

# No Finish Line

## Creating Inclusiveness in Children's Programs

KATE GRAFELMAN AND SARAH BARRIAGE

As a professional group, public library staff working in children's services strive to provide high quality services and programming for all children and their caregivers; they are committed to respecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the people in their community, creating inclusive spaces, and continuously working to develop cultural competency.<sup>1</sup>

Honoring the different aspects that make up a child's identity is emphasized multiple times in the Association for Library Service to Children's (ALSC) Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Libraries, including a direct mention of creating "diverse programs for children" with specific consideration of the diversity in a community.<sup>2</sup> Naidoo explains that a discussion of diversity in library programming should be "as expansive as possible," stating that "race, ethnicity, ancestry, physical and mental ability, family composition, gender expression, sexual orientation, citizenship status, language fluency, domicile, socioeconomic status, religious preference, and age" are only a few examples of the diversity present in a library's community.<sup>3</sup>

This study aims to explore how library staff working in children's programming are taking these considerations into account and actively using them to create children's library programs. Through interviews with eight library staff based in the United States, we gathered information about the methods used by library staff members to create, plan, and carry out children's programming, as well as the degree to which they are intentional about honoring children's diverse backgrounds.

### Literature Review

Storytime song and book choices, physical spaces, and types of programs offered are several ways library staff can incorporate diversity into programming. Some studies focus on these discrete ways that children's library programs can work towards the goal of incorporating diversity, as well as edited collections of articles that focus on all aspects of this goal. The most common early childhood library program offered are library storytimes, which is the main focus of the existing literature.

Storytimes are an essential way library staff can incorporate different lived experiences into children's programming. Children benefit from seeing themselves reflected in diverse and culturally authentic books read aloud in children's programs; equally important is children's exposure to cultures that differ from their own in this same setting.<sup>4</sup> Seeing characters that resemble themselves allows children to feel they have every opportunity open to them, regardless of their race, ability, or background.<sup>5</sup> Unfamiliar cultures and identities are introduced to children through accurate diverse books and



**Kate Grafelman** is a Children's Programming Librarian at the Bartholomew County (IN) Public Library. She earned her MSLS degree at the University of Kentucky in 2021. **Sarah Barriage** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Science at the University of Kentucky.

this allows them to “build bridges of cultural understanding.”<sup>6</sup> Despite this, Cahill et al. found a significant lack of diversity in books read aloud in their study of public library storytimes.<sup>7</sup>

Research has found that the physical space used for children’s programming can affect a child’s ability to engage in the program.<sup>8</sup> The physical space used and activities performed during children’s programming have the potential to exclude children with physical or developmental differences.<sup>9</sup> Library staff are continually looking for ways to make their programming spaces as inclusive as possible, for example by arranging programming rooms to allow for minimal distractions and using “sensory-friendly” toys and props.<sup>10</sup> Prendergast found that while children’s librarians are eager to offer inclusive programs, they do not have the training they would like for working with children with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

Social interaction has been noted as an important reason for bringing children to public library storytimes.<sup>12</sup> In addition to storytimes, play programs are increasing in popularity in public libraries. These programs occur either as stand-alone programs or following a traditional storytime. While engaging in play, children develop in all areas including development of their social, emotional, and early literacy skills.<sup>13</sup> In addition to allowing all children to build vital skills, these programs are a means for children with physical and developmental differences to interact with typically developing children.<sup>14</sup> These interactions and friendships build empathy, acceptance, and “an appreciation for diversity.”<sup>15</sup>

Many studies focus on individual best practices in early childhood programming. This study seeks to examine how practicing library staff are making use of these separate elements as a whole to create accessible, inclusive, and meaningful early childhood programming.

## Methodology

### Recruitment

In November 2020, children’s library staff were invited to email Grafelman if they were interested in being interviewed regarding their practices in creating inclusive, accessible, and meaningful programming for children aged birth to five years. The invitation was posted to three Facebook groups whose membership is made up of library staff and to the now-closed ALSC Preschool Services Discussion List. The Facebook groups had individual membership sizes of approximately 5,500 members, 16,500 members, and 23,600 members.

### Participants

Participants included eight library staff members located in the Western and Midwestern regions of the United States. Initially, nine library staff had expressed interest in

participating, but only eight agreed to be interviewed. All participants are directly involved in planning and carrying out programming in a library setting for children who are birth to age five. Participants were not asked about job titles, qualifications, age, race, or gender. Two participants were located in small, rural towns, one participant was in an urban environment, one participant was in a college town, and four were in midsize towns. Two participants stated their community was made up of primarily low-income families, and three participants stated there was significant socioeconomic diversity in their community.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were interviewed via phone or video conferencing software. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted, on average, thirty minutes. The interviews were recorded on an external voice recorder and transcribed by Grafelman, with all identifying information removed. The transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.”<sup>16</sup>

First, Grafelman read and re-read the interview transcripts, making note of her initial impressions and thoughts about potential patterns across the data set. Next, she assigned initial inductive codes to data extracts that appeared salient to the phenomena of interest. She organized these codes into themes, which she then reviewed in order to ensure that the data within each theme “cohere[d] together meaningfully,”<sup>17</sup> that there was enough data to support each theme, and that each of the themes were distinct from the others; changes to themes were made as necessary. Next, the first author defined and named each of the themes, further refining each theme and noting particularly salient or illustrative data extracts to be incorporated into the final write-up. The second author participated in peer debriefing at various stages throughout this process.<sup>18</sup>

## Findings

In this analysis, the researchers identified seven themes of common practices among the participants.

### Know the Community

Participants were asked how they assess the diverse make-up of the community they serve. Knowing who is in the community is a vital first step in providing programming that appeals to that community. Analyzing data from the Census Bureau is a common first step among the participants interviewed in learning the makeup of their community. Lindsey explains that the Census Bureau provides a valuable picture of a community’s demographics, even economic status and education levels.<sup>19</sup> Nicole points out that census data is “limiting in some ways, especially when you’re assessing abilities of people—physical and mental abilities of people—it is a little bit hard to

figure that out, but in terms of economic and racial diversity, census data is really helpful.”

In addition to the Census Bureau, Becky also uses data from the local school system to get a picture of the student body makeup, which she finds especially useful for guiding children’s programming. Malorie’s library system has access to surveys conducted by the community’s Parks and Recreation Department that assess factors such as “how people identify and what people want from the community.” Some libraries conduct their own needs assessment surveys, but Crystal points out that not only is it difficult to figure out how to ask patrons what their needs are, “but even once you do put things out there, it’s hard to get people to respond.”

While demographics data provide an important snapshot of a community, many participants rely on their own observations to understand who they are serving. Crystal, Joy, and Lindsey all find that paying attention to who is coming to the library and who is attending their programs is the most reliable way to know who is in their community.

Other participants get the best sense of their community outside of the library. Malorie and Nicole both find that being active in their community allows them to see who is living there. Because it can be difficult to gain feedback from library users through surveys, personal conversation is a preferred way to learn about a community. Malorie feels that even chats at the grocery store have been helpful and she uses conversation with community members to “know who is here and understand what people need.” Stacey also benefits from relationships with the families of the children she serves, because when she gets to know a family, she is better able to know what that family’s needs are, so that she can be inclusive.

Crystal makes an effort to keep in contact with families who attend library storytimes to understand their needs. She maintains these relationships through a professional Facebook account, separate from her personal account, that she uses to engage in local community groups. She also shares her professional email address extensively and lets the families she interacts with know that they can come to her with any questions. When she is interacting with people in her community, especially people from different diverse communities, Becky focuses on the question “What can the library do for you?” She also ensures that each individual she talks with knows that she does not expect them to speak for their entire cultural group, but only for themselves.

## Be Intentional about Diversity

All participants stated that they are intentional about including diversity in all of their library programming, especially storytimes. This includes choosing books with characters from many different cultures and representing many races and ethnicities, choosing books that have LGBTQIA+ characters, and choosing books with diverse authors. Rachel states that when planning storytimes, “I do try to make sure that I’m using

diverse books and being mindful of different family structure and different religious beliefs and customs.” About her library, Nicole states that with “storytime we’ve really tried to make sure we are including books that are both written [by] and portray BIPOC humans as well as humans who are different sexualities and trans and [other identities], so we’re trying to be more intentional about the inclusion of that in storytime.”

Lindsey and Joy try to mirror their audience so children can see themselves represented in books. At the same time, Lindsey intentionally asks herself, “How do we make it so that we’re still being diverse even though the patrons that we serve aren’t?” in order to keep herself mindful of the books she is choosing. Malorie’s community is predominantly white, so she chooses her storytime books to introduce different races and ethnicities to the children who attend.

Three participants reported providing programming that focuses specifically on one cultural group. For example, Stacey hires presenters who are from a specific cultural group to present if she is holding a program the focuses on a cultural group she is not a part of, and she gathers library materials to complement the program. Conversely, Nicole said her library avoids programming that focuses on one specific cultural group. Crystal also avoids this type of programming, stating that “just knowing how to be inclusive while not othering people I think is a really hard line to walk, and I try really hard to make it so that everyone feels welcome.”

The participants felt that being inclusive of differing cultures and experiences is something that they are continuously working at and will continue to work at. Nicole’s library is mindful of this and has “taken a really pretty progressive approach to make sure we are all considering our inherent biases and that we are being as open and communicative and empathetic as possible.”

Malorie feels that “diversity and inclusion is always important, not just when it is in the news . . . it is something that we should always be working towards and doing so that people feel welcome in our libraries . . . keeping in mind that diversity is beyond race, and that is of course incredibly important, but there is also diversity in language, and . . . economic diversity, and abilities, and families, and family structure, and gender identities and all of these different things, and just to always keep that in mind: just the default of what can we do to be welcoming.”

Similarly, Becky says, “I think one of the things about librarianship in general, but youth and children’s librarianship in particular, is librarians are positioned in a way in our communities that they can be such amazing bridge builders and as long as they’re doing it with cultural humility and continually working on their cultural competence, it often just benefits their whole community in ways they might not even be able to anticipate. It needs to be like a standard part of what we do as children’s and youth librarians, is do that work of holding space for our whole community.”

Joy emphasizes that it is important to remember that library staff will make mistakes as they work towards being inclusive and they should be willing to apologize and be open to learning from their mistakes. Becky, Nicole, and Crystal suggest seeking further professional development with regards to all forms of diversity in children's programming. Becky feels "there are aspects of our community, beyond racial and ethnic diversity that we could take a better look at and do a better job of supporting. So, the work's never done, right? There's always room to grow."

### Create an Accessible Space

Participants were asked how they use their physical space to make programming accessible. Crystal, Malorie, Rachel, Joy, and Stacey all said the libraries where they work were built in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards. Becky's programming space is a large room in the children's area that has one wall that can slide completely open allowing for easy entry. In addition to holding programs in open spaces, Crystal and Stacey both have easily moveable furniture in their programming spaces. This allows for furniture to be moved easily when necessary to improve accessibility. Rather than relying on moveable furniture, Malorie ensures accessibility by "making sure that furniture is placed so that people are able to move around and having it always be that way so it's not like these are special accommodations that we make, no, this is what we do, this is how it always is."

### Design for All Children

Only one participant reported providing separate library programs for children with disabilities or developmental delays. Crystal's library has held after-hours programs for families of children with special needs. Crystal provides a sensory storytime, marketed for all babies and toddlers, that consists of "fun quiet play time that is sensory focused." She found that this storytime "is a good one for bringing in kiddos with special needs to play with other kids." Rachel says her library had considered providing storytimes "specifically for children with disabilities or developmental delays but we have kind of moved away from that idea in the hopes that we can focus more on making it accessible and open and welcoming in the mainstream" storytime.

Becky sees her programming space as a way of making her programming inclusive. She explains that because her space is very open "we're not sort of confining them to the space and we try to make it clear for all parents that if they're bringing their young ones to a program, that they can come in and out of the program and we don't take that personally; we cater to various levels of neurodiversity," further explaining that "we want parents and caregivers to feel comfortable bringing them to the library—including to programming—so we try to make it clear that it's ok if the kids leave the programming space, and come back in, if they go back and forth." Lindsey says her programming space has a specific area where children can go to calm down if they are over-stimulated.

Rachel, Malorie, Crystal, and Becky agree they are mindful of providing multiple ways for children to engage in programming to account for ability and comfort level. Rachel keeps activities in her programs "very open ended, and that way they are manageable for kids who are right on track developmentally and they can also be challenging for those who have moved ahead a little bit, and good for those who are still not meeting developmental milestones."

In storytimes, Crystal adapts movement activities, noting, "I make sure to say 'and if you don't want to stand up to jump up and down with us, or whatever, you can bounce in your chair' and it's really cool to be able to do that in a way that doesn't call out kiddos with physical disabilities . . . just do what you can, we can modify this, we can make it good for everybody."

Participants also mentioned being flexible with ages allowed at programs to allow children of different development levels to attend the programs that best fit their needs. Malorie notes this flexibility is also convenient for families with differently aged children, allowing a family to come to one program that all their children are able to participate in.

One of the participants interviewed mentioned providing bilingual storytimes; Lindsey says other branches in her library system offer bilingual storytimes as well as single language storytimes held in languages other than English. Nicole's library system offers American Sign Language interpreters for any program, even virtual programs, as long as they are requested in advance. These were the only mentions of providing programming in a language other than English.

### Remove Barriers

At most of the libraries, there was no cost for children's programming. Rachel's library also strives to make sure that activities presented in her programming are inexpensive or free so families can replicate the activity at home.

Becky's library does not require registration for any program because many families in her community lack access to the internet, making registration impossible. Becky feels that while not knowing how many library users may attend a program does make planning difficult, it is important to remove that barrier to participation. Another potential barrier was program timing. Malorie addresses this by offering programs on evenings and weekends as well as during the weekday to accommodate the varying caregiver work schedules.

As the pandemic paused in-person programming, many libraries offered virtual programs. This necessary move away from in-person programs has amplified the problem many families face—a lack of reliable internet access or internet capable devices. Becky's library created videos, and in addition to having those videos available to stream, the library also burned them to DVDs, allowing library users to watch the content offline. Those DVDs are one piece of a kit of activity materials distributed to caregivers.

Three participants reported distributing take-home kits with age-appropriate activities or crafts during pandemic library closures. Rachel's library saw kits as a way to get over the digital divide and allow all children to participate in programming. Nicole explains that her library felt there were two equity issues to overcome with programming during the pandemic—lack of computers or internet access and lack of materials to do crafts or science activities at home. They began distributing take-and-make kits with all the supplies needed for six different activities that did not require internet access. Becky's library began distributing kits to library users in June 2020 and had given out eight hundred kits within the first month, proving they were extremely popular.

### Provide Programs beyond Storytime

All participants interviewed provide early childhood storytime programming. Other programming mentioned includes science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs, art programs, playtimes, and an educational series with hired presenters geared towards preschoolers.

Becky runs a program that is process art based.<sup>20</sup> She found that the relaxed structure and lack of focus on academic achievement that can exist in storytime programs made the program more accessible, resulting in higher attendance numbers and a more diverse attendance than her storytime programs. Lindsey also provides an art program, including a favorite watercolor program. Lindsey's library is in an urban environment, and the program was open to children and teens alike. Lindsey said, "In this community, it's a lot of violence, and sometimes the kids do need a space where they can destress and regulate their emotions . . . when we do programs like calming programs, watercoloring [*sic*] and crafting and having the kids be busy with their hands and minds, a lot of times they're really successful."

Two participants held library playtimes. Nicole brings out toys at the end of her educational program co-led with a hired presenter to let both children and caregivers socialize. Crystal has a playtime at the end of her family storytime and also sets up stations at the end of her kindergarten readiness storytime. At these stations children are "encouraged to choose which station they wanted to go to and then they were able to choose whether or not they wanted to play with the other children, if they wanted to stay with their family, do that parallel play, start trying their cooperative play, things like that. . . . It's really child led and I try to encourage things that get the kids to talk to each other because that emotional development is so important."

### Acknowledge Challenges

Interview participants were asked what challenges they face in providing inclusive and diverse programming. Two participants reported feeling that families of children with developmental differences are uncomfortable coming to library programs. Rachel feels these families feel judged by other

families present if their child does not behave like a typically developing child. Crystal, whose library holds after-hours programs for children with special needs, also thinks these "families tend to choose not to come to libraries because they're worried that their child will be too loud, or they won't be able to follow the rules, or they're worried about being a disturbance."

Crystal, Joy, and Becky felt that pushback against LGBTQIA+ programming, displays, or book choice in storytimes is one of their main challenges in providing diverse and inclusive programming. Joy stated that while there would be no problem at her library with featuring books containing LGBTQIA+ characters on a table display, they might face a problem if such a display were specifically labeled as a Pride Month Display.

Such a display would not be possible at Crystal's library since they have faced negative reactions from some conservative community members. Crystal and Joy's pushback on this topic is only from the community; however, Becky's library director is also unwilling to allow LGBTQIA+ programming or displays.

For Malorie, the biggest challenge is "an ongoing challenge of I don't think that inclusivity is ever . . . really a finish line, you know? It's just something that we're always striving for . . . the main challenge would be always keeping that in mind and always trying to come up with new ways to reach different people."

## Discussion

All participants felt it was important to create early childhood library programming that is welcoming to all children and their families. Participants interpreted welcoming programming in many ways, but common to all interpretations was intentionality with book choice for storytime programs. Every participant said they make an effort to include books in their programming that feature characters from many different races, ethnicities, backgrounds, and family structures and try to both reflect their library users in their book choice, as well as introduce new cultures to them, practices which have been proven to be beneficial to children.<sup>21</sup> This finding is encouraging as Cahill et al. found in their recent study that very few diverse books were actually being read in storytimes in the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Some participants noted that including storytime books that include LGBTQIA+ characters was challenging, if not impossible, at their libraries. This troubling finding is in opposition to ALSC recommendations, which state that library staff serving children must counteract "systems of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion in the community" by providing "culturally aware services."<sup>23</sup>

As Barriage and colleagues note in their study of drag queen storytimes, "It is important to recognize that LGBTQ+

individuals reside in all types of communities, and they may be erased by those who perceive a lack of community support,” real or imagined, for programs and displays that feature LGBTQIA+ experiences.<sup>24</sup> Such acts of internal and external censorship are detrimental to the overall mission of the library as an institution, including its commitment to intellectual freedom, in addition to the harm inflicted on LGBTQIA+ individuals and families within the library’s community and beyond.<sup>25</sup>

Another facet of welcoming programming was ensuring programs were accessible to children of all abilities, both physical and developmental. Most participants stated that their spaces are ADA compliant, allowing for the programming spaces to be reached and navigated easily. Interview participants design their program activities to have multiple ways for children to engage so that children of any physical ability or developmental level have a way to participate and feel successful.

Most participants prefer this approach to programming, allowing all children to attend the same programs and interact with one another, rather than holding programs specifically for children with disabilities or developmental delays. A smaller number of participants felt that families preferred separate programming for children with developmental differences because they would feel more comfortable, but it is unclear if this was stated by a library user or if the interview participant inferred it.

In interviews with library staff and parents of children with disabilities, Prendergast found that parents of children with disabilities tended not to approach library staff to share how the library could best meet their needs or to learn how they could best be served by library programs.<sup>26</sup> It is possible, therefore, that there are families of children with developmental differences who would prefer to attend regularly scheduled programs, as well as similar families who prefer separate storytimes for their child. The challenge is finding a way for library staff to learn these preferences from families in their community.

Participants are offering open-ended art programs as well as play programs, both of which have less formal structure than a storytime. This is seen as more welcoming to families who are intimidated by the academic elements, whether real or imagined, of a storytime program. These programs make it easier for typically developing children and children with differences to interact because there is none of the sitting still and demonstration of abilities that can occur in a storytime.

These programs also build children’s skills, including social emotional and early literacy skills.<sup>27</sup>

While incorporating diverse experiences into library programming takes many forms, participants felt that they will always be working towards this goal; as Malorie stated, it does not have a finish line, but rather, is something to always strive for by learning and listening. Conversation with library users—whether in the library, the community, or online—is a vital way participants learn what their community wants from early childhood programming, allowing them to create programs that library users want to attend.

*“I don’t think that inclusivity is ever . . . really a finish line, you know? It’s just something that we’re always striving for . . . the main challenge would be always keeping that in mind and always trying to come up with new ways to reach different people.”*

Conversation and active listening also ensures that those creating library programs hear when they have made a mistake or offended someone and allows them a chance to learn and grow. Many participants wish they had access to more professional development and training that specifically addresses topics of incorporating diversity and accessibility into children’s library programs.

Based on this study and the existing literature, library staff value incorporating all forms of diversity into their programs for early childhood, but they would like more professional support as well. Knowing who is in the community and what they would like from library programs is one way that library staff can achieve this goal.

Direct conversation with families in the community who have children in this age group is an important way to make sure that programs are welcoming and meet community needs. There are often barriers to having these conversations, as it is hard to find situations where these conversations can occur. Informal programs such as open-ended art programs and play-based programs are ways to bring more library users in general to library programs, and a more diverse group of library users specifically. These programs allow for natural conversation between library staff and caregivers, giving library staff the opportunity to learn about their community and for community members to learn what the library can offer their children.

## EDI Recommendations

As library staff may face challenges in providing inclusive programming in their own libraries similar to those described by the participants in this study, the authors reached out to members of ALSC’s Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Task Force for their recommendations.

Consistent with prior literature related to diversity in children’s literature used in library storytimes,<sup>28</sup> ALSC’s EDI Task Force emphasized the need to incorporate books that feature diversity of all kinds. One member said, “During any given storytime, 80% of the stories selected for read aloud should feature visible diversity or explicitly named invisible diversity.”<sup>29</sup> Importantly, this guideline applies to all storytimes, not just those that are focused on themes or events such as “holidays or awareness months.”<sup>30</sup> As Naidoo notes, “by including diverse material in regular programming, all families are included in routine programs and their experiences are normalized.”<sup>31</sup>

However, as the task force emphasized, the use of diverse books alone is not sufficient—how these books are incorporated and used in storytime is also key. As one member stated, “Yes, it’s critical to highlight own voices, diverse characters and settings but what if the presenter is including their own bias while reading? What if the way they are talking about the characters or culture/lifestyle/religion is othering? It’s not enough to read diverse books, storytellers need to be able to present these books with empathy, prompting opportunities for connection and stimulating curiosity about the lived experience of others in [an] open-minded way.”<sup>32</sup>

Notably, books are not the only materials that can be used to create a more inclusive programming experience. For example, storytimes can incorporate diversity into other elements of the program, such as songs, crafts, props, and other activities.<sup>33</sup>

This can also extend beyond storytimes; as one member of ALSC’s EDI Task Force noted, “Library spaces can also include physical representations of ethnic diversity through the toys, games, puzzles, and dolls they incorporate into play times.”<sup>34</sup>

Several participants in this study noted pushback they receive from the community and, in one case, their library director, in creating displays featuring books with LGBTQIA+ characters. One task force member offered the following recommendation to combat this pushback. “Instead of having a specific LGBTQ+ display that would not be approved by administration, create a display that says ‘Celebrating Family’ or another theme that will support highlighting books that feature diverse families and identities.”<sup>35</sup>

Other strategies to combat negative reactions include ongoing education for library staff about the LGBTQIA+ community and their information needs, the development of policies and procedures related to challenges to the content of library programming and library collections, and the creation of

toolkits or other resources for library staff to use in responding to such challenges.<sup>36</sup>

Community partnerships are another means of combatting some of the challenges library staff experience in providing inclusive children’s programming. For example, a member of the ALSC EDI Task Force suggested that library staff could “reach out to local schools or special recreational associations for partnership opportunities” to provide programming that better meets the needs of children with developmental differences.<sup>37</sup> Partnerships with local youth and family-centered organizations such as community parenting groups, early childhood education organizations, and those who serve LGBTQIA+ children and families also offer an opportunity to create programming that serve various diverse groups.<sup>38</sup>

Libraries could also create advisory boards consisting of “diverse members from the community to allow for community buy-in and to ensure cultural sensitivity of program materials and activities.”<sup>39</sup>

Importantly, the diversity of the field itself can pose challenges to providing truly inclusive library programming. As Vinopal notes, the professional library community as a whole is “starkly lacking in diversity based on race and ethnicity (we are overwhelmingly white), age (librarianship is an aging profession), disability, economic status, educational background, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other demographic and identity markers of difference.”<sup>40</sup>

According to a member of the ALSC EDI Task Force, “Libraries could make major strides in creating inclusive environments by hiring and retaining an ethnically diverse staff that reflects the diversity of the communities they serve.”<sup>41</sup>

*Libraries could make major strides in creating inclusive environments by hiring and retaining an ethnically diverse staff that reflects the diversity of the communities they serve.*

## Limitations

This is a small exploratory study, with only eight participants. Because the participants knew the interview would cover the topics of diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, it is reasonable to assume that these issues are important to them and they may demonstrate more intentionality in these areas in their work practices than other library staff.

Because of these factors, these findings may not be transferable to children’s library staff more generally. However, the participants were from a wide variety of communities and offered a wide variety of experiences, which suggests that their responses are a valuable cross section of library staff members’ experiences.

## Conclusion

Library staff who create early childhood programming have the goal of reaching and empowering as many children in their community as possible. Listening to and learning from their community, curating storytimes that reflect and honor the lived experiences of children in their community, seeking professional development that addresses diversity in all its forms, and branching out beyond storytimes in early childhood programming are ways that library staff are currently working towards this goal. By incorporating diversity into their programs in ways that affirm children and broaden their view of the world, library staff can create programs

that fulfill the ALSC goal of creating “diverse programs for children.”<sup>42</sup>

Being intentional about these practices will ensure that all aspects of a child’s self are honored and valued in the library. Nothing is more welcoming than feeling valued in a space, and this feeling of welcome and inclusion is what library staff are always striving for in early childhood library programming. &

*The authors thank Sophie Kenney, Ayn Reyes Frazee, and Kelly Smith from the ALSC Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Task Force for their helpful contributions to this paper.*

## References and Notes

1. ALSC Education Committee, “Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Libraries,” last modified 2020, <http://www.ala.org/alsc/edcareers/alsccorecomps>; Sandra Ríos Balderrama, “This Trend Called Diversity,” *Library Trends* 49, no. 1 (2000): 194–214. Note that cultural competency is perhaps best considered as a continuum without an endpoint—rather, “there will always be room for growth.” Terry L. Gross, “Cultural Competence Continuum,” *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work* 24 (2012): 83.
2. ALSC Education Committee, “Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Libraries.”
3. Jamie Naidoo, “When All Really Means All: Creating Library Programs for Children and Teens that Embrace All Types of Diversity,” in *Create, Innovate, and Serve: A Radical Approach to Children’s and Youth Programming*, edited by Kathleen Campana and J. Elizabeth Mills (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2019), 7.
4. Cass Mabbott, “The We Need Diverse Books Campaign and Critical Race Theory: Charlemae Rollins and the Call for Diverse Children’s Books,” *Library Trends* 65, no. 4 (2017): 508–22; Jamie Campbell Naidoo, “The Importance of Diversity in Library Programs and Material Collections for Children,” last modified April 5, 2014, [http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/ALSCwhitepaper\\_importance%20of%20diversity\\_with%20graphics\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ala.org/alsc/sites/ala.org.alsc/files/content/ALSCwhitepaper_importance%20of%20diversity_with%20graphics_FINAL.pdf); Maria Cahill, Erin Ingram, and Soohyung Joo, “Storytime Programs as Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors? Addressing Children’s Needs Through Diverse Book Selection,” *Library Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2021): 269–84; Anna Haase Krueger and Tamara Lee, “Storytime-Palooza! Racial Diversity and Inclusion in Storytime,” *Children & Libraries* 14, no. 3 (2016): 18–22.
5. Mabbott, “The We Need Diverse Books Campaign and Critical Race Theory: Charlemae Rollins and the Call for Diverse Children’s Books”; Christopher Myers, “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature,” *New York Times* (March 16, 2014): section SR p. 1.
6. Naidoo, “The Importance of Diversity.”
7. Cahill, Ingram, and Joo, “Storytime Programs.”
8. Kathleen Campana, Jacqueline Kociubuk, and J. Elizabeth Mills, “Making Space for Storytime: The Role of the Environment in the Production of Storytime,” *Public Library Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2020): 140–56.
9. Tess Prendergast, “Seeking Early Literacy for All: An Investigation of Children’s Librarians and Parents of Young Children with Disabilities’ Experiences at the Public Library,” *Library Trends* 65, no. 1 (2016): 65–91.
10. Tricia Bohanon, “Making Room for Inclusion,” *American Libraries* 51, no. 1–2 (2020): 66.
11. Prendergast, “Seeking Early Literacy for All.”
12. Maria Cahill et al., “We’ve Been Offering It for Years, But Why Do They Come? The Reasons Why Adults Bring Young Children to Public Library Storytimes,” *Libri* 70, no. 4 (2020): 335–44; Pamela J. McKenzie and Rosamund K. Stooke, “Making a Difference: The Importance of Purposes to Early Learning Programs,” *Children & Libraries* 10, no. 2 (2012): 47–52.
13. Jessica Ralli and Rachel G. Payne, “Let’s Play at the Library: Creating Innovative Play Experiences for Babies and Toddlers,” *Library Trends* 65, no. 1 (2016): 41–64; Sarah Ward and Sarah A. Evans, “Playing to Learn, Learning to Play: A Play and Making Framework for Libraries,” in *Create, Innovate, and Serve: A Radical Approach to Children’s and Youth Programming*, edited by Kathleen Campana and J. Elizabeth Mills (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2019), 37–48.
14. Bohanon, “Making Room for Inclusion.”
15. Betsy Diamant-Cohen et al., “We Play Here! Bringing the Power of Play into Children’s Libraries,” *Children & Libraries* 10, no. 1 (2012): 3–10, 52.
16. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2006): 77–101.
17. Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis,” 91.
18. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985).
19. All participant names are pseudonyms.
20. Process art is any art activity that focuses on the creation process itself rather than focusing on a specific finished product.



21. Mabbott, "The We Need Diverse Books Campaign"; Naidoo, "The Importance of Diversity"; Cahill, Ingram, and Joo, "Storytime Programs."; Krueger and Lee, "Storytime-Palooza!"
22. Cahill, Ingram, and Joo, "Storytime Programs."
23. ALSC Education Committee, "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Libraries."
24. Sarah Barriage et al., "Drag Queen Storytimes: Public Library Staff Perceptions and Experiences," *Children & Libraries* 19, no. 2 (2021): 14–22.
25. Peggy McEachreon, "Libraries 'Coming Out' in Support of LGBTQIA+ Human Rights and Social Justice," in *Perspectives on Libraries as Institutions of Human Rights and Social Justice*, edited by Ursula Gorham, Natalie Greene Taylor, and Paul T. Jaegar (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2016), 183–208; Taylor Stevens, "Suppressing Communities: An Analysis of LGBTQ+ Censorship in Libraries," *Pathfinder* 1, no. 2 (2020): 51–62.
26. Prendergast, "Seeking Early Literacy for All."
27. Prendergast, "Seeking Early Literacy for All."
28. Cahill et al., "Storytime Programs;" Krueger and Lee, "Storytime-Palooza!"; Naidoo, "The Importance of Diversity."
29. Ayn Reyes Frazee, ALSC EDI Task Force member, email message to authors, April 20, 2022.
30. Krueger and Lee, "Storytime-Palooza!"
31. Naidoo, "When All Really Means All."
32. Sophie Kenney, ALSC EDI Task Force co-chair, email message to authors, April 20, 2022.
33. Krueger and Lee, "Storytime-Palooza!"
34. Frazee, email message to authors, April 20, 2022.
35. Kenney, email message to authors, April 20, 2022.
36. Cameron M. Pierson, "Barriers to Access and Information for the LGBTQ Community," *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 41, no 4 (2017): 245–62; Lisa Houde, *Serving LGBTQ Teens: A Practical Guide for Librarians* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Vanessa Kitzie et al., "How Visibility, Hypervisibility, and Invisibility Shape Library Staff and Drag Performer Perceptions of and Experiences with Drag Storytimes in Public Libraries," *Library Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (July 2022): 215–20.
37. Kenney, email message to authors, April 20, 2022.
38. Beth Crist, "Taking the Library to Unexpected Places," in *Create, Innovate, and Serve: A Radical Approach to Children's and Youth Programming*, edited by Kathleen Campana and J. Elizabeth Mills (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2019), 71–82; McEachreon, "Libraries 'Coming Out.'"
39. Naidoo, "When All Really Means All."
40. Jennifer Vinopal, "The Quest for Diversity in Library Staffing: From Awareness to Action," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (January 13, 2016), <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/quest-for-diversity/>.
41. Frazee, email message to authors, April 20, 2022.
42. ALSC Education Committee, "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Libraries."