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THE DISCOURSE OF DRAG QUEEN STORY TIME CHALLENGERS AND SUPPORTERS: A CASE STUDY FROM THE OKANAGAN REGIONAL LIBRARY (Paper)

Abstract

Drag Queen Story Time (DQST) is a public library program where drag queens lead a story time for children and families. Although this program is meant to celebrate diversity, the program can also invite an onslaught of political warfare against gender and sexuality nonconformity and intellectual freedom. This study analyzes the arguments of DQST challengers and supporters to better understand the motivations behind both negative and positive responses to this polarizing program. The study examines 406 publicly available letters written by community members, professionals, and vested organizations expressing opposition or support for a DQST that was hosted in a large library system in Canada, the Okanagan Regional Library (ORL) in 2019.

1. Introduction

Drag Queen Story Time (DQST) is a public library program where drag queens lead a story time for children and families. Libraries advertise this program as one that brings families together to celebrate diversity, difference, and being true to oneself. For hosting libraries, however, the program can also invite an onslaught of political warfare against gender and sexuality nonconformity, often prompting controversy that threatens to influence library policies to restrict intellectual freedom. Similar to Emily Knox's (2014a) research on the discourse of book challengers, this study analyzes the arguments of DQST challengers and supporters to better understand the motivations behind both negative and positive responses to this polarizing program. This study aims to provide insight into how differing worldviews align or do not align with library values on intellectual freedom, neutrality, and social responsibility. Specifically, the study examines 406 publicly available letters written by community members, professionals, and vested organizations expressing opposition or support for a DQST that was hosted in a large library system in Canada, the Okanagan Regional Library (ORL) in 2019.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in professional interest and academic research on DQSTs, likely due to the dramatic increase in the offering of programs across North America. Naidoo (2018) offers the earliest rigorous academic consideration of the program in addition to providing an in-depth 'how-to' section for practitioners. Scholars have also taken up DQST as an object of study. David and Kettrey (2021) study the discourse on DQST within ideologically and culturally diverse forums on Reddit, looking at how each group frames the program relative to its perception as a cultural threat. Barriage et al. (2020, 2021) surveyed librarians whose libraries hosted a DQST and investigated librarians' perceptions of childhood development. Within the educational sphere, Keenan and drag queen Lil Miss Hot Mess (2020)

present DQST as an emancipatory way of queering early childhood education, while Radis et al. (2021) explored the potential psychoeducational benefits of drag queen reading programs. Montague and Latham (2019) summarize the trends and similarities in DQST programs across the United States. Librarians from across North America (Condren, 2018; Jones, 2019; Davey, 2020; Stickles, 2020) have also written to discuss their local experiences.

Intellectual freedom (IF), freedom of expression, and censorship have been discussed at length in the LIS literature. Several volumes (Curry, 1997; Pinnell-Stephens, 2012; Oltmann, 2019; Garnar & Magi, 2021) tackle definitional problems and discuss professional values, while practical sections feature model policies, case studies, or explicit guidance on how to manage book challengers. Many of these texts largely focus on IF in relation to collections, meeting rooms, and displays, but to a lesser extent mention challenges related to programming. Albright and Brown (2020)'s discussion of how to incorporate intellectual freedom into programming is one exception. Current trends in IF research focus on the intersection between IF and social responsibility. For example, Nye's (2020) recent edited volume features a number of articles addressing IF's intersection with transgender rights, #MeToo, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Book banning remains a relevant topic of research. Currently, the professional world is scrambling to address a dramatic increase in book challenges that deal with LGBTQI+ (gender nonconformity in particular) and BIPOC experiences through resources and educational opportunities (ALA, 2021, n.d.). Most relevant to this study, Emily Knox's (2014a, 2014b, 2015) works on censorship and intellectual freedom provide some of the most comprehensive and precise investigations into the motivations, justifications, and worldviews of book challengers. A discussion of DQST naturally intersects with this as challengers and supporters of the program harness these ideas rhetorically.

3. Methodology

This study is ongoing case-study research. The data is sourced from letters, emails, and library board memos that were received and compiled by the ORL and made publicly available online through the library's website (ORL, n.d.). There are a total of 406 responses written by community members, professionals, and vested organizations expressing opposition (261) or support (145). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is being used to identify, analyze, and report themes found within the data. The coding scheme utilized is adapted from Emily Knox's (2014a) study on the discourse of book challengers. Coding is being undertaken collaboratively to minimize intercoder reliability.

4. Case Background

This case was chosen because of the scope of the controversy and the availability of the unique data. The ORL is the 16th largest library system in Canada, serving four regional districts in the Okanagan/Shuswap area of British Columbia. The DQST organized by two librarians (Ashley Machum and Christopher Stevenson) at the Kelowna Branch with local drag queen, Miss Frieda Whales, initially drew public outcry to cancel the program. The controversy was exacerbated by a disapproving response from the library CEO, Don Nettleton, that proposed the adoption of board level policy to prevent library staff from organizing "controversial" children's programming (ORL, 2019). In response, this prompted efforts from the community to prevent this policy from being accepted by the board, in addition to supporting DQST. Responses were

received from across Canada and the controversy has received national media interest (e.g., CBC's *The Doc Project* [Ball, 2020]).

5. Preliminary Findings

The following findings and discussion are preliminary, as analysis is ongoing. In their correspondence, both challengers and supporters expressed their views and beliefs about drag queens, children, the effects of DQST, and the role of libraries in society. Again, the examination and comparison of these two viewpoints is meant to demonstrate for library scholars and practitioners where these worldviews align or do not align with library values on intellectual freedom, neutrality, and social responsibility.

Worldviews

Challengers

In their correspondence, challengers based their arguments against DQST in their worldviews on drag queens, children, and drag queens interacting with children.

Some challengers held disinterested views on drag queens, while others expressed their personal disapproval. Some descriptions of drag queens were relatively neutral, such as “men who dress like women” or “cross-dressers”, while others demonstrated that they viewed drag queens as being equal to criminals, pedophiles, child abusers, drug addicts, and/or sex workers.

Comparisons were made to potentially dangerous fringe groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the “aryan nation.”

Challengers also displayed many beliefs about children and their development, depicting them as innocent and in need of protection. Challengers often portrayed children as being deficient in certain qualities, for example: “not mature enough,” “not coherent enough,” or “incapable of discernment.” Relatedly, they expressed fears around child development and the DQST’s ability to be an influence: children are “vulnerable,” “malleable,” “groomable,” and “impressionable.” They are, as one challenger wrote, not “ready emotionally or mentally to navigate the ideologies and personal lifestyle choices that these adults will be promoting and presenting.”

Challengers of DQST also relied upon several appeals to argue against the program, revealing their worldviews:

- They appealed to morality: “It is astonishing WRONG to allow drag queens to push their sexual agenda upon young children!”
- They appealed to normativity, or normalness, insisting that the library should offer normal programming instead. One wrote, “It is very dangerous to normalize drag and especially to hold drag up as something ‘cool’ or just another alternative lifestyle that is perfectly wholesome and healthy and natural to pursue.”
- They appealed to “diversity”, viewing having drag queens in the library as allowing a special interest group that is promoting a sexual agenda over other groups, a treatment they viewed as unfair to other special interest groups. One proclaimed that “having a drag

queen present is very non inclusive and intolerant of those whose values oppose this idea.”

Supporters

Supporters of DQST predominantly wrote their letters mostly in response to the ORL CEO’s memo of September 18, 2019, with the intended outcome of curbing the policy that would effectively ban DQST (and other “controversial” programming). Supporters placed a high value on intellectual freedom and freedom of expression and used these as the basis for their arguments to reject the policy. They made frequent reference to professional values of librarianship and as librarians’ professional organizations were invoked. For example, one letter proclaims: “In so doing, we stand by the CFLA's Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries...The policy proposed by Mr. Nettleton is firmly at odds with that principle.”

Supporters of DQST also relied upon several appeals to argue in favour of the program which demonstrated their worldviews:

- Some appealed to evidence: “the overwhelming response has been positive, with attendance more than double what the library usually sees on Saturdays,” noting that the increased attendance at the program signifies its popularity and acceptance.
- Appeals were also made to common sense reasoning, stating matter-of-factly that those who oppose the program have a personal choice not to bring their children to it, writing “Those that oppose it do not have to attend.”
- Finally, there were appeals to justice. Supporters believed that offering the program was the right thing to do to be as widely inclusive as possible. One wrote, “I hope that you and the ORL board choose the right side of history and vote to represent ALL of Okanagan residents...”

The DQST Program

Challengers

In the opposed correspondence, challengers considered DQST to be a “display of fringe sexual expression intended to target our children.” This description summarizes their claim well, as it implicitly encapsulates their beliefs on drag queens, children, morality and values, and the purported dangerous effects of the program. Comparatively, challengers relied upon attacking the merits of the program by attacking the integrity and beliefs of individuals rather than addressing the program created by the ORL librarians and Miss Frieda Whales. Notably, many challengers speculated on the effects of the program on their children, viewing the program as emanating from a hidden ideology or an agenda that the library or drag queens have. Challengers were most fearful about the program influencing the identity of their/others’ children or causing psychological harm. They feared it would “promote gender questioning” or “manipulate” them. One wrote, “This library program is part of that agenda, to hijack the identity of our children.”

Supporters

Similarly to the challengers, supporters also discussed the potential effects the program would have on them and their children. These were related to two themes, an effect of personal well-being and societal benefit. This particular quotation from a supporter captures both sentiments:

Wouldn't it be amazing if every 3-6 year old (not just the gender-typical ones) proactively saw themselves reflected in their community before they became another teen suicide stat? And wouldn't it be even more amazing if even all the cis-gendered children had the opportunity to see gender diversity reflected, leading to developing a more accepting and inclusive society overall?

On Libraries

Challengers

Challengers relied on their personal beliefs about the library rather than referencing supporting evidence as to the role of libraries in society. Challengers believed that libraries should be politically and socially agenda-less, “neutral and safe,” and a “moral and non-controversial space” because of their role as a civic institution. Challengers often beseeched the library, and the library CEO, to protect the community’s children. One challenger admonished, “children are so precious, and it is your responsibility to keep the environment in our libraries clean and pure and neutral.”

Supporters

Many supporters’ correspondence contained in-depth and research-based discussion on the role of the library in society. In response to the ORL CEO’s memo, they engaged in a lengthy analysis of what neutrality means and how a policy banning the event would “perpetuate the status quo of exclusion and the continued suppression of marginalized voices.” They emphasized that libraries are not, cannot realistically be, and should not be neutral spaces. They also relied on the argument that libraries have an “obligation to be inclusive, promote equity, and uphold intellectual freedom” even if it is difficult or causes controversy, and invoked library values and ethics to support this.

6. Conclusion

Discussion is limited at this stage of inquiry, but the implications for this research include providing answers to complex conceptual dilemmas related to the core values of the profession and by extension, providing direction to library staff. While the librarians at the ORL received strong support from the professional community—even going on to win the 2020 BCLA Champion of Intellectual Freedom Award (BCLA, n.d.)—it is clear that there continues to be widespread misconceptions about the roles of libraries and the actual composition of diversity and inclusion initiatives. As demonstrated by this case, these misconceptions exist not only amongst community members, but also to the highest levels of library management. It is important for library leadership to have a strong education in intellectual freedom rights and core library values so that they are capable of distinguishing between voices that align with the mission of the public libraries and those that do not.

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