

Storytime Librarians Are Striving to Deliver Effective Storytime Programming to Children with Disabilities and Developmental Delays

Daskalakes, D. T. M., & Cahill, M. (2023). "We're all pretty welcoming": Inclusion of children with disabilities in library storytime programs. *Journal of Early Intervention*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10538151231176193>

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Article abstract

Objective – To identify and characterize public librarians' inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental delays (and their caregivers) in storytime programming, and to characterize how librarians determine if inclusion was successful.

Design – Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews.

Setting – Public library settings across Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana (United States).

Subjects – 34 public librarians offering storytime programming.

Methods – The researchers invited all public libraries in the geographic area of interest to complete an internet survey expressing their interest in participating, and from the responses a stratified random sample of libraries was chosen. From each of these libraries, researchers randomly selected one storytime librarian to participate in the study. An experienced research team member conducted interviews using video conferencing software, and the other team member reviewed all transcripts to ensure accuracy. The researchers first analyzed the data using an inductive approach to generate descriptive codes. They then assigned these codes to the data that matched the study's research questions. Finally, they conducted a third round of coding to describe some topics in greater detail.

Main Results – Librarians are making attempts to be inclusive, and their attitudes toward children with disabilities and developmental delays (and their caregivers) are welcoming and flexible. However, they expressed limited experience in offering accommodations, and they perceived their positive attitude as being an accommodation in and of itself. Librarians are largely relying on the child's experience to gauge how successful they are at being inclusive, and engaging in collaborative conversations with caregivers is also common.

Conclusion – Overall, librarians are interested in offering programs that are accessible to children with disabilities and developmental delays but struggle to engage with meaningful accommodations that promote better educational outcomes. The authors emphasize that it is important for libraries to be welcoming of everyone, but more should be done to actually meet the needs of these patrons. This study has implications for public libraries and librarians, who should review their practices to ensure they are addressing the needs of children with disabilities and developmental delays and their caregivers. It also has implications for the profession, as it supports the idea that librarians should be better prepared to support these patrons in storytime programming and that institutions should facilitate librarian efforts through information exchanges. Finally, this study establishes that there is a need for further exploration of inclusivity for children with disabilities and developmental delays in storytime programming.

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Evidence Summary

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Abstract

Objective – To identify and characterize public librarians' inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental delays (and their caregivers) in storytime programming, and to characterize how librarians determine if inclusion was successful.

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Conclusion – Overall, librarians are interested in offering programs that are accessible to children with disabilities and developmental delays but struggle to engage with meaningful accommodations that promote better educational outcomes. The authors emphasize that it is important for libraries to be welcoming of everyone, but more should be done to actually meet the needs of these patrons. This study has implications for public libraries and librarians, who should review their practices to ensure they are addressing the needs of children with disabilities and developmental delays and their caregivers. It also has implications for the profession, as it supports the idea that librarians should be better prepared to support these patrons in storytime programming and that institutions should facilitate librarian efforts through information exchanges. Finally, this study establishes that there is a need for further exploration of inclusivity for children with disabilities and developmental delays in storytime programming.

Commentary

Attempts to understand how public libraries serve children with disabilities have been discussed in the literature for many years (Mehdizadeh & Khosravi, 2019; Ross & Akin, 2002), and librarians have described receiving “minimal training in how to support children with disabilities and their families in meaningful participation in preschool storytime sessions” (Pebly, 2020, p. i). This study contributes to the scholarly conversation on this topic and provides the reader with the librarians' perspective through use of qualitative research methods.

Using the critical appraisal form for qualitative research by Letts et al. (2007), this study performs well in its description of overall purpose, inclusion of supporting literature, and clarity surrounding research methods. The authors provide sound justification for conducting this study through their comprehensive use of the literature and repeatedly demonstrate how key definitions are relevant to their research questions. In doing so, they also openly recognize the limitations of existing definitions and ensure the reader understands the implications of this when interpreting the study results. The authors of this study also acknowledge the theoretical perspectives underpinning this work, as they note their collaborative expertise in library and information science and early childhood special education and describe their self-reflexivity during the analysis phase of this study.

In reviewing this study's methods of data collection and analysis further, it is evident the authors took great care to justify their methods and ensure validity of their results. Their procedures for participant recruitment are well-described and ethically appropriate, and the authors point out that all study participants are referred to as “storytime librarians” or “librarians” due to their status in the workplace, regardless of formal training. The authors illustrate their use of convenience sampling but clarify that their recruitment of library locations was offset by random selection of actual study participants within each library. Although they did not divulge if they conducted sampling until redundancy was reached, they note in their limitations section that their study employed a small and geographically specific sample and that there is a need for further research in this area. The authors'

procedural and analytical processes are appropriate for the research questions, and findings are tied directly to points raised in the study's introduction.

Although this study lacks generalizability due to its specific location, its results are still valid. The librarians in the participant group demonstrated that they want to serve children with disabilities and developmental delays (and their caregivers) but noted a paucity of demand that impacted the provision of this service. Those who made accommodations were using a variety of methods, and the librarians' education level did not impact their use of accommodations. Regardless of background, some librarians expressed reliance on professional supports along with a hesitancy to engage in accommodations without formal training.

In reviewing their findings, the authors acknowledge their own learning throughout the course of the study, having discovered that a term used in their interviews is offensive. Their recognition of these limitations further enhances the implications of this work, and their conclusions provide a strong foundation for further enquiry into this topic. Public libraries looking to augment their inclusion efforts should take note of this study's findings, and MLIS programs (and their equivalents) could find inspiration in this study when updating their curricula.

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