirelessly throughout her career to diversify the genre of children's literature and to make books for children and young adults more reflective of the young people who read them. Baker served as USC's storyteller-in-residence for fourteen years from 1980 to 1994.

In each kid-friendly session of the AB Kids program, experts talked about diversity, equity, and inclusion at a level appropriate for children and their classroom teachers and caregivers. These were morning sessions, lasting thirty to forty-five minutes, and our audience included children of all ages, some watching and participating live and others viewing the recorded sessions.⁶ Speakers from around the country contributed their time and talents, sharing readings, songs, and stories geared toward helping kids and young people understand and appreciate differences.

References

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3. "Dinner Table Talks: Buffalo Bird Girl: A Hidatsa Story," Richland Library blog, December 7, 2021, <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/blog/2021-12-04/dinner-table-talks-buffalo-bird-girl>.
4. Augusta Baker EDI Programming at USC, <https://sites.google.com/view/bakerlectures/>.
5. "AB Kids," <https://sites.google.com/view/bakerlectures/ab-kids>.
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Serious work to be sure, but our presenters made these sessions seriously fun! Sing-alongs and stories imparted gentle messages that demystified gender diversity, celebrated Black childhood, and explored ideas like allyship and privilege in an accessible and engaging way. A sense of belonging is essential to healthy development. AB Kids seeks to build connections for children, to enlarge their circle of friends, and to provide meaningful, joyful interaction in these isolating times.

As with any debut program, we learned some things the hard way. For example, 9 a.m. on the East Coast sounds like a great idea, but it makes it very difficult for West Coast participants and speakers to participate. We have to plan for a wider audience, given the potential reach of virtual programming.

The AB Kids team looks forward to offering more programs next fall, focusing on a range of diversity-related issues. &