

A Rainbow of Creativity

Exploring Drag Queen Storytimes and Gender Creative Programming in Public Libraries

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Recently, there has been an increase in public libraries initiating targeted and inclusive programming for rainbow families (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer [LGBTQ+] caregivers with children or families with LGBTQ+ children). Specialized training programs have been offered to children's librarians on how to create inclusive services and collections for rainbow families.¹ As a result, many libraries in the United States and Canada have designed children's library programs with LGBTQ+ themes and content, included among these is the drag queen storytime (DQS). A DQS generally includes a drag queen performer reading children's books and sharing songs much like a traditional storytime program. Many of these programs often focus on creativity in general, as well as gender creativity, or include LGBTQ+ children's literature as a way to normalize the experiences of rainbow families. Some public libraries market DQS programs for rainbow families while others promote these programs as an example of general inclusive programming for all families. DQS programs can be successful when used with all kinds of families, and many rainbow families appreciate a librarian's meaningful gestures towards inclusivity.

Since 2016, the number of DQS programs in public libraries has dramatically increased with a mixed reception from children, caregivers, community members, and the library profession. Some patrons are excited to see inclusive programming celebrating LGBTQ+ and gender diversity.² At the same time, critics have also identified the lack of quality control in these programs as well as the alleged immoral underpinnings of allowing drag queens to work with children and indoctrinate them with unsavory sociopolitical views.³

This article examines several DQS programs in US public libraries to determine considerations when planning and operationalizing these programs. A brief background of the study is followed by a discussion of key findings as well as implications for librarians interested in developing programs inclusive of diverse children and caregivers in rainbow families.

Background and Methodology

In November 2017, an online survey with both closed and open-ended questions was administered to librarians via



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the American Library Association GLBT roundtable and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) listservs to examine DQS program planning strategies as well as the necessary partnerships and collaborations needed with outside organizations. Twelve respondents entirely completed the survey and were comprised of children's and outreach librarians from nine different states—California, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Pennsylvania.

Two-thirds of these librarians served urban communities, with the remaining third divided equally between librarians serving rural and suburban communities. Structured follow-up interviews were conducted via phone with self-selected librarians to further understand the case-by-case nuances influencing community engagement, buy-in, and outreach to local rainbow families in communities served by specific public libraries across the country. Librarians participating in these interviews resided in Massachusetts, New York, and Oregon.

All of the participating librarians were active members of ALSC and eager to share their experiences as a way to assist other librarians in planning inclusive programs that celebrate gender diversity and welcome rainbow families to the public library. Using descriptive statistics and summations of interviews, the subsequent section shares some of the major findings from the structured conversations and online survey. Although only twelve different libraries comprised the sample, the valuable information gleaned from the librarians is highly relevant to any librarian planning a DQS program.

Key Findings

Planning Process, Marketing, and Recruitment

When planning programs for children and their caregivers, librarians often employ a wide range of practices to determine the program format, presenter, content, and activities, and any accompanying print and digital media. Consistent with other types of children's library program planning, the respondents' made the same types of decisions in planning DQS programs. Many of the respondents (58 percent) conducted a formal or informal needs assessment in their communities to determine the need for a DQS programs. Two librarians also conducted informal surveys of LGBTQ+ individuals in the community, and 80 percent of the respondents indicated consulting with LGBTQ+ library staff.

Planning. The actual planning of DQS programs varied from library to library with approximately 20 percent of the librarians planning the DQS program without assistance or input from the LGBTQ+ community and one librarian employing their library system's specific LGBTQ+ committee for the actual program planning. The majority of the respondents (70 percent) indicated that they partnered with a local LGBTQ+ nonprofit to assist with planning and recruitment of drag

queen performers. The nature of specific community-based partnerships will be further explored in a subsequent section.

Recruitment. Drag queen recruitment comprised a large portion of the planning for DQS programs. Every librarian indicated the desire to find a drag queen who would be a good fit for a children's program. However, this quest varied significantly across the library systems represented in the survey. One-third of the librarians indicated working with the national Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) organization (www.dragqueenstoryhour.org/), created by author Michelle Tea and San Francisco-based literacy nonprofit RADAR Productions. DQSH screened and supplied the drag queens who performed during the programs. Two other libraries also mentioned distinct partnerships for selecting performers. A librarian in Oregon identified and joined a local LGBTQ+ nonprofit, the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Emerald Empire (ISCEE). After becoming active in the organization, he approached the ISCEE to provide a drag queen for a DQS program. In Illinois, a librarian described how she worked with the local bookstore, which had already been hosting DQS programs, to select performers.

Other librarians detailed their creative efforts to blindly locate performers in the absence of local LGBTQ+ organizations with knowledge about qualified performers. A librarian in Massachusetts reached out to coworkers and friends on Facebook to identify potential performers. From there, she reached out to see if the performer was interested. Two other libraries (one in the Northeast and one on West Coast) attended local drag shows to identify drag queens. Once they found a potential match, they then approached the performer with varying degrees of success. Approximately 25 percent of the respondents chose drag queens from library volunteers who were already working within the library system. Finally, two librarians, one in Ohio and one in California, mentioned that they were approached directly by a drag queen interested in offering a DQS program. As we will discuss later, the diverse methods for recruiting performers have a significant impact on program quality, depending on the level of story-time training offered by library staff.

Marketing. Decisions about marketing the DQS programs varied widely from in-house promotional fliers and Facebook posts to targeted e-mails for rainbow families. While the programs were generally marketed in a consistent manner as other types of children's programs offered in the library system, the intent of the DQS programs often determined the methods of promotion. Half of the respondents billed their DQS program as an inclusive program for all families, and the other half marketed the program specifically to rainbow families or general LGBTQ+ populations. For the librarians that saw the DQS program as a mainstream program, promotional methods mirrored that of other general children's programs, such as advertising in the children's program calendar and posting fliers around the community. In these instances, special promotion was not offered to distinguish the DQS program from other children's programs.

Those librarians perceiving the DQS program as a way to strategically target rainbow families or the queer community often promoted the program in conjunction with other LGBTQ+ or Pride events. A quarter of these libraries also made a concerted effort to notify non-rainbow families about the content and nature of the DQS program to prevent families from mistakenly bringing their children to the program.

These cautionary practices bring up an interesting question related to equity and inclusion. Is it equitable to warn heterosexual families of LGBTQ+ content in children's programs if you do not put similar disclaimers on other types of children's programs? If librarians do not alert families to potential trigger topics in other library storytimes, then they are inadvertently engaging in exclusionary practices at the expense of children and caregivers in rainbow families. Ostensibly, there is a balancing act needed between paving the way for offering a particular type of library program in the community and being equitable in the library's dialog around particular subsets of the population.

Another consideration when marketing a DQS program as being for rainbow families is the potential to marginalize caregivers in rainbow families that do not want to be identified as different or special from heterosexual caregivers. Ultimately, a DQS program might be too "out and proud" for some rainbow families. As such, it is critical that librarians

understand their local populations when planning and marketing programs to ensure they are developing a DQS program that the community will embrace.

Community Engagements and Partnerships

Almost all (70 percent) of the librarians surveyed participated in community collaborations, partnerships, or engagement activities with LGBTQ+ organizations or nonprofits during the planning and implementation of their DQS programs. In some instances, an outside organization approached the librarian and, in other instances, the librarian either made the initial contact or was already working with the organization on other LGBTQ-related events, such as Pride, a teen book club, etc.

Partnerships and collaborations ranged from advice on program content and performer selection to in-kind donations—such as free marketing to rainbow families and financial support—to full-blown collaborations where the library worked alongside the LGBTQ+ organization to offer cohosted daylong programs for rainbow families and individuals of all ages from the queer community.

Throughout the structured interviews and surveys, librarians reiterated the necessity for community partnerships in the

Training and Selecting Drag Queens

It is extremely important that performers working with children in library programs be adequately trained on how to offer a successful literacy and learning experience that is developmentally appropriate. DQS programs should be of equal quality as other library children's programming.

Librarians are very selective about the performers they choose for summer reading programs and other children's events. The same should hold true for the DQS program. Success of a DQS program is dependent on a well-trained performer who has good rapport with children. If at all possible, it is recommended for librarians to collaborate with LGBTQ+ and other community organizations that have previously conducted DQS programs. These organizations can recommend specific drag queens who would work well for a DQS program. Librarians may also need to work with drag queens to tweak stage names to make them more appropriate for children, removing the adult humor that sometimes finds its way into drag queen names. Outfits may also need to be modified to make them kid-friendly, such as removing excessive cleavage, risqué dress that might show too much when sitting, etc. This can easily be addressed during training sessions.

There is a variety of skills that can be shared with drag queens to improve their performance at a DQS program. Librarians should consider requiring all performers to attend training and commit to offering programs that promote early literacy standards and creative expression.

Rachel Payne from the Brooklyn Public Library also suggests the following outline for training drag queens for DQS programs.

- Introductions (Share and ask for preferred pronouns)
- What is Drag Queen Story Hour? (Those who have led a DQS program before can share their experiences.)
- Setting up your space
- Read-aloud demonstrations (Including how to hold a book)
- Selecting books
- How to make read-alouds interactive

success of DQS programs. One librarian in Upstate New York worked with an LGBTQ+ organization to identify members to attend the DQS program as greeters to help create a welcoming environment for rainbow families after negative publicity about the program suggested a potentially hostile environment. Other librarians relied upon LGBTQ+ organizations or educators to identify drag queens interested in working with children and to develop culturally sensitive activities that would provide positive experiences for gender creative children in rainbow families.

The libraries that did not engage in community partnerships identified this as an impediment to the success of their DQS program. One library staff member noted that while program attendance was acceptable, it did not have the impact she had anticipated nor did it have any rainbow families in attendance. Another librarian commented about the poor story-time presentation abilities of the drag queen in their program, lamenting that a partnership with an organization such as DQSH might have produced stronger candidates.

Drag Queen Training

Librarians and library staff working with children are well versed on read-aloud best practices, literature selection, and developmentally appropriate behaviors and activities for young children. Unfortunately, not everyone is skilled with read-aloud and storytelling abilities and may need assistance in learning the trade. While drag queens are experts at

performing for adult audiences, it takes a special set of skills to hold the attention of young children.

Given the diverse recruiting strategies employed by the respondent librarians, the pool of drag queens ranged from local performers to individuals such as Mrs. Kasha Davis, who appeared on the Season 7 of *Rupaul's Drag Race*. Some of the drag queens had never worked with children while others had children in their extended family (grandchildren, nieces, and nephews). Still others had previously conducted DQS or other literacy programs with children or teens. For this reason, providing some sort of training for performers is particularly important given that library programming and outreach become the face of the library to the local community.

Surprisingly, one-third of the library respondents indicated that no training was offered to the drag queens; rather, the drag queens just did what they wanted. Two additional libraries, one in Illinois and one in Oregon, indicated that they tried to offer specialized training to the drag queens but the suggestions were either not well received or were entirely ignored. In one of these instances, the youth services staff interjected throughout the DQS program to keep it engaging for young library patrons.

Of the libraries that did provide training, they taught the drag queens essentially the same skills, though the time commitment on the part of the drag queen varied. One librarian in Pennsylvania mentioned that drag queens attended a special training before the first DQS program. The children's librarian offered this hour-long training as a way to share

Training and Selecting Drag Queens (continued)

- Transition songs and rhymes and stretches
- Read-aloud practice in small groups
- How to deal with a wide age range of kids
- Activities after the storytime program
- Group discussion: How do you structure a program? What has worked? What has not?
- Questions and answers

Librarians wanting to implement a DQS program and include a training for their performers could easily adapt these suggestions to ensure that their drag queens are ready to work with young children. Having such a training is also useful when pitching the idea of a DQS program to library administration or defending the program to the library board or larger community.

The national Drag Queen Story Hour organization (www.dragqueenstoryhour.org/organize-your-own-drag-queen-story-hour/) in New York also provides helpful suggestions. They also provide useful information such as what pronoun to use for a drag queen and how to answer children's questions about gender. To gain an inside look of what it's like to be a drag queen performing at a DQS program, check out Alex Falk's post, "Three Queens: Perspectives on Drag Queen Story Hour," on the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom Blog (www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=14809).

Finally, Sez Me (www.sezme.me/) is another good resource for librarians interested in seeing how an educational children's program with a drag queen might look or to get ideas for working with drag queens and how to teach children about gender. Sez Me originally started as an LGBTQ+ web series for children and has evolved into an educational program for children and caregivers to explore important topics related to creativity, gender, and identity.

best practices and key information about child development, dialogic reading, and the early literacy program Every Child Ready to Read 2. Another librarian mentioned that drag queens were required to observe existing library storytimes to gain tips and ideas for best practices.

Children’s librarians from the San Francisco Public Library and Oakland Public Library partnered with the RADAR Productions and Gender Spectrum (www.genderspectrum.org/) nonprofit organizations to offer a day-long training for twenty drag queens. The training included early childhood development information, literature selection guidelines, and book sharing techniques, as well as recommendations for interactive songs, rhymes, and storytime props such as puppets and flannel boards.

A similar training occurred in the New York Public Library system, where library staff met with drag queens from the New York section of DQSH for a two-hour training. According to Early Literacy Coordinator Chelsea Condren, who believes training is key, the success of their DQS program was highly dependent on this training. While incredibly talented and expressive, the performers needed to learn how to hold a book and the importance of reading the book beforehand. They also required time to practice. Condren noted that one of the other systems in New York did not offer training, and as a result, the DQS program was not as well received. She believed the training also helped to weed out potential drag queen readers who were not suitable.

Rachel Aimee, director of DQSH in New York City, confirmed that their organization has provided additional training for drag queens beyond that provided by public libraries. In October 2017, DQSH provided training, facilitated by the Manhattan Behavioral School, related to working with children on the autism spectrum. This was in preparation for a new DQS program for children with autism and varying abilities, which the organization is piloting with the New York Public Library. Drag queens have also received training on how to talk with children about gender and drag-related topics from a social worker who specializes in children’s gender and sexuality.

Programs

DQS programs offered by library staff completing the survey or participating in structured interviews encompassed a diverse range of activities and were organized quite differently. Some were offered as part of larger LGBTQ+ events, others comprised a portion of a storytime series, and still others were stand-alone events.

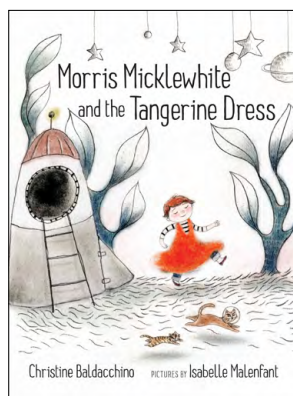
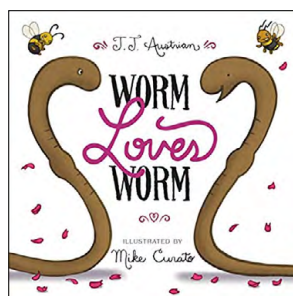
A librarian in San Francisco described including a DQS program as part of events for an inclusive music festival aimed at all families. The New York Public Library includes DQS programs in their paid vendor programming catalog offered to branches throughout the system for all types of families, while several of the other librarians responding to the survey indicated that their DQS program was a one-off attempt at outreach to rainbow families.

Nearly all of the librarians (92 percent) indicated that the intent of their DQS programs were to provide mirrors for children in rainbow families to see their experiences reflected in a mainstream event such as a library program. The libraries found the opportunity for the DQS programs to provide a safe space to explore gender creativity specifically and diversity in general equally compelling. Multiple libraries offering DQS programs indicated that drag queens would show a picture of themselves as a child. The intent was to help children make a more concrete connection between the storytime performer and themselves.

This was also reinforced in the type of materials selected for the program. More than 75 percent of respondents identified the use of children’s books with gender diverse or gender nonconforming characters, such as those in *Worm Loves Worm* by J. J. Austrian and Mike Curato or *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* by Christine Baldacchino and Isabelle Malenfant. Similarly, 80 percent of the librarians included books about not fitting in, such as Todd Parr’s *It’s Okay to be Different* or Andrea Loney and Carmen Saldaña’s *BunnyBear*. A few libraries (15 percent) selected specific books about transgender children, such as Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings’ autobiographical picture book *I am Jazz*.

The theme of many of the storytime programs (80 percent) was celebrating individuality and creativity. In many of these programs, a child’s story about individuality was shared, children sang a few songs, and then a craft was offered, where children were encouraged to design a costume that they wanted and not one defined by binary genders.

One library in Upstate New York received a grant from a local library resource council to host a storytime series celebrating diversity. Their United Stories of America series introduced storytime attendees to all types of diverse families with one event being a DQS program to celebrate LGBTQ+ culture. All storytime programs included a sign language interpreter, and they used light-hearted stories throughout the series to provide the subtle message “It’s OK to be who you are.”



Community Reception

Most (75 percent) of the DQS events were well received by the families in attendance, and very few programs received considerable outspoken criticism. In most instances, the library was applauded for its inclusivity and cultural sensitivity to the LGBTQ+ community. Caregivers and children alike felt like they were given a safe space to explore gender and creativity.

However some notable negative responses were discernable. One library in New York received considerable community backlash before the DQS program. Librarians promoted the DQS program via various types of media, including a television interview and multiple radio messages. One conservative radio host propagated misinformation that the library was hosting a transgender seminar for preschoolers. His comments stirred ire in the community, fueling the stereotypes that gay men are likely to be pedophiles. Community members thought that the librarians were talking about sex and sexuality with children. Eventually, the library director called the radio host to set the record straight. This particular library created a handout for staff about the DQS program with the intent to dispel any misconceptions about the program and changed the title “drag queen” to “female illusionist” in marketing materials to assuage concerns of a library board member.

Another library close to Provincetown, Massachusetts, noted that the DQS program was well received by attendees—one patron even joked that he brought his three-month-old grand niece to her first drag show. Unfortunately, the coverage of the program by local press was awkward with the potential for hostility. The library hired local actor-playwright Ryan Landry, who often writes comical and risqué pieces, as the performer. *The Provincetown Banner*, a local newspaper, commented on the choice of Landry as a performer for a children’s program and conjectured he would not be reading his adult material as it would be inappropriate for the children. The library director intimated that this poorly placed comment cast a poor light on the DQS program, making the program about gawking at a drag queen rather than an inclusive event celebrating diversity and creativity.

Finally, a librarian in Georgia felt the need to heighten library security after receiving a Facebook post with an admonishment about corrupting the souls of young children accompanied by a photograph of a man toting a gun. While the DQS program was offered without incident, the librarian was left unnerved by the experience.

Other Services to Rainbow Families

Fewer than half (41 percent) of the libraries responding to the survey offered some type of children’s program, such as a rainbow family storytime or pride programming beyond the DQS program. These varied from one-time programs to recurring programs.

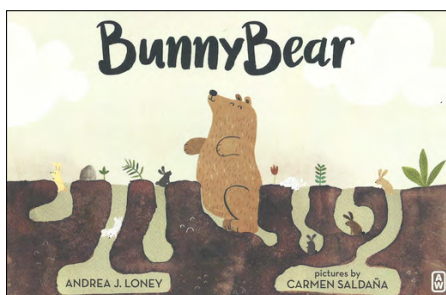
In October 2017, the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) offered the Genderful! Exploring Gender Through Art program for children ages six to twelve. The program was cosponsored by the New York–based nonprofit Gender is Over, If You Want It (<http://genderisover.com/>), a community of gender non-conforming, gender expansive, intersex, transgender, and cisgender individuals with a shared passion to deconstruct the gender binary through art and expression.



Genderful! was the brainchild of Leigh Hurwitz from the BPL, Marie McGweir from Gender is Over, If You Want It, and musician/writer/trans activist Laura Jane Grace. An example of a very successful community engagement project, Genderful! offered a space intentionally created to allow children and their adult caregivers to

celebrate gender diversity through crafts, storytelling, music, and open conversation. The event also included a read-aloud of Myles Johnson’s children’s book *Large Fears* and a resource fair with several LGBTQ–friendly organizations.⁴

BPL also offered a series of workshops throughout 2018 for early childhood educators and children’s librarians on the topics of gender identity/expression, bodies/curiosity/touching, and welcoming rainbow families. Megan Madison, a researcher and educator from The City University of New York’s Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, led the series. The intent was to encourage educators and librarians serving young



children to create more frequent opportunities for children in rainbow families to see their experiences represented.

A librarian in California indicated that the main library in their system hosted trans children’s author Alex Gino, while several locations welcomed children’s author Laurin Mayeno, who authored the queer-friendly bilingual children’s book *One of a Kind Like Me/Único Como Yo*. The librarian also noted that several of the branches frequently use books in storytimes that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ themes or rainbow families.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of the study suggest that some librarians in areas of the United States have been very successful at hosting DQS

programs, while other libraries have been less successful. Much of this success can be attributed to training the drag queens and collaborating with LGBTQ+ and other community organizations, particularly those related to education, the performing arts, and literacy. Buy-in by library administration is also important to the success of DQS programs. At least 50 percent of the survey respondents and all of the librarians participating in the structured interviews mentioned working with library administration or having library administration approval to implement their DQS program. A library in Gilbert, Arizona, offers a clear example of the negative consequences of not having administration support and offering training to drag queens. In the November 2017, the Southeast Regional Library, a branch in the Maricopa County Library System, had their DQS program cancelled by the library director. The director's main two reasons for terminating the program were lack of early literacy training for the drag queen and not following administrative procedures for program approval.⁵

The results of this study indicate that additional training and planning resources should be available for librarians implementing DQS programs. These resources should include training information for drag queens, suggestions for program activities and materials, and tips for outreach and community collaborations with LGBTQ+ and other community organizations.

Program Plans & Material Selection

Program Plans. When planning a DQS program, it is important to know your local community and understand its needs. Part of this is being aware that planning a DQS program will invariably raise the ire of some individuals in the community. One only needs to conduct a brief Internet search of DQS programs to see an array of negative commentary. As part of the program planning process, librarians should decide in advance how to respond to these sentiments. Be very clear about the goal and intent of the DQS program and seek input from local LGBTQ+ community organizations as well as other librarians who have experience dealing with undesirable press in relation to the queer community. A particularly useful resource for librarians is the blog post “Defend Pride at Your Library” published by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=14620), which offers suggestions for both planning DQS programs and responding to public disapproval. Elizabeth Moreau Nicolai from the Anchorage Public Library provides another especially helpful and relevant resource for program planning as well as how to deal with unexpected intruders in her blog post “Drag Queen Storytime—awesome and a protestor” (<https://lizintheibrary.com/2018/06/14/drag-queen-storytime-awesome-a-protestor/>).

All children's programming should be inclusive. If a children's program does not have an LGBTQ+ focus, librarians can still provide welcoming spaces for rainbow families. Similarly, if a

DQS program is targeted towards rainbow families or offered in conjunction with gay history month or Pride activities, then librarians will want to ensure that all families are included in marketing strategies and welcomed to attend. Every community is different and it is up to each librarian to determine how best to plan and market a DQS program in their community.

DQS programs do not always have to include themes related to gender or queer topics. As suggested by one of the interviewed librarians in Massachusetts, simply providing opportunities for children to interact with someone who is different from them can be accomplished without focusing on topics such as gender creativity and nonconformity or LGBTQ+ themes. Certainly some DQS programs can and should address creativity in gender expression, but this need not be a requirement for all of them.

Program plans should take into consideration children's developmental abilities and include the same level of rich, high-quality materials found in other types of children's programming. If a librarian is not a member of the LGBTQ+ community, they should seek input from someone who is, such as by talking with LGBTQ+ library staff or caregivers in rainbow families, collaborating with local LGBTQ+ community organizations or nonprofits, or creating and working with an LGBTQ+ specific or general diversity advisory committee with cross-sectional representation. By seeking this input, librarians can avoid inadvertently stereotyping or perpetuating microaggressions towards LGBTQ+ individuals.

Material Selection. The print and digital materials selected for the program are extremely important. Librarians want to create a program that is engaging, educational, and supportive of young children's sensibilities. Presently there is a dearth of high-quality, read-aloud queer books for young children.⁶ This sentiment is also echoed by New York Public librarian Chelsea Condren who notes,

There is a gap in good LGBTQ picturebooks. Some are not as fun to read aloud as we want them to be. That is why I supplement with new classic storytime favorites. *Worm Loves Worm* works out as a read-aloud, but other books don't always work well. Todd Parr books work pretty well but they aren't solely LGBTQ focused. *And Tango Makes Three* (by Justin Richardson, Peter Parnell, and Henry Cole) is simply too long and wordy. *A is for Activist* (by Innosanto Nagara) doesn't read super well aloud. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* works well as does *King and King* (by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland); but there is still a huge gap. We strive to include these books, but there needs to be attention to the best strategies for read aloud. We need books that work for storytime. Current LGBTQ children's books are too “afterschool special.” We aren't connecting the dots between topical coverage and aspects of a good read aloud. It is much more work for the reader when you use the current titles available. People assume we have more LGBTQ picturebooks to read-aloud for this age group than we actually do.⁷

Rachel Payne from the BPL echoes a similar sentiment. She notes, “One of the things we have been recommending is only one or two book about difference in gender expression in the program and incorporating fun, sure-fire read-alouds as the other books. The reason for this is that some of the books about diverse gender expression can be long and we have an audience of very young children at these programs.”⁸ BPL provides a list of recommended picture-books for DQS programs on their website (<https://borrow.bklynlibrary.org/booklist/vjXMD>) that librarians will find useful for planning.

A few other resources are available to assist librarians, including book awards and booklists for LGBTQ+ children’s books as well as collection development tools. Awards such as the American Library Association’s (ALA) Stonewall Book Award and Mike Morgan and Larry Romans Children’s and Young Adult Literature Award administered by the ALA GLBT Round Table, can be useful for finding an LGBTQ+ children’s title, though many of the books do not lend themselves to being read aloud. The Amelia Bloomer Booklist (<https://ameliabloomer.wordpress.com/>), selected by a committee of the ALA Feminist Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table, recommends books with gender nonconforming female characters. Some of these titles can be used for a DQS program as well as titles on the ALA GLBT Round Table’s Rainbow Book List (<http://glbrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>) of recommended children and young adult titles with LGBTQ+ content.

The collection tool *Rainbow Family Collections* by Jamie Naidoo identifies LGBTQ+ children’s picture-book titles that lend themselves for use in storytimes as read-alouds. The international companion to that book will include children’s titles published in English since 2012 as well as titles in other languages such as Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish.

Advocacy for Rainbow Families and Community Engagement Strategies

Some librarians may be hesitant to offer a DQS program for fear of community backlash. Nonetheless, it is the responsibility of all libraries to be advocates for their local community. By offering DQS programs, the library can help establish an environment that accepts and celebrates diversity.

A librarian in Oregon mentioned a community survey that was administered to the local LGBTQ+ community. When asked to identify community resources that they used, no one mentioned the public library. As a result, the librarian used this as the impetus for creating a DQS program. Essentially, the librarian wanted to demonstrate that the public library was an advocate for the queer community and a potential partner for programming.

A librarian in New York extolled the benefits of video recording the DQS program as a way to not only archive the library’s programs and outreach efforts to the LGBTQ+ community,

but also as a way to provide evidence of what really happened during the program. This provides the opportunity to counteract negative sentiments by demonstrating reality versus perception of the event. If other librarians wanted to follow this practice, they should consider recording other types of children’s programs beyond the DQS program and ensure they have proper permissions from caregivers for any children captured in the video.

Another librarian in New Orleans (not part of the original study), indicated that her impetus for offering a DQS program was a group of straight mothers who saw a need for the program in their community and encouraged the library to host the event. In this instance, the hugely successful DQS program was billed as an inclusive family event celebrating the creativity and diversity inherent in the library’s local community.


When thinking about community engagement strategies to welcome rainbow families, the most successful librarians have worked with LGBTQ+ community or other community organizations that have a common focus on creativity, reading or cultural literacy, and education. These librarians have invested considerable time and effort in developing a mutually beneficial relationship where everyone feels valued and respected. From the librarians interviewed and surveyed, the ones that clearly exhibited this partnership were those that worked with the DQSH organization in California or New York.

In these instances, considerable time was taken to meet with leadership from DQSH to discuss shared interests and goals of creating a DQS program in the library. Training for drag queens strengthened the partnership, leading to well-received programs and, in turn, resulting in additional partnerships for other DQS programs or Pride events for rainbow families and the general public.

Getting rainbow families invested in program planning is equally beneficial to community engagement. Those libraries that included either caregivers in rainbow families or members of the LGBTQ+ community who had worked with children, reported greater success in their programs than those libraries who did not work with the LGBTQ+ community. By working with these populations, librarians can gain insight on programming topics and strategies as well as tap into the network of rainbow families to promote both targeted and inclusive children’s programming, including DQS programs.

While not indicative of all DQS programs and the experiences of public librarians planning them, this study provides a glimpse into some of the challenges and benefits of planning such programs. The results can be useful to librarians interested in pursuing their own DQS program and can serve as a call for librarians to train the performers they recruit to work with children in programs. It is also critical that libraries planning DQS programs think about the intended audience of the program and discern if the structure of the program

is inclusive to all families or if it unintentionally marginalizes rainbow families by outing them or using materials that perpetuate stereotypes or microaggressions against them. Finally, the power and potential of developing community collaborations with LGBTQ+ and other community organizations is evident within the results and an indicator of DQS program success.

As the number of DQS programs continues to grow, library staff planning these programs and working with the drag queens will inevitably continue to face new challenges and opportunities. Hopefully, in the end, everyone will understand the DQS program is really all about inclusivity, creativity, and imagination. As executive director of RADAR Productions and DQSH notes, “It’s really beautiful to have drag queens painting children’s faces and telling stories. It’s a kid’s world to be very imaginative. . . . They’re just seeing the drag queens as other people who are being imaginative [too].”⁹ 

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Sparking the Ire, and Support, of a Community

When a Public Library Program Becomes Something More

Jennifer Stickles, Head of Youth and Adult Programs and Gallery Exhibits Coordinator at Olean (NY) Public Library.

“I am thoroughly disgusted with the thought that children need to learn about abnormal sexual relationships when they can’t even decide what clothes to wear or what’s for lunch today! Now they can learn how to tuck and tape their genitals, apply makeup, put on a dress and heels, and prance around like a chicken pretending to think that they are the other gender.”

“The world is going to hell in a hand basket. What’s right is wrong and what is wrong is right. Not in my book. This is not OK. This is the world view; it is not God’s view. The Bible calls homosexuality an abomination and that is the truth!”

Those were some of the many negative comments the Olean (NY) Public Library received—via e-mail, phone,

on social media, and even in person—when we announced our programming surrounding LGBT+ Pride Month, which included a storytime with drag queens.

The city of Olean, New York (population around 13,000), is located in Cattaraugus County, where 63 percent of votes in the presidential election went to Donald Trump. The area has a strong conservative leaning, and our library received criticism via e-mail, phone calls, in-person complaints, and on our social media accounts.

My role at the library is to oversee and create programs for all ages. As the head of youth and adult programs and an openly queer woman, I took the brunt of the negativity. There were calls for me to be fired, statements about me forcing my “lesbian agenda” on the



Both protesters and supporters rallied outside the Olean Public Library to make their voices heard about drag queen story-times. Photos courtesy of Danielle Freeman-Brauen.

community, and eventually threats of violence and death. I dealt with a self-professed preacher getting in my face, telling me to burn in Hell, and calling me a demon and a regular patron going on for several minutes about how sick LGBT people were.

Our local newspaper, *The Olean Times Herald*, did an article about the event the day it was to take place. They discussed the criticism and the threats to burn down the library. They also interviewed several people in the community. When the article was published on their Facebook page, it was swamped with comments.

"And of course what the article fails to mention is that Stickle is, herself, a lesbian and thus has a vested interest in promoting her lifestyle choice as well as the lifestyle choices of other LGBT individuals."

"Actually it does mention that lower down in the article as to reference its insignificance. It's a crock, they shouldn't allow her around children."

That last comment was made by a regional director of the National Socialist Movement, who resides near Olean and stated he would be attending the drag event to protest.

On June 20, 2018, there was a definite tension in the air when I arrived at work. That evening we would clearly see how our community felt about its LGBT citizens. We had been threatened, and I had received vague death threats on social media. The police were set to arrive later in the day to attempt to keep the atmosphere calm and protect library staff and patrons. There were protests and counter-protests scheduled, and the Buffalo news was on its way to interview individuals on camera.

It wasn't just our local community that was waiting to

see how this would all play out. The news of the controversy had spread throughout the country. I had posted about the events leading up to the day in a closed Facebook group for librarians, seeking advice from my peers. People were reaching out to us from all over to let the library know that they stood with us in the face of adversity and censorship.

One woman chimed in, "Thank you for hosting this, OPL. Accepting and learning from people who are different is the fundamental American value. I'll be cheering you from Chicago!"

What had started out as a storytime program that would teach inclusion and acceptance had become a sort of symbol in a way—we were being lauded for standing strong, refusing to back down and cancel the event even with the threat of violence and Neo-Nazis. The library staff and board of trustees were being commended for refusing to participate in censorship.

Our staff wore Celebrate Diversity buttons and worked extra hours to be there during the event, and all members of our board were in attendance. We pulled together and showed a united front against the hate that was coming at us.

It was controlled chaos that day. Police officers in and out of uniform patrolled the library and parking lot. There were camera crews, radio stations, the local newspaper, protesters, counter-protesters, and patrons filing in and out of the library that evening. Our performer, Benjamin Berry, was being interviewed by multiple news outlets all while trying to get into the role and unicorn attire of Flo Leeta.

Approximately an hour before the event, I stepped outside for the first time. The small front lawn of the library was filled to capacity with supporters. There were rain-

bow flags, signs, children laughing, and adults from all walks of life conversing. The scene before me was in a word, beautiful.

There were protesters. The police had made them stay off to the side huddled together with their signs. About ten people had gathered to show their anger versus the two hundred that were there to show their support.

The show was a huge success, and an additional 150 tried to squeeze into the small venue. Flo Leeta's costume resembled a unicorn, and the children adored her. The library staff and board were all smiles as they watched people gather around afterwards to have their picture taken with the drag queen. I went home after we closed—later on the evening news, our event was the headline story.

It didn't end that night though. The days leading up to the event and the overwhelming support by our community that night had only been the start. The next day, the local paper ran the headline "Drag Queen Kids' Party Brings Waves of Support to Olean Library." The library received congratulatory e-mails from the Office of Intellectual Freedom, the American Library Association, and the New York Civil Liberties Union.

Our library was being talked about on the Stonewall Gazette twitter account, ilovelibraries.org, in *American Libraries* magazine, on the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutes Twitter account, and more. The news report went national a couple of days after the event.

The program had exposed a lot about our community, and the supporters ended up outnumbering those who were against the event. The biggest fallout from the event happened at the local school district. Marcie Richmond was the Title IX compliance officer for the Olean Schools. In a public post, Richmond left a comment regarding the drag event that had happened at the Olean Public Library.

"Gender identity issues are directly from Satan...Children should not be exposed to that at such a young age. Satan tried to make it seem like it's just a story reading and 21st century thing that we should embrace and that's so far from the truth..." Marcie Baker Richmond

On June 26th the Olean School Board had a public hearing regarding their code of conduct. The Cattaraugus County Pride Coalition (CCPC) and others attended the meeting, intending to bring up the statements made by Richmond. Community members were concerned that Richmond would not be capable of performing her job duties as the Title IX compliance officer if she held transphobic and homophobic beliefs.

The school board would not allow the community members to speak. The previous year they had enacted a policy stating those wishing to be given time at a school board meeting had to put in a written request no later than the Wednesday before. Understandably the public was upset by the restriction, and so the board agreed to hold a special session the following Monday, July 2nd.

The CCPC and others spent the days leading up to the special session preparing statements to read and a list of changes they wanted to see happen at the school. The group did not ask for Richmond to be disciplined, they instead spoke of proactive changes they wanted to take place at the school:

- All Olean City School District employees should receive safe space training
- Create a diversity committee of students, faculty, and community members
- Create a gay-straight alliance at the middle school

The school board did not comment about the requests or the statements that were made by the public. One thing that did become clear that evening, Marcie Richmond was no longer the Title IX compliance officer for the Olean City School District.*

A drag queen storytime program, threats of violence, Neo-Nazis, and homophobia brought together the LGBT community and allies, gave us national recognition, and started the journey of making our city and schools a safer and more inclusive environment for this marginalized group of individuals.

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