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Storytime Can Be Social Justice Time

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Natasha is a Youth Librarian at the Multnomah County Library's Hollywood location and serves as the Chair of OLA's Children's Services Division. In her professional life, she does programming and reader's advisory for kids ages birth–18 and the adults who raise and teach them. This includes storytimes for babies through preschoolers and moderating two family graphic novel book groups: one for grades 2–3 and one for grades 4–5, plus their favorite adults. She's a member of the Amelia Bloomer Project committee for ALA's Feminist Task Force, and when not actively librarianship she plays board games, walks her dogs, searches for the perfect taco, and hoards comic books like a dragon hoards gold.

A great philosopher* once said, "I believe the children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way." Libraries have long held this belief, with records dating back to the 1800s showing a history of U.S. public libraries offering materials, services, and programs that support language acquisition and literacy specifically aimed at children (History and Traditions). Providing age-appropriate storytimes aligned with research-supported early literacy strategies is a cornerstone of that belief.

But storytimes are not just about getting young children ready for the educational aspects of school. Storytimes are an amazing opportunity to give children world knowledge outside their own experiences and to model for adults how to be aware of and inclusive in their children's early learning. As author Grace Lin states in her [TED Talk](#), "as much as kids need books to be mirrors, kids also need books to be windows; kids who always see themselves in books need to be able to see things from other viewpoints. How can we expect kids to get along with others in this world, to empathize, and to share if they never see outside themselves?" Many parents say that part of the appeal of storytimes is the opportunity to interact with other children and families. Storytimes are when many children meet families from different races, cultures, and countries of origin, either in person or through the pages of the books read to them.

Many libraries throughout the state offer storytimes in Spanish, Russian, and other languages. My library system offers storytimes in five languages as well as culturally-responsive and adaptive programs such as Black Storytime and Sensory Storytime for children on the autism spectrum and/or with sensory processing disorders. While these are good-faith efforts, I believe we can do more. Families attending any library storytime should feel seen, heard, and included even if it's not a special storytime aimed at their specific situation. We owe it to our patrons and the kids we serve to think critically about what we offer and to always do better.

I'm not sure when I started consciously thinking about how to make sure inclusivity and the opportunity to see mirrors and windows were parts of my



storytimes. Was it the day I had planned to do a 10 Little Monkeys finger play and realized that wouldn't be as easily accomplished by the child in storytime that day who had six fingers total? Was it the day it hit me that every book I read that storytime featured a two-parent household with one stay-at-home mom and one leaves-for-work dad, even though that isn't the experience of many kids in my community? Was it the day I acknowledged that *We Were Tired of Living in a House*, while a book I love, was kind of tone deaf to read in a community experiencing huge increases in homelessness? I can't pinpoint a time or a place, but all those experiences started to add up.

Lucky for me, the library world is a generous and always evolving community, and other people had those thoughts long before I did and had ideas about how to address those concerns. If your interest is piqued and you're looking for a starting place, I highly recommend the Storytime Underground's (SU) excellent [Storytime for Social Justice Toolkit](#) (Storytime Underground, 2017). If you aren't familiar with the term "social justice," the commonly accepted definition of the term means the fair and equitable distribution of privilege and opportunities, which is basically at the core of each and every library's mission. The toolkit has tons of book suggestions for preschool and school-aged storytimes, as well as extension activities and discussion points. What storytime provider doesn't love a new flannel board or song to share?

One of the other resources on the SU page is a [list of questions](#) (Storytime Underground, 2017) to ask yourself about inclusivity, and all of us library folks love a good question, right? For some of us, it's never occurred to us to consider questions like these. For some of us, these questions might be uncomfortable to think about and hard to answer. For some of us, we've thought about them but not really delved in deep to find answers. The important part is that we take an opportunity to think about them now, asking questions such as:

- What is your favorite storytime book featuring a main character of color?
- What was the last story you read aloud about Native people that was NOT a "myth, legend, or folktale?"
- What do you do when you don't have diverse books that fit your theme?
- What are ways of modeling or encouraging compassion, kindness, and empathy in storytime? How do we make it easy to continue this practice at home?
- How would you speak with an adult who took issue with reading a book that included a gay couple in storytime?

Remember how I mentioned some might be uncomfortable to think about? Each time I look through them, I find one that stretches my comfort zone or makes me ponder a situation that I haven't dealt with yet but would like to prepare for in case it happens. My favorite question to come back to over and over again is this: What mistakes have you learned from?

There are a lot of other riches available online as well. The ALA has great booklists to help you include [LGBTQ materials](#) in your storytimes. Canada's Burnaby Public Library offers [songs in 15 languages](#) (Embracing Diversity) as well as suggestions and tips for using them in culturally-aware and inclusive ways. Head Start has a [guide to selecting culturally responsive children's books](#). This [Tennessee State Library and Archives program](#) offers ways to include children with visual impairments. The [Bryce Don't Play blog](#) addresses ableism in the library with many suggestions that apply to storytimes.



At this point I can hear a few people grumbling that they don't have the time, energy, or money to overhaul their storytime practices, and the fabulous news is that I'm not advocating for major changes! I'm advocating for all of us to ask ourselves and other storytime providers some questions and to take action based on our personal answers. I'm asking all of us to acknowledge that the way we've always done things isn't always the best way, the most welcoming way, or the most inclusive way. I'm asking us to do the work to make sure we're doing right by our communities, even the ones we don't think we see inside our walls.

With the help of the resources above and many others, I'm making changes to my own storytimes. I am not an expert in storytime inclusivity. I don't think anyone can BE an expert in storytime inclusivity. But what I am and what we all can be is a storytime provider willing to make some changes, make some mistakes, think about some practices, listen to other people tell their stories, and make more changes ... wash, rinse, repeat. I've reached out to other storytime providers from around the country in person and online, and I've started to gather some tips, some of which I'll share below. These are not "the way" to do inclusivity in storytimes, they are just ways that I'm trying and adapting, and I encourage you to try what works for you and come up with new ideas (and then share them with the rest of us!).

Here are some basic changes I've made:

- Make nametags (stickers) for everyone in the room, including grownups, and when two people have the same first initial, point that out as a simple connection. "Oh, look, Jasper and Josefina both have the same first letter in their names! Jasper's J sounds like 'juh' and Josefina's sounds like 'huh' but they both look the same. How cool!"
- Be mindful about the books you choose, and look for more than just ethnic diversity, considering family make-up (one-parent? Multiple generations in one house?) or home diversity (House? Apartment?) or gender make-up (Do only boys do action? Do only girls take care of dolls/pets/other people?).
- Try out your ink colors ahead of time on different skin tones if you give kids hand stamps at the end of your storytimes. A recent online thread indicated dark red, dark black, dark blue, and metallic colors can work well on a variety of skin tones, while other storytimes chose to do stickers to avoid the issue.
- Even if your book doesn't have a lot of racial diversity, extension activities such as flannel boards or puppet play around the book can. A co-worker recommends getting a multi-ethnic puppet pack comparable to [this](#).
- Give kids options when doing fingerplays and movement activities. Let them tap the floor (or their leg or their wheelchair) instead of clapping their hands, or have them raise their hands instead of stomping their feet, as appropriate.
- Avoid using phrases like, "Everyone has 10 fingers and 10 toes," even if everyone who happens to be in that room at that time does. Instead use more open questions such as, "How many fingers do you have? Help your grown up count your own and theirs."

The library community and especially library staff who work with young children have long embraced the idea that we help teach children and give them the skills to lead the way. Those skills don't just include letter knowledge or phonological awareness, but also sharing, recognizing and respecting differences, and learning self-control. To quote the Storytime Underground Social Justice toolkit, "We have the ability to teach our kids



compassion, empathy, and critical thinking skills. We introduce them to diversity and culture they may not come across otherwise. Our children will be leaders *someday*, and we can help them become thoughtful, kind, and open minded human beings. Storytime matters. Libraries matter. We matter.” 

**If you did not recognize the opening lyrics to The Greatest Love of All, there is a good chance you are not an aficionado of ‘80s pop hits. And while Whitney Houston might not be recognized as a great philosopher, I think we can all agree she had a great set of pipes (as did George Benson, the original singer).*

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Resources

Multicultural puppets <http://tinyurl.com/yb5y46um>

