

Public library virtual storytimes: Meeting school readiness and community needs through a socially distant approach

STATEMENT OF NATIONAL NEED: No empirical research exists to validate the value of virtual library programs for young children, yet public libraries nationwide have moved traditional storytime programs online to meet the needs of families during the COVID-19 crisis. Storytime programs are a cornerstone of public library programming and were the most highly attended programs libraries offered prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Given public libraries' longstanding role in school readiness,² public libraries, both large and small, and in communities of all sizes,³ elected to move storytime programming online as a means to support young children and families at the onset of the pandemic, and the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) began curating resources to support librarians' virtual efforts almost immediately.⁴ Virtual storytime (VST) program offerings are likely to continue in the future.^{5/6} Yet, it is unclear how, if at all, VST programs are meeting the needs of young children and/or their caregivers, and this is especially true for the most underserved populations of the community who tend to be further marginalized in fully remote learning situations:⁷ those with financial insecurities, insufficient access to or proficiency with technology, language differences, disabilities and/or developmental delays. Given the prominence of storytime programming in public libraries, its role as a gateway into other library services,⁸ and the transition to virtual delivery; empirical investigations focused on the reach and effectiveness of VST programming offered by public libraries are essential.

This project proposes to examine and inform current practice in the development and delivery of public library VST programs. This project will support the IMLS Agency-Level Goal of **promoting lifelong learning** among young children and their caregivers. The overarching question we will answer through this exploratory Research in Service to Practice project is: **How do public library virtual storytime programs meet the needs of ALL young children and their caregivers?** To answer this question, we will conduct two multi-state studies to inform the creation of a set of guidelines that can subsequently be used by public libraries across the rural to urban continuum to ensure VST programs are accessible and beneficial to young children and their caregivers.

PROJECT DESIGN: This three-year project will consist of two sub-ordinate studies *Study 1* will be a holistic investigation of elements of VST, and *Study 2* will assess the needs of stakeholder groups. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the findings of these two studies will be incorporated to build evidence-based guidelines immediately applicable to the field. We will obtain Institutional Review Board approval prior to engaging in any human subjects research.

Strategic Collaborations and Demonstrated Expertise— Drs. Maria Cahill and Soohyung Joo will serve as co-PIs, and this project is a natural extension of their current collaboration, the *Storytimes for School Readiness and Community Needs* (LG-96-17-0199-17) multi-state project and will employ many of the same data collection and analysis protocols. The PIs will convene a strategic advisory board that includes state library agency youth services consultants, the co-Chair of the ALSC Early Childhood Programs and Services Committee, and researchers with expertise in both library services and programs for young children and qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Participants— Working with state library agencies and association advisors, we will solicit participation from public libraries in all nine US regions. From those volunteers, we will draw a stratified random sample of 27 libraries, three in each region, based on population of the legal service area and rural/urban designation to ensure the sample equally represents urban, suburban, and rural communities as well as the continuum of small libraries to large library systems. As described below, other participants include library directors, VST librarians, caregivers and parents, and young children.

Data collection— Study 1: We will obtain video records of four VST sessions from each public library participant, totaling 108 VST programs. All utterances in VST programs will be fully transcribed. A \$100 payment will be offered to each participating library. **Study 2:** The research team will survey library directors nationwide and conduct semi-structured interviews with VST librarians at each site. We will survey parents/caregivers at each site, and the survey will contain two optional questions: one requesting contact information if the caregiver is interested in entering a drawing for a \$25 gift card, and a second one requesting contact information if the caregiver would be willing to participate in an individual virtual interview with their child. From those who agree to participate, we will randomly select a total of 25 caregiver-child dyads to interview and offer each a \$50 gift card. All interviews will be recorded and then transcribed.

Data analysis— Study 1: we will use systematic observational techniques and analyze various elements in VST, such as accessibility for traditionally underserved groups, interactivity, strategies employed, materials used, visual/audio effects, editing techniques, and inclusion of health, safety and emotional well-being elements. Using natural language processing and text mining, we will measure the language complexity to assess the potential benefits of VST on young children’s language learning. Finally, we will use three hierarchical levels of storytime factors to examine the impacts of program, librarian, and library factors on the quality of interactions, strategies employed, and the language environment. **Study 2:** we will quantitatively and qualitatively analyze surveys, and employ iterative, comparative, and inductive coding to make meaning and generate findings from interviews.⁹

Translating Studies 1 & 2 for evidence-based practice— The project team will consolidate findings to develop evidence-based guidelines for VST. We will examine all empirical findings from *Study 1* and *Study 2* and work closely with the advisory board to identify the components to be included in the guidelines.

DIVERSITY PLAN: Inclusion of libraries from all nine regions of the US ensures that this project addresses the circumstances of the full spectrum of young child populations, and sampling techniques ensure representation of urban, suburban and rural libraries. Additionally, the project is attuned to examining how VST programs are being created and delivered to ensure accessibility for traditionally underserved groups including those with financial insecurities, insufficient access to or proficiency with technology, language differences, and disabilities and/or developmental delays.

NATIONAL IMPACT: This project will lead to an enhanced understanding of VST practices and community needs. Public library VST is a topic that has not been previously studied, and it is imperative to learn about the entire sphere of the VST domain to yield empirical evidence-driven guidelines that are well aligned with the needs of different stakeholders. The guidelines will inform public libraries of the diverse needs of stakeholders and offer comprehensive strategies to support child learning and well-being, including attention to health, safety, and emotional well-being. The guidelines will be applicable to libraries large and small and in rural, suburban and urban communities as well as museums, and other educational organizations that plan virtual programming for children. To ensure that the recommendations of this study are immediately accessible, we will share our preliminary findings as a form of gray literature reports as early as possible through a project web site. We will also share our research findings and guidelines at regional and national professional conferences as well as through professional and academic journals.

BUDGET: The total award sought is \$319,563: \$102,776 for salary and fringe benefits for the co-PIs; \$89,460 for student assistants; \$12,000 for travel; \$6,225 for research subject payments; \$3,600 for the advisory board; and \$105,502 for indirect costs.

REFERENCES:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Z8w5CDjoMmLSHsCcQBHkwAcQD5c3WDeH/view?usp=sharing>