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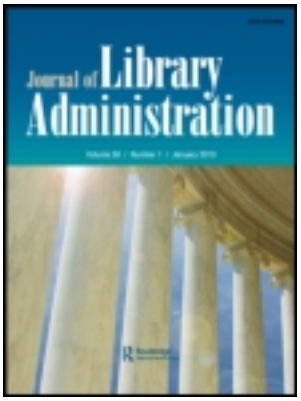

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Growing Readers: A Critical Analysis of Early Literacy Content for Parents on Canadian Public Library Websites

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Growing Readers: A Critical Analysis of Early Literacy Content for Parents on Canadian Public Library Websites

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ABSTRACT. *A critical analysis of 20 urban public library systems' websites in English-speaking Canada, this study critiques the prevailing messages about early literacy found on these websites and pays particular attention to content aimed at parents of young children. By seeking examples of attention to both diversity and inclusion, the researcher concluded that public library websites are not being used to their full potential to portray, include, and invite participation in early literacy learning opportunities for diverse families in urban communities, particularly those whose children may have disability labels as well as those who are new to the English language.*

KEYWORDS diversity, early literacy, public libraries, websites, parents

Library websites represent a rich source of easily accessible information about how public libraries attend to early literacy. Storytime listings and other information aimed at parents (including foster parents, custodial grandparents, and so on) of young children can begin to tell us about how public libraries are using their websites as tools to promote and support early literacy in diverse communities. By carefully examining website content, I hope to reveal some of the assumptions and beliefs that underlie messages to families about early literacy learning and teaching. After briefly considering the available research about library websites and explaining my methodology, this article then explores how the libraries in the sample present storytime program

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information and early literacy messages within those storytime program descriptions. I then examine the early literacy web content aimed specifically at parents of young children. Next, I analyze the images taken from the sample libraries storytime and early literacy pages. I conclude with a list of recommendations for public libraries with regard to expanding the inclusivity of web content about storytime and early literacy aimed at parents to better reflect the needs and interests of diverse families, including those whose children have disabilities, across Canada.

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Public libraries position and identify themselves as places for lifelong learning. In its mission statement, the Canadian Library Association states, "We believe that libraries and the principles of intellectual freedom and free universal access to information are key components of an open and democratic society" (Canadian Library Association, 2012). Viewing themselves as inclusive institutions where anyone can pursue information and literacy goals, many types of libraries try to meet the needs of increasingly diverse communities (Subramaniam, Rodriguez-Mori, Jaeger, & Franklin Hill, 2012). Within this general mandate to meet the needs of communities, public children's librarians work to maximize the benefit of the services they provide to the young children and their families who venture into their spaces and programs. Children's librarians provide early literacy programs and resources that build on knowledge of the well-publicized advances in brain research emphasizing the importance of the early childhood period in human development (DiPietro, 2000; Lloyd, Li & Hertzman, 2010; Shore, 1997). As places that are literally filled with books, children's libraries have always been literacy-rich environments. It is not uncommon to also see alphabet posters, developmental checklists, kindergarten readiness resources and writing and drawing tables and other preschool-like features in children's libraries as well as posted on the library's virtual spaces today. Clearly, children's librarians are deeply concerned with early literacy learning and actively involved in both providing resources and promoting practices that aim to support early literacy development (Ghoting & Martin-Díaz, 2006). Despite changes to the profession brought about by the initiative called Every Child Ready to Read (American Library Association, 2011), there remains a dearth of research about children's early literacy development in the context of the public library (Stooke & McKenzie, 2011). Additionally, as communities across the developed world grow more linguistically, ethnically, and developmentally diverse, not enough is known about how public libraries consider and respond to this diversity through their programs, services, and collections for children and families.

CRITICAL STANCE

Although the library field as a whole has multiple statements about diversity and inclusion (ALA, 2012; CLA, 2012), concerns persist about the public library as an accessible place for everyone. Insufficient library research that investigates diversity topics is available for practitioners. Also, as Western societies continue to become more diverse, academic courses that prepare librarians for working in such communities have not increased within library education programs (Subramaniam et al., 2012). Even less is known about diverse families who face multiple barriers to inclusion, such as newcomers who have disabilities or whose children have disabilities. In the very few recent studies about children's early literacy in the context of children's libraries, several authors have made note of the "mainstream-ness" of the participants (Becker, 2012; Nichols, 2011; Stooke & McKenzie, 2010). That is, participants in these studied library programs have almost all been members of majority/mainstream communities with regard to their ethnicities, cultures, languages, and, as far as was discernible, income levels. As Canada's communities become increasingly linguistically, ethnically, and culturally diverse (CIC News, 2012), and the incidence of people with disabilities rises (Statistics Canada, 2006), this study intends to critique library website content about early literacy through what I have named a "diversity/inclusion lens."

This lens views "mainstream" families (possibly some of the following characteristics: European heritage, fluently English-speaking; non-disabled; middle income) as, generally easily able to access, and well-represented in, the early literacy opportunities available in their communities. This lens views "non-mainstream" families (possibly some of the following characteristics: non-European heritage; Aboriginal heritage; ESL/ELL; refugee/immigrant; labelled with a disability; lower income) as generally facing barriers to access, and not as well-represented in the early literacy opportunities present in their communities. By examining Canadian public library web content about early literacy with this lens, I aim to provide some insight about public libraries' efforts to promote early literacy on their websites and how web content might be developed to better represent the linguistic, ethnocultural, socioeconomic, and developmental diversity of families. This examination will contribute to what is known about how public libraries represent early literacy on their webpages and suggest strategies for furthering their aims to reach diverse communities.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

In a study of academic library websites that investigates how diversity is represented on their webpages, Mestre (2011) states that websites "make an instant statement regarding the library's diversity commitment" and then goes

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on to say that the library's web presence "creates an impression of the library in the viewer" (p. 101). She also discusses how webpages can make diversity more visible and then surmises that those who do not see themselves, their values, or their needs reflected may be isolated and reluctant to further explore the services of the library (p. 102).

As digital content becomes more widely used across all sectors of society, websites have been scrutinized in a variety of ways in a number of academic fields of inquiry. In a study closely related to this one, Anderson, Lenters and McTavish (2008) analyzed the websites of family literacy organizations and programs and concluded that fairly narrow views of family literacy are portrayed, usually invoking the message that reading storybooks to one's children is the best path to reading success in school. Similarly, Anderson, Streelasky, and Anderson (2007) analyzed the images found on family literacy websites and concluded that the dominant image is that of a mother reading to her child. Both studies suggest that deficit notions of families and families' literacy practices persist.

Research has only rarely investigated the role of public libraries in children's literacy development and the role of the public library's website content aimed at parents has not been investigated in the literature. An overview of literature about children's literacy development and public libraries reveals that the role of the public library has evolved and that libraries can be considered sites of family interactions where literacy practices are enacted and encouraged in a variety of ways (Becker, 2012; De Groot & Branch, 2009; Nichols, 2011). Therefore, this study aims to illuminate how libraries present messages about early literacy to parents on library websites and how those messages reflect or do not reflect community diversity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What messages (text and images) about early literacy aimed at parents are found on English language urban Canadian public library websites?
- Do early literacy messages (text and images) aimed at parents on English language urban Canadian library websites reflect or acknowledge family diversity?

METHOD & PROCEDURES

Consulting the Canadian Urban Libraries Council website (www.culc.ca) generated a sample of urban libraries from across Canada. Urban libraries in Canada are defined as those library systems and districts that serve populations of over 100,000. Library membership in CULC is optional. From their current membership list of 40 members, French language-only websites were

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eliminated as the researcher has relatively limited proficiency in the French language. Two library systems that the researcher is still closely affiliated with were then eliminated to avoid conflict of interest. By dividing the remaining libraries into provinces and building numbered lists of each province, the even-numbered libraries in Ontario were selected first for the sample for a total of ten Ontarian sites. From British Columbia, even numbers were also selected for a list of three sites. Since the other provinces have far fewer urban systems, and to achieve a total sample size of 20 from across the country, all CULC members from Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta were added to the sample. Finally, a randomly selected site from the remaining BC libraries was added to the sample to make a total of 20 libraries from 6 provinces.

The purpose of this article is not to compare regions, but rather to consider the range of content, including images, of early literacy promotion within Canada's English language, urban public library websites, focusing on issues of diversity and inclusion. This sample should therefore offer a broad overview of Canada's English language libraries' web content regarding early literacy and begin to reveal some of the ways in which public libraries use websites to promote early literacy in their communities.

A visual scan was taken of each library system's website and brief notes were taken about where to find information about storytime and early literacy resources specifically for parents. After this cursory scan, the storytime and early literacy data from each library system was copied and pasted in a Microsoft Word table document, using these three main headings: library name and key images, storytime descriptions, and other early literacy resources.

After reviewing the total data set, the researcher compiled quantitative data to answer the following questions about the website content in the sample set.

1. Does this library offer a range of storytimes for children in their early years and their parents/caregivers?
2. Do any of these storytime offerings overtly represent community diversity in any way?
3. Does this website have a specific page aimed at parents?
4. If images (i.e., photographs) are present on these webpages (storytime listings pages and early literacy resources pages), is diversity (including developmental diversity) easy to discern or not?

By analyzing the trends noted in the quantitative data, the researcher then explored specific longer segments by coding for themes using the qualitative research software Atlas-Ti. Major themes explored in detail were: Cultural and/or linguistic diversity, developmental inclusion, kindergarten and reading readiness. The thematic coding in Atlas-Ti resulted in groups of data that could be separately examined and considered. Similarly, photographs and

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other visual images were examined, coded, and analyzed according to the same major themes.

FINDINGS

Early Literacy Messages Within Storytime Descriptions

Storytime is ubiquitous at Canadian public libraries. All 20 sample libraries offered storytime programs for children under the age of 6. These were described in a number of ways, but there were interesting commonalities seen across the sample. A word-level analysis of 150 unique storytime descriptions reveals that the ten most frequently used words across all 20 libraries' listings were: songs, rhymes, stories, fun, books, fingerplays, learning, interactive, love, reading. Considered together, these ten words reveal the essence of most library storytimes.

At the sentence level, most storytime programs are written as encouraging invitations to participate in what promises to be a good time for all. The following examples typify most of the storytime program descriptions that are found across the 20 sites.

- "Join us for stories, songs and rhymes."
- "Have fun sharing great stories and songs."

Of particular interest in this analysis of storytime descriptions are the frequent references to bonding and attachment within several of the storytime program descriptions.

- "Bond with your one-year-old by sitting on the floor to do rhymes, songs, finger games and stories together."
- "Program emphasizes bonding through lap rhymes and songs, board books, and very simple stories."

These frequently occurred within the descriptions of branded Parent-Child Mother Goose© (PCMG©) programs aimed at parents and caregivers of babies and toddlers, although some occurred in descriptions of programs that were not identified as bona fide Parent-Child Mother Goose© programs. The PCMG© was initially developed in 1984 by a social worker and a therapist who were both also storytellers. The program model was intended to help at-risk parents learn ways to bond with their babies through rhyming and singing. However, with its strong emphasis on oral language development and "the pleasure and power of rhymes, songs and stories" (Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, 2012) it also provides a model for libraries to provide language and literacy programs for parents and their very young children. Training is regularly provided to librarians and other

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community workers. The PCMG© program has been taken up with enthusiasm by public librarians across Canada and abroad who often co-facilitate with other agency staff in community settings outside of library branches (Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, 2012). This website study revealed that 25% of the libraries in the sample offered either bona fide PCMG© programs or very similar programs that nonetheless frequently specified the bonding aspects of the program's original mandate within the social-work realm of parent support.

Cultural and linguistic diversity themes are woven throughout the storytime descriptions with approximately half the sample libraries indicating at least one storytime that is either delivered in a language other than English and/or is aimed at meeting the needs of newcomer/ESL/ELL families. Of the non-English storytimes offered, most are French, with Mandarin, Urdu, Punjabi, Spanish, and Farsi also advertised in some locations. Most libraries, however, do not provide translated webpages for adults who are unfamiliar with written English, and none provide specific storytime information (i.e., descriptions, dates and times) in languages other than English or French. Only one library overtly states on their webpage that all their storytimes (not just their ESL offerings) are appropriate for those families who are new to English.

> Great for ESL! Library storytimes are an excellent introduction to English, and knowledge of English is not required to attend storytimes.

Additionally, as the data was collected in the late fall of 2012, two libraries in this sample advertised special programs to celebrate the South Asian festival Diwali. Many programs also advertised winter, snow, and Christmas-themed programs during this timeframe, although all the Christmas-themed programs were advertised as being about Santa Claus, Christmas trees, decorations and presents, rather than the birth of Jesus Christ. One site included a variety of winter celebrations in one program as described below.

> Winter Celebrations Around the World: Join us for stories, songs, and rhymes that reflect multicultural winter celebrations around the world.

Three library systems advertise a number of different Aboriginal storytime programs such as this one.

> Aboriginal Family Storytime: Join us as we share songs, stories, and rhymes inspired by the Aboriginal culture. The whole family is invited to enjoy this entertaining program.

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Some of these programs indicate that they are run in partnership with Aboriginal organizations and/or led by Aboriginal storytellers. There is no indication that the programs are specifically for Aboriginal families and the descriptions are interpreted as encouraging non-Aboriginal families to attend as well.

Storytime descriptions frequently include statements about preparing for kindergarten and reading readiness as program goals.

> A new program to help get your child ready for and excited about kindergarten. Sing, rhyme and read together while exploring basic concepts and FUN-damentals including letters, numbers, shapes and colours.

Some of these were noted to be programs in which preschoolers were invited to attend independently of their caregivers.

> Join us for a fun-filled circle time, where kids listen to stories, sing songs, and start learning some of the social skills needed to get them ready for kindergarten. Children attend the program alone while caregivers stay in the library.

Across this sample, about half of the storytimes aimed at 3 to 5 year olds suggest independent attendance as preparation for kindergarten.

Almost all the libraries in this sample offer "family storytimes" for all ages of children to attend with their caregivers. These family storytimes (usually called just that) are much more likely to be described as "fun" or "cozy" programs for everyone to enjoy together. Several places offer family storytimes in the evening, too, a practice that offers working parents a chance to attend library programs with their young children.

- "Share stories, songs and games for the whole family."
- "Wear your PJ's, bring your stuffie, and settle in for some bedtime stories, songs, puppets and fun!"

While cultural and linguistic diversity is frequently attended to in storytime program offerings found across the sample (i.e., programs offered in other languages or bilingual programs), the same cannot be said for developmental diversity or inclusion of children with disabilities. Only one program was found that overtly suggests the appropriateness of a particular program for children with disabilities.

> Sing, Sign, Laugh and Learn: Join us for singing, rhyming and signing. Parents will learn strategies to engage their children and enhance their communication and development through repetition, visuals and

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> movement. For children up to age three (including those with developmental delays) accompanied by a grown-up.

Another interesting program features stories told in sign language but does not overtly state that this program is intended for deaf children and indeed suggests that anyone interested in learning American Sign Language (ASL) is welcome to attend.

> Sign-a-Story: A reading program presented by a Deaf Storyteller using American Sign Language (ASL). Participants will learn to sign the text of a picture book and develop ASL skills and literacy skills at the same time. This program is most appropriate for children ages 2–6. Older siblings, family members and friends who are interested in learning ASL are welcome to attend also. You do not need to know American Sign Language in order to participate.

Still another program seems to be more like a baby signing course than an actual storytime program. Interestingly, the program description does not suggest that signing might be especially appropriate for children who have been labelled with a range of disabilities, thereby missing an opportunity to encourage them to participate. As children with disabilities are often in need of intensive therapies and support in their language and communication domains, this program may be particularly beneficial for such children and their caregivers.

> Sign, Say and Play: Bring your baby, aged 6 months to 2.5 years, and join us for a three week session of Sign, Say and Play! These classes are an excellent way to practice signing . . . .

Because of the inclusion of sign language, these three programs may be especially appealing to some families of children with disabilities who may benefit from learning ways to support their communication skills development via signing.

While none of the 150 program descriptions that were analyzed overtly state that they are only for children with typical development, neither do many program descriptions allude to, describe, or invite the range of development found in diverse communities of young children. After careful examination of all the program descriptions in this sample, only two program descriptions were found to include some subtle words and phrases that suggest that these programs are more inclusive of children with a range of developmental features, including disabilities.

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- "Fun for Ones: For 12- to 23-month-olds and their caregivers, this is a 30-minute story time held over 6 weeks featuring movement rhymes, songs, stories, and sensory activities that appeal to the active child."
- "Mumble Jumble Storytimes: A little bit of this and a little bit of that: stories, singing, dancing, puppets and lots of fun and laughter for kids of all ages and stages!"

While these programs do not appear to be designed specifically for children with disabilities, they describe a setting where a range of development is welcome and accommodated, thereby representing an inclusive setting (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Finally, one library website shows a program to celebrate Down Syndrome Awareness Month, which includes an informal meet-and-greet as well as a screening of a documentary film about Down syndrome. The promotional content includes a booklist of picture books about Down syndrome.

What was sought in this sample of storytime descriptions was evidence that programs are indeed inclusive of children with a range of disabilities in their communities who are expressly invited to benefit from these regular library story programs alongside their typically developing age peers. In contrast, frequently seen statements like "Library programs are designed with specific ages and developmental stages in mind" indicate an assumption that all children of similar ages present with similar development. In contrast, although not overtly welcoming to children with developmental challenges, program descriptions that welcome all "ages and stages" provide an example that sounds more inclusive of children with developmental differences. This phrase may be all that is needed to allay the concerns of parents of children who have developmental delays and disabilities, who may wonder if and how their children will be welcomed and included.

Early Literacy Information and Resources for Parents Only

This study takes a particular interest in what messages about early literacy directed at parents can be found on Canadian public library websites. While there are plenty of references to the importance of early literacy within storytime descriptions themselves, there is a range of content to be found that is separate from the actual storytime programs. Ninety percent (18) of the 20 sample libraries contain at least some early literacy messages directed at parents and caregivers on their websites, although there is a huge range in terms of volume and types of resources aimed at parents of young children. Sixteen library systems use the content from either or both of the editions of the PLA/ALSC initiative called Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library. Other resources include the websites Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org) and PBS Parents: Reading and Language (http://www.pbs.org/parents/readinglanguage/). Many libraries offer

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customized resources and programs specifically for early literacy support in their communities. Some of these are available in several languages, reflecting the linguistic diversity of these urban libraries' communities. Much of this kind of customized early literacy content focuses on kindergarten readiness and/or the kindergarten year. These resources typically include booklists, activity and book kits to borrow, as well as specialized storytime programs.

Visual Images

While public library websites generally portray a range of ages and family configurations, this study seeks to investigate portrayals of early literacy within library webpages aimed at parents. Most libraries in the sample show images of young children in close proximity to related text about programs, services, and collections for young children. Pictures of children with books, with and without adults interacting with them, are most frequently seen across the sample. Slightly fewer pictures show children engaged in other activities (such as drawing or playing with play dough) with and without adults shown. Children are often shown reading what appear to be adult books. Children shown pretending to read adult books and newspapers are cute in the same way that children dressing up in high heels and carrying purses are cute. They are playing at being a grown up. However, as children actually do gain early literacy skills by interacting with children's books, showing children reading grown-up tomes somewhat misses the opportunity to showcase the libraries' holdings that are developmentally appropriate for young children. A baby or toddler shown looking at and manipulating a board book made especially for little hands would better demonstrate what library resources are available for free for babies in any given community's library.

In just over half of sample, images are shown in which cultural diversity is fairly easy to discern. What I assumed are stock photos are frequently used as visual elements on early literacy pages, and cartoon-like icons showing people with varying skintones are featured on a small number of samples. Only four of the 20 sample sites contain images that visually portray any aspects of disability. Of these relatively rare pictures, two are cartoon images of a child in a wheelchair, taken from a recent Summer Reading Club illustration, while another shows a child learning sign language and another shows a child with Down syndrome (in a promotion for a Down syndrome specific event) under the caption "Celebrate Me!" While census data suggests that disability rates in children are estimated to be around 5% percent, the absence of any truly inclusive images is a concern. Inclusive images would show children with visible disabilities participating in regular programs alongside their age peers. A child who has Down syndrome is obviously well-qualified to promote a program about Down syndrome awareness, but that same

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child should be equally qualified to promote any of the regular early literacy programs in his or her community.

DISCUSSION

Dominant Views of Early Literacy

Early literacy texts and images found on library websites aimed at parents point out dominant views held by public libraries about the promotion of early literacy within their communities. As interest in, and concerns about, the first 5 years of life has increased across multiple fields, so have agendas that aim to maximize what is considered to be a critical learning period (ALA, 2011). In much of the Western world, this general concern about young children's development is conflated with ambitious early education agendas that seek to even the playing field for all children before school entry (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Neuman & Celano, 2013). While librarians have always provided support to children's reading development, prior to the early brain development and reading research that has emerged in the past few decades, children's librarians were mainly concerned with providing material to best suit children's interests across the years of childhood (Stooke & McKenzie, 2011). The partnership between the American Library Association, the Association for Library Service to Children, the Public Library Association, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development that eventually resulted in initiative now called Every Child Ready to Read® (ECRR®) has changed children's librarianship in both the U.S.A. and Canada (ALA, 2011). Its decade-long influence is clear in the data gathered for this study. A recent survey of Canada's libraries resulted in a study that recommends nationwide adoption of the tenets of ECRR® (McKend, 2010), so it is possible that the reach of ECRR® within Canada's public libraries will extend even further. Borrowing directly from ECRR® discourse, most of the early literacy content aimed at parents emphasizes the importance of building specific early literacy skills and generally promotes the idea that the library is a valuable resource for parents as they help prepare their children for kindergarten. Parents are frequently referred to as their child's first teacher in these messages. Additionally, library storytimes, offered as they are across the years of early childhood, are positioned as the ultimate school-readiness tool, and although generally described as fun, the activities therein are frequently described as being good ways to build a love of reading or kindergarten readiness. Both editions of ECRR® material for parents, either separately or in combination, appear on 80% of the libraries sampled, indicating a fairly broad Canadian uptake of a resource developed largely from so-called evidence-based American research about the best ways to prepare children for reading. Interestingly, even though ECRR® is designed primarily

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as a teaching tool for library practitioners to use in face-to-face workshops with groups of parents and caregivers, this study found no ECRR® (or similar) workshops advertised for parents or caregivers at the time the sample data was gathered. Finally, while many practitioners and researchers continue to promote the use of ECRR® curriculum in both the U.SA and Canada, there remain concerns about this resource's privileged position within the early literacy resources provided by public libraries (Stooke & McKenzie, 2011).

Rationale for Expanded Views of Early Literacy

Even though a great deal of early literacy research has been conducted and published over the past few decades, very little research on this topic focuses on public libraries, or the ways in which public libraries contribute to the development of early literacy skills in young children. ECRR® tenets were developed out of cognitive, skills-based educational research (not library and information studies research) about reading readiness (Stooke & McKenzie, 2011). The resulting curriculum is designed to teach parents and other caregivers about what they can (and should) do to support the child's reading readiness before they arrive at school where they will likely encounter the same skills-based literacy learning techniques. Because the field of children's librarianship lacks its own early literacy research, library practitioners have nothing of their own to draw on in this regard, and it is hardly surprising that practitioners concerned with early literacy welcomed the opportunity to learn more and do more in their communities. The problem with ECRR® being the primary "go to" resource for early literacy in the field of children's librarianship (and therefore appearing frequently on library websites) stems from the resource's very narrow view of early literacy and how this narrow view might limit its inclusiveness of and relevance for the diverse communities served by public libraries. Stooke and McKenzie (2011) state that "the narrow framing of research in children's service professional discourse could undermine the public library's ability to achieve important goals with respect to social inclusion . . ." (p. 24). They argue that viewing literacy development only through cognitive (skills-based) research "cannot be responsive to the cultural and linguistic diversity that characterizes Canada . . ." (p. 24). This current study of 20 Canadian public library websites reflects that reality, as no evidence of a broader view of early literacy, beyond the skills-based, reading readiness frame, was found on any of the sites examined, nor did any of the links provided on these sites lead to resources that convey a broader view of early literacy. Of particular concern is the fact that none of the libraries' websites portrayed a nuanced understanding that all families engage in and support their young children's learning in ways that are culturally important to them, and that this support may not look like Western notions of early literacy (i.e., reading books to young children). According

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to Hamer and Adams (2003), a broader sociocultural perspective of literacy in early childhood should be understood to mean:

> the experiences, practices, attitudes and knowledge experienced by young children in multiple settings that contribute to their understanding, enjoying, engaging with and using oral, visual and written language and symbols of their own and other cultures to express their individual identity and allow active participation in literate society. (p. 13)

This website study, however, revealed that early literacy is framed mainly as a set of cognitive skills to be developed prior to school entry, and not as a range of experiences influenced by myriad sociocultural factors.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

While 55% of the sample sites have pictures that show a reasonable amount of ethnocultural diversity, there are still relatively few non-English language resources about early literacy made available to parents who are not familiar with written English. Only two libraries of the 20 in the sample offered extensive multilingual resources about early literacy and child development that were aimed at newcomer families. Even so, the content of these resources still reflected fairly narrow views of early literacy and, once again, emphasized Western notions of school readiness above all else. While broader representations and understandings of what literacy looks like in different cultures may help diverse families to access library programs, collections, and services, none were found in this sample.

Stooke and McKenzie (2011) suggest that what is needed is a "counter-narrative" to the so-called "evidence-based" ECRR® program so that librarians can apply their own professional judgement and take critical looks at early literacy from differing perspectives. Sociocultural views of early literacy, such as the one presented by Hamer and Adams (2003), are absent from most academic research about children's library services and this lack of research in our field was certainly evident in this website-content study. The significant gap in what we know about children's libraries in diverse communities and how they support early literacy should be viewed as priority for future research. Informed by sociocultural views of early literacy, librarians may still choose to utilize the tenets of ECRR® in their programs, services and collections, but they could do so with a broader understanding of how children's literacy development is being supported in diverse communities and that mismatches do not necessarily herald risks of reading failure.

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Including Children With Disabilities

Research about young children and libraries has not yet specifically examined early literacy support for children with disabilities. As children with even severe disabilities arrive at school at the same time as their age peers, school readiness checklists and exhortations to promote independence have less relevance to parents who have spent their children's early years contending with their children's developmental challenges (Pivik, 2008). "Ready" or not, these children still arrive in, one hopes, inclusive classrooms and are still learning literacy (as they have been doing all along) although their skills may not resemble ECRR® types of achievements. For example, despite the elevated importance of phonological skills in reading research, these orally based skills may be difficult or impossible for children whose disabilities include speech delays or impairments (Kliewer, 2008). Other avenues to literacy should be taken such as those offered by multimodal, including, but not limited to visual and digital literacy resources (Burne, Knafelc, Melonis, & Heyn, 2011; Flewitt, Nind, & Paylor, 2009). Parents may seek help from librarians as they support their child's growing literacy, and children with disabilities should be included in how children's librarians support all families in diverse communities. Expanded views of early literacy (i.e., those that go beyond things like phonological skills and school readiness) can help practitioners learn about ways that literacy skills can be developed for children labelled with a variety of disabilities. These expanded, flexible, and inclusive views of early literacy and the ways that libraries' collections, programs, and services can support them should be made evident on library webpages for parents and caregivers to see.

SUMMARY

Although the web content in the sample provides a range of resources and promotes a large number of community-based opportunities for families, a division between "mainstream" and "special" is readily apparent. Most mainstream programs and services are presented only in English and often include stated age limits and developmental skills needed to attend. Specialized programs for newcomer ESL/ELL families are found in several places, but only one library also includes the statement that regular storytimes were appropriate for ESL families. Only a few programs seem to anticipate the participation of children with disabilities, and very few mainstream programs include descriptions suggesting that children with a range of development could thrive within them. This critical analysis does not mean that ESL/ELL families or children with disabilities are unwelcome or excluded from actual children's library programs across the country; it is my assumption that they are definitely very welcome to participate if they choose to attend.

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Nevertheless, the way these programs are framed on the library's website may affect family decisions to participate or not. Families who choose not to participate because they have encountered overt or hidden barriers on the website represent a missed opportunity for librarians to help them in what they are already doing to support their child's early literacy learning. Finally, in terms of visual representation, the only photographs of children with discernible disabilities were associated with specialized programs (i.e., ASL, Down syndrome awareness). Inclusion aims would be better served if children with disabilities were included in the many photographs used to illustrate mainstream/regular programs, services, and collections alongside their peers without disabilities. It is hoped that this study's findings will inform libraries' website content aimed at parents in Canada's increasingly diverse communities.

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LIMITATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

By gathering from only 20 library systems, this study is not necessarily representative of early literacy messages across the nation's public libraries as a whole. A much larger study that included non-CULC and smaller municipal and rural systems would be needed to draw more comprehensive conclusions about the state of early literacy on public library websites in Canada. The data collected for this study was gathered within the last 2 weeks of November 2012 from 20 urban library systems in Canada. The data taken from the sample libraries' websites is not intended to represent the actual current, ongoing activities at these libraries. However, since libraries frequently and actively engage in the production and exchange of digital information, library website data can demonstrate a great deal about individual libraries' activities and resources aimed to support early literacy in their own communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Create and Maintain Separate Parent Pages

The information needs of parents (i.e., foster parents, custodial grandparents) are different than those who work with children. Library systems should consider developing a separate page for parents that addresses the resources each library has for parents as they support their children's early literacy development (e.g., storytime kits, kindergarten kits). There may be some duplication of the content and links for parents and teachers, but a dedicated parent site will allow librarians to customize web resources to suit the needs of families in diverse communities.

Translate and Adapt All Parent Pages

Translation of web content into the non-English languages found in each library's community can provide instant access to early literacy information and programs for community members who are not yet familiar with English. All storytime program descriptions should state somewhere that they are appropriate for families and children who are new to or learning English, even if the programs themselves are only conducted in English. Two of the sampled libraries' websites also contained links to short videos in multiple languages explaining key programs and resources. This practice is an excellent way to reach diverse families. Also, including information (in all locally spoken languages) for parents of children with disabilities may help alleviate any concerns they might have about inclusion in library programs. For example, parent information pages could mention that programs welcome all children, regardless of developmental skill level, and that locations are accessible by wheelchairs and walkers. A general statement like *"Children's librarians are available for parents to speak to about their children's early literacy and any other questions or concerns you may have"* may go a long way to help parents reach out to children's librarians for resources and support as well as help them decide to attend storytime with their child.

Expanded, Sociocultural Views of Early Literacy and Strength-Based Approaches

Librarians should develop and provide some alternate views of literacy for families to access on library websites. For example, oral traditions, traditional songs, and other cultural transmissions such as preparing for special holidays can all be expressions of literacy from a sociocultural standpoint (Hamer & Adams, 2003; Hamer, 2005). Emphasize that the library can provide parents with resources for all the ways in which parents support their child's literacy development both before and after they begin formal schooling. Point out the library's role in lifelong learning, and that literacy goes far beyond traditional print-literacy skill development. Take strength-based and culturally sensitive approaches to supporting and promoting early literacy development in diverse families. ECRR® 2nd edition uses language and terminology that may be more accessible to both parents and practitioners alike and may reduce confusion between the two editions and what each says about specific early literacy skills and how to build them. ECCR® parent-workshop preambles should emphasize what the parents in the community are already doing that support early literacy in ways that are culturally and developmentally appropriate for their children. In conversations and interactions with parents, invite them to speak about their cultures and how literacy and learning is

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supported within their families and then invite parents to ask questions about whatever they are curious about in terms of their child's literacy development. Librarians can play a supportive and non-intimidating role in helping newcomer families learn about Canada's schooling system, what they can expect when their children begin school, and how it may differ from the schooling with which they may be most familiar.

Photographic Representation of the Diversity of Families in Your Community

The web can be a rich visual resource as well as a text resource. Images send strong messages about your library's culture of acceptance. It is important for website readers to see true representations of your library's various communities in its virtual pages. Libraries can take advantage of the ease in which community diversity can be represented by asking permission to photograph a range of real people with their own children taking part in programs and services. These can include community settings where librarians do their work as long as real people are doing real things that are meaningful to them. Books and reading can of course be shown, but keep in mind that drawing, painting, writing, singing, dancing, and playing with puppets, play dough and blocks as well as many other pursuits build literacy skills in early childhood. Also, although disability is not always visible in photographs, it is important to visually represent disability in ways that invite participation. Using photographs that show children both with and without disabilities participating together is likely the best way to achieve this inclusion goal.

Relax Storytime Rules

Relax or drop some or all storytime "rules" in favor of a more welcoming, flexible approach to early literacy program attendance. The vast majority of libraries in this sample already offer something usually referred to as "family storytime" that is open to all ages, with parents or caregivers. Since this is such a widespread practice, it may be confusing as well as inconsistent to also have many programs to which attendees must adhere to stricter guidelines about age, developmental stage, and independence. An open and drop-in family storytime seems to be an approach that supports all families as they familiarize themselves with the range of early literacy resources at the library, including the activities at the storytime itself (songs, stories, rhymes and so on). Offering weekend and evening programs may encourage working parents to attend with their young children. The learning benefits for all ages and stages come directly from the playful language interactions modelled and supported during storytime. Translations of storytime descriptions should be easily accessible on library webpages for families not yet familiar with

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English. Emphasize the universality of fun, that children can participate at their own rates, and that everyone is both welcome and included.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As a professional children's librarian for 17 years, I came to this study with questions about how the profession represents early literacy work on the web. I recognize that a great deal of the profession's most valuable work in early literacy goes unseen and unadvertised on library webpages. Also, a short description of rhymes, songs, and stories does not do justice to what happens in a storytime in real life (McKenzie & Stooke, 2007), nor are early literacy resources and links on a webpage the same as face-to-face conversations with families about their children's literacy learning. My analysis, critique, and recommendations are not reflective of the actual work my professional colleagues are doing every day to support early literacy in communities. However, my exploration of web data has led to my overall impression that public library webpages are not being used to their full potential to both represent family diversity and promote a range of inclusive early literacy resources and practices in our communities. As discussed by other researchers such as Stooke and McKenzie, the skills-based early literacy agenda that prioritizes school readiness is problematic from both cultural and developmental perspectives. Additionally, the absence of broader views of early literacy on library websites may point to the need for children's librarians' work to be explored in research that takes a sociocultural perspective of literacy. In this way and with some of our own research to inform our practices, I believe that the profession as a whole can expand our reach into communities. In an era where it is commonplace for people to seek initial information about something they are unfamiliar with on the Internet, it important for public library websites to thoughtfully showcase diverse, inclusive, and responsive services, programs and collections to everyone who lands there.

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