**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**Public Library Staff Perceptions of Stakeholder Support for Drag Queen Storytimes**

**Keywords: public libraries; children’s services; drag queen storytime; library staff; diversity & inclusion**

**Introduction**

Drag queen storytimes (DQS) are becoming increasingly common in public libraries across North America. During these events, drag queens[[1]](#endnote-1) lead children’s storytime by reading stories, singing songs, making crafts, and engaging in other activities typical of library storytimes. DQS organizers point to the programs’ potential to promote acceptance and celebration of diverse identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) identities (Proxmire 2018; Staino 2017), as a main reason for incorporating this type of programming into children’s library services. DQS have proven to be controversial in many communities, with various stakeholders expressing their opinions in sometimes extreme ways. For example, stakeholder opposition has been evidenced by community protests (Stickles 2018), library board resignations (Peet and Yorio 2018), and legislative proposals to cut library funding (Walters 2019), while stakeholder support has been shown via public demonstrations (Stickles 2018) and record attendance at library storytimes (Pereira 2019).

Despite the increasing popularity of and controversy surrounding DQS, little scholarly research has engaged with these programs in libraries. While some accounts of DQS are available in the professional (e.g., Condren 2018; Landgraf 2018; Stickles 2018) and scholarly (e.g., Montague and Latham 2019; Naidoo 2018) literature, the focus has virtually exclusively been on libraries that have hosted or have planned to host such programs. Missing from the literature are the accounts of those who have not hosted DQS, as well as library staff perspectives of stakeholder support for these events. Given the controversy DQS can spur among various stakeholder groups, it is imperative to better understand library staff perceptions of stakeholder support and the ways in which this support may impact DQS. This paper presents preliminary quantitative findings of a survey exploring library staff experiences with and attitudes toward DQS.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study used sensitizing concepts (Charmaz 2014; Dunne 2011) from studies pertaining to equity, inclusion, and social justice in libraries (e.g., Morales, Knowles, and Bourg 2014; Wexelbaum 2018) in developing survey questions.

**Research Questions**

The overall aim of this study was to explore US library staff experiences with and attitudes toward DQS, including those who work at libraries that have and have not hosted DQS in the past. The specific research questions addressed in this paper are:

**RQ1:** What levels of support do library staff perceive from various stakeholders in hosting DQS?

**RQ2:** What differences, if any, exist between levels of support perceived by library staff working at libraries that have and have not hosted DQS?

**Methodology**

*Data Collection*

A survey was developed to capture library staff experiences with and perspectives of DQS. The survey was pilot-tested and revised prior to dissemination. Data were collected via Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Participants were recruited by email invitations sent directly to children’s librarians and library directors in each US state, as well as professional and institutional listservs.

*Data Analysis*

The authors imported Qualtrics data into Excel and generated pivot tables summing responses across question categories. Authors also calculated post-hoc two-proportion z-tests (α = 0.05) to test for significant differences between population proportions among respondents from institutions that have hosted DQS and those from institutions that have not hosted DQS. The Benjamini-Hochberg procedure (Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995) was applied to p-values prior to significance testing to adjust for false-discovery rates. Effect sizes were determined using Cohen’s h (Cohen 1988), which measures differences between two proportions.

*Participants*

Four hundred and sixty-six library staff members responded to the survey. Respondents were primarily middle-aged, ages 31-50 (n=262, 56%) and 51 or over (n=113, 24%). Almost three-quarters of participants reported having very liberal (n=211, 45%) and liberal (n=127, 27%) personal political views. While the majority of participants did not consider themselves to be LGBTQ+ (n=238, 51%), a significant minority identified as LGBTQ+ (n=153, 33%) or unsure (n=44, 9%). Respondents represented all major regions of the US, with respondents’ libraries located in the Northeastern (n=183, 39%), Midwestern (n=98, 21%), Western (n=97, 21%), and Southern (n=48, 10%) US regions. Most respondents reported being in a position to make programming decisions for their library (n=393, 84%). The majority of respondents work at a library that has not hosted a DQS in the past (n=346, 74%), and the remaining 120 respondents (26%) work at a library that has hosted at least one DQS event.

**Results**

Respondents were asked to indicate how supportive they think various stakeholders in their library’s location would be of DQS. Stakeholder groups included: library staff, library administration, library board of trustees, community members, local government, and local religious organizations. Responses were on a five-point scale ranging from *Not at all supportive* to *Extremely supportive*.

Tables 1-6 display perceived stakeholder support, divided by frequency of responses among respondents whose institutions hosted DQS and did not host DQS. The significance of two-proportion z-tests and h-values display the difference and magnitude of this difference, respectively, between responses for both groups. While caution must be exercised when interpreting h-values that do not have established theory or context, shading of these values reflects rule-of-thumb conventions reflecting the strength of effect size (h=0.2, small effect size; h=0.5, medium effect size; h=0.8, large effect size).

On average, significant differences with moderate effect sizes were present across all stakeholder groups. When comparing responses across institutions that have hosted DQS versus those who have not, it appears that respondents from institutions who have not hosted report a perceived lack of support across all stakeholder groups. Respondents from institutions who have hosted DQS report that all of the stakeholder categories with the exception of religious organizations are very to extremely supportive. Perceived levels of moderate support did not vary across respondents for all stakeholder categories with the exception of local government and religious organizations. When it comes to religious organizations, both groups reported low levels of support, with institutions who have hosted indicating slightly larger levels of moderate support or being uncertain of support levels from these organizations.

Table 1. Perceived library staff support for DQS

by respondents from libraries who have and have not hosted DQS.



Table 2. Perceived library administration support for DQS

by respondents from libraries who have and have not hosted DQS.



Table 3. Perceived board of trustees support for DQS

by respondents from libraries who have and have not hosted DQS.



Table 4. Perceived community support for DQS

by respondents from libraries who have and have not hosted DQS.



Table 5. Perceived local government support for DQS

by respondents from libraries who have and have not hosted DQS.



Table 6. Perceived religious organization support for DQS

by respondents from libraries who have and have not hosted DQS.



**Discussion**

Findings indicate significant differences in perceived stakeholder support reported by respondents by whether their institutions had hosted a DQS or not. Specifically, respondents from institutions that have not hosted DQS viewed each of the stakeholder groups as not being supportive of DQS, whereas those from institutions having hosted DQS reported high levels of support. This finding suggests that perceived stakeholder support may be a significant factor in determining whether an institution decides to host a DQS. This claim can be tested further in follow-up individual interviews with library decision-makers, who can be culled from the current participant pool given that the majority identified having a decision-making role.

Differences between proportion of responses across these two groups were less consistent when it came to religious organizations. Regardless of whether the respondent came from an institution that had hosted a DQS or not, the frequency of perceived high levels of support from religious organizations was low, with respondents from institutions who had hosted DQS reporting higher levels of uncertainty. This finding suggests that religious organizations may not function as a crucial stakeholder group under consideration among respondents from institutions who had chosen to host DQS. Further research can examine whether this stakeholder group varies in perceived importance of support among these two groups.

**Conclusion**

This paper presents preliminary results of a survey exploring US public library staff experiences with and attitudes toward DQS, focusing on library staff perceptions of stakeholder support for these events. Presented here are preliminary quantitative findings. Analysis of qualitative data is ongoing, and is anticipated to lead to additional insights regarding library staff perceptions of stakeholder support of DQS.

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1. Drag is a type of entertainment where people dress up and perform in highly stylized ways. While many prominent drag artists identify as men and present in exaggeratedly feminine ways, people of any gender can be drag performers. Drag performers may have a separate drag persona in addition to their everyday selves that could have a different name and different gender pronouns. However, having such varied identities does not mean drag performers are transgender, or vice-versa (National Center for Transgender Equality 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)