How Drag Queen Storytime in libraries helps early years children develop multi-literacies, empathy and centres inclusion

On the surface, drag queen storytime (DQS) in a library setting is seen as fun, glamorous, entertaining and possibly a novelty. However, through careful consideration of execution DQS can learn from and build on the established success of library early years storytime programmes. Emphasising expected storytelling skills, multi-literacies, learning development, play, community cohesion and empathy. Looking at studies and observing reports from DQS sessions I will consider how DQS can extend library storytime and provide a unique fulfilling experience for children.

Drag queen storytimes have become a recent sensation in public library programming around the world. Set up in 2015 by LGBT author Michelle Tea as a new a parent when she attended local library storytimes in San Francisco, which to her felt ‘really straight’ and not reflective of her own life (Kuga, 2018). Tea launched an organisation called Drag Queen Story Hour with the purpose of creating a storytime that ‘captures the imagination and gender fluidity of childhood and gives kids glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models’ (Drag Queen Story Hour, 2018a). Early on Drag Queen Story Hour began to work in partnership with libraries, to train drag queens with appropriate reading skills and coordinate organised events (Condren, 2018, p. 21). A UK equivalent started in 2017 called Drag Queen Story Time who have a pool of performers who will host events across the country (Drag Queen Story Time, 2019). Libraries are brilliant as a site for DQS where many members of the community feel welcome, can access free storytimes and literacy development and reading for pleasure.

Drag

The drag queen themselves is a site for analysis for why drag queen storytime can work so well. In the context of a DQS event they can be seen as a mode, within a multimodal context (which will be looked at later) as they are a representation of a set of ideas or expression. A drag queen and their performance (traditionally in the context of LGBT nightclubs) is primarily seen as an impersonation or character presenting an entertainment act (Barrett, 1999, 313-314). It is important to consider what it is the drag queen presenting to their audience at drag queen storytime. Historically there have been feminist concerns of drag being a misogynistic mockery of women but Rusty Barrett (1999, p. 315) observes drag performance by gay men of female characters as not being about women, but rather as a subversion of gender performance. Barrett cites Judith Butler as a theorist who follows this interpretation also. Butler (2004, p. 214) speaks specifically about an understood ontology of gender and identifies how gender performance in drag can help a drag performer and their audience rearticulate a cultural
ontology of gender. In creating a named character, drag queens embody a performance of a character who has a fictional construction of gender with exaggerated features. These exaggerated features are intentional, as signs, to signify certain ideas about gender, but also to create an idea of a glitzy ‘showtime’ with their bright colours, glamorous clothes and lots of glitter and sparkle, as Una Lamarche (2017) reports when Harmonica Sunbeam emerges out as if onto a stage at Hudson Park Library there are screams and ‘elation’ from child attendees. Drag Queen Story Hour also use words such as ‘artistic’ and ‘creative’ to explain a drag queen’s expression (Drag Queen Story Hour, 2018b). DQS often aims to shift the focus from being a one way performance and about the drag queen, to an encouragement for children to explore individuality and appreciate difference with the freedom ‘to express themselves however they want, free from the constraints of prescribed gender roles’ (Drag Queen Story Hour, 2018b), this invitation, within the context of a confident glamorous character in a position of authority is the potential for the drag queen to be a role model (Drag Queen Story Hour, 2018a).

Lawrence Sipe (2008, p. 239-241) sees the value of using theoretical frames to interrogate his research data on children’s responses during read aloud storytimes. He considers these (race, gender, culture) and looks to understand in context any subsequent effect on engagement, enjoyment and literacy development. He uses ‘gender’ as one of the frames asking questions about not only the identifiable differences in response between perceived boys and girls but also considers what responses and interactions may look like from children ‘who do not conform to the heteronormative rules of gendered behavior’ (Sipe, 2008, p. 240). Children invited into a space with a drag queen are encouraged to engage with the gender performance and will likely have experience of dressed up characters or recognise and enjoy glitz and glamour.

Predominantly the performances are hosted by drag queens, with some instances of drag kings such as Adam All (Newham Mag, 2019) and Kurt (Porter, 2019) who have both hosted DQS in the UK. However there is work to avoid any binary assumption, Rachel Aimee who runs the New York chapter of Drag Queen Story Hour asserts that the sessions have an ‘inclusive, open definition of drag’ that does not stop with a man dressing up as a woman, avoiding any reinforcing of a gender binary (Kuga, 2018).

**Storytelling skills**

Storytelling and understanding how it can best underpin literacy development is a skill, which is expected to be exemplified by librarians working in the early years (Rankin & Brock, 2009, p. 48). It is important for a library considering programming a drag queen storytime to distinguish the purposes of a DQS as having a specific literacy and early years need, that the same standard and outcomes of storytelling they would expect from a librarian led storytime, as without these skills a storyteller is unlikely to connect with an audience. Research on drag queen storytime delivery in the USA found that two thirds of the survey respondents had established training for the drag queens leading the storytimes (Campbell Naidoo, 2018, p. 15). As Campbell Naidoo notes, its worrying that a third of his research respondents did not ensure training, ‘rather, the drag queens just did what they wanted’ (Campbell Naidoo, 2018, p. 15). It is
important for both the drag queen and library to understand that a drag queen storytime event in an early years setting requires a considered approach very different from a drag queen’s nightclub entertainment act.

Those in Campbell Naidoo’s study who did deliver training felt that it was important for the drag queens to understand a range of information and skills such as best storytime practice, key information about child development, dialogic reading, local early literacy programmes such as ‘Every Child Ready to Read 2’, observe regular storytimes led by librarians, literature selection guidelines, book sharing techniques, how to talk to children about gender and drag, songs, rhymes and props, how to hold a book whilst reading and the importance of practicing and reading a book beforehand (Campbell Naidoo, 2018, p. 15-16). These skills replicate the expected practice of librarians working in the early years as mentioned but also extend to the specific requirements of DQS, talking about gender and drag in an age appropriate way for young children.

Considering that a drag queen storytime session could be made up of these different elements; the story (or stories) being read itself, rhymes and discussion as well as the strong visual element of the storyteller, the experience for a child attendee has many visual and aural stimulants. This is an extension of the multi-modal elements experienced during the storytelling.

Multi-modal elements of storytelling at a DQS

The stories read during drag queen storytime are exclusively picture books according to the literature. The books are carefully curated (Campbell Naidoo, 2018, p. 16-17) and are a mixture of LGBT representation/gender variant themes and popular children’s classics often focusing on inclusivity or wonder. The picture book is ideal for performed storytelling for the early years, with the images held up and the words read aloud. Serafini (2012, p. 153) defines a mode as a system of signs which convey meaning, such as font, graphic design, text or images which are all multimodal elements of picture books.

Sunderland and McGlashan’s study into multi-modal representation in two-Mum and two-Dad picture books identified the books as having the modes language and image, and suggested that for the books to be read aloud to or with children the additional modes ‘such as gesture, facial expression, and prosaic elements such as pitch, pace and rhythm with additional platforms and sensory modalities’ (Sunderland & McGlashan, 2012, p. 199). This gives us an extension of modes to consider to include storyteller, particularly in a highly visual performance setting such as drag queen storytime, as well as the typical picture book elements.

Visual elements of the book

Visual elements of a book contributing to an overall visual mode are usually in the form of illustrations but include colour and style of illustrations also. During storytime the book is held up whilst the storyteller reads out the pages, meaning visual elements with big bold images enhance a storytelling event. Children construct knowledge about print in the early years before
formal education, as print is one of many literacies that pervade society and everyday life (Dickinson & Smith, 1994, p. 105).

Text and language
In a storytime setting the text and language mode of a picture book is read predominantly only by the storyteller and converted into speech. On some occasions picture books may lend them to large bold text that can be read at a distance, lending themselves well to being read aloud. An example of this is in a photograph of Erin B. at Jones public library, Toronto (Pulicicchio, 2017). The drag queen storyteller is holding up and reading from Todd Parr's *Be who you are*, which has large illustrated colourful text across a double page spread, reading ‘Just be who you are’ the simple words spread across the page are potentially intentional from the author to lend itself well to storytelling (Parr, 2012). It adjusts the children as listeners’ interactions with the modes to shift from just listening to speech, to also read the text with the storyteller at this point in the story.

Speech
Identifying how speech can operate as a mode, pitch, pace and rhythm can be considered, as identified by Sunderland & McGlashan (2012, p. 199). Storytellers also impose voices of characters, using a cross-focus approach to present multiple characters, changing tone of voice dramatically for each character (Rankin & Brock, 2009, p. 129). These help as a mode to construct understanding of the narrative.

Drag queen as a visual mode
The drag queen presents their own character, whilst telling a story presenting other characters’ experiences. The drag queen’s representation of gender as a theoretical frame has already been considered but it can be extended to understand the drag queen’s presence as a storyteller as a mode, interweaving with the experience and understanding of the story. The drag queen has a high visual element as they read the story, as described by Michelle Tea ‘Drag queens wear very glamorous, pretty and fantastical dresses, sometimes fantastical pants’ when introducing drag queen storytime at Stories Books in Echo Park, LA, journalist Siran Babayan goes on to specifically describe drag queen Pickle as wearing ‘a pink gown with a slit, Rita-Hayworth style wig, tarantula eyelashes and lavender acrylic nails’ (Babayan, 2017). The high visual element of bright colours and accentuated features (hair, eyelashes and nails) will combine with the drag queen’s overall character portrayal, placing themselves as an integral part of the story. Drag queen Bella Noche, reading Julian is a Mermaid, attaches a crab to her hair and signals to the children that she is also a mermaid, therefore integrating an appearance prop that ties directly into the story (Kuga, 2018).

Gestures
McNeill (cited in Herman, 2010, p. 88) distinguishes four distinct types of gestures: gesticulations, emblems (such as the OK sign), pantomime or sign language. Drag queens as readers will have the restriction of one hand holding the book to read, but there is plenty of opportunity to integrate all these types of gestures to suggest size, space, weather and action or to portray characters (Rankin & Brock, 2009, p. 129).
Participation
An effective and considered drag queen storytime style of storytelling would follow a performance-orientated style defined by Elaine Reese and Adell Cox (1999, p. 21) as the story read without commentary or discussion interruption, but with participatory discussion of the story before and after encouraging children to use their imagination and develop their own storytelling skills. At a DQS at Hudson Park Library (a branch of NYPL), drag queen Harmonica Sunbeam introduced the story *Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress* by Christine Baldacchino, engaging the group of children in a discussion about whether astronauts, or boys can wear dresses, the children themselves discussing the topic presenting different ideas to each other (Lamarche, 2017). Asking children to use their existing knowledge of the world, such as assumptions about gender and clothing in order to interrogate and understand the story along with adult-child dialogue with questions and prompts are seen established mediated storytelling techniques established from Vygotskian theories of scaffolding (Cochran-Smith, 1984, p. 264). Another example of interaction and participation was drag queen Pickle at an Echo Park DQS telling the children ‘I want everyone to say a very special word: love!’ (Babayan, 2017). Anne Harding (2015, p. 272) recognises that it is ‘through talk before, during and after book sharing that children make sense of what they are hearing and seeing, relate it to their own lives, and find wonder’, children relating to their own lives is what Cochran-Smith identified as knowledge of the world as a life-to-text interaction (Cochran-Smith, 1984, p. 173), this making sense contributes to narrative comprehension as a whole.

Narrative and comprehension
Concluding the consideration of all these individual multi-modal elements, it is evident that they can contribute to children’s literacy development and comprehension skills when children attempt to understand a narrative. Lawrence Sipe (2008, p. 189-192) identifies basic learning impulses children can combine in order to comprehend a story. A child reading a story alone will have minimal modes to interrogate (colour, images, text) but a storytelling session, led by a drag queen performer has many visual and aural stimulus. There is also particular importance placed on participation. If comprehension is improved by knowledge of the world and children’s own lives, then it is essential that children from LGBT families or who have gender variant feelings themselves see themselves or multiple gender possibilities or anti-stereotypes represented.

Representation and empathy as learning outcome
Libraries, their programming and their provision of a wide range of children’s literature support children’s learning around diversity in society. Rankin & Brock (2015, p. 45) write that librarians working in an early years setting delivering story and rhyme sessions need to make sure they can foster links with parents and carers from minority communities (in this case LGBT parents, like Michelle Tea herself will feel welcome by DQS programming) and promote anti-discrimination in their sessions. In a LGBT context, including drag queens in formal settings such as library storytimes can reflect the cultural codes that both parents/carers and children may see at home, if LGBT parents bring in these codes of gay culture, by having images of drag queens or bringing them up with children in other contexts. Michelle Tea’s inspiration to create a
drag queen storytime as a reaction to her perception of existing storytime being heteronormative (Kuga, 2018) follows a lineage of a desire for reflection creating representative children’s literature itself. Leslea Newman the author of Heather Has Two Mommies wrote it following a request from a lesbian mother ‘who was frustrated by the lack of positive stories about alternative families for her daughter’ (Finnessy, 2002, p. 146). Finnessy (2002, p. 150) through looking at potential censorship of these works, asserts that having an exposure to a wide amount of literature helps young people ‘acquire a point of view, and by restricting LGBT representation through a lack of availability of LGBT literature this would ‘distort children’s point of view’.

Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) describes books as being able to be both mirrors (where a reader can reflect on their own identity and experiences), windows (allowing child readers to see into the life of others) and sliding glass doors (that window moving and being a tangible world the child can step into) so in providing these resources to children as part of their learning and development can encourage both self-acceptance, empathy concerning others and an ability to see possibilities for yourself.

This is a sentiment echoed by Michael Willhote (as cited in Finnessy, 2002, p. 146) author of Daddy’s Roommate who sees his book as successfully being ‘a mirror in which children of gay parents can see themselves. Yet it has also been used as a tool to educate children in more traditional families about the gay families in their midst’. Sims Bishop’s ideas can be extended to the drag queen storytime experience. Drag queens will be an accentuated over the top dressed up role model, so in terms of being a mirror this may only extend to children enjoying dressing up themselves, but perhaps also give confidence to children who enjoy dressing up in opposite gender clothes. Certainly in terms of being windows, children are introduced to drag queens and who they are (Babayan, 2017) and then spend time with them during the storytime session, which can help them see into the world of possibilities that drag queens present with their creative appearance and reading of inclusive stories.

**DQS - Misconceptions and complaints**

Backlashes and protests against drag queen story time have been well documented (Kuga, 2018). Many reasons have been cited as complaints and suggest a fear of the other, or a misinterpretation of the events as an early sexualisation of children. Empathy for LGBT people rather than misunderstandings and fear exemplify the need for ‘windows’ in literature and other narrative experiences at early learning stages.

Past resistance to LGBT inclusion in libraries include the incidents in the 1980s which led to Section 28 in British legislation. The law was in force 1988-2003 within which, libraries as part of local authorities could not provide any LGBT programming or books for children or risk being seen to promote LGBT lifestyles (Vincent, 2018, p. 95). Since the repeal 16 years ago there is little evidence of LGBT children’s event programming in libraries as exemplified in Elizabeth L. Chapman’s research of LGBT provision in 13 library authorities. She found that only one
authority had recently programmed a specific children’s LGBT event, a ‘rainbow storytelling’ session, with the intention of highlighting the library’s LGBT children’s collection (Chapman, 2015, p. 268). With the drag queen storytime model being replicated across multiple locations, it is an example of this need just beginning to be addressed.

A current comparison is highly reported complaints from parents about the ‘No outsiders in our school’ project in Birmingham which instructs lessons teaching diversity (particularly LGBT representation) following the equality act in primary schools using inclusive literature as its basis (Parveen, 2019). With the project using many of the same titles as drag queen story time, the BBC have reported parents as saying the books are not ‘age-appropriate’ (BBC News, 2019).

A cancellation of a drag queen story time at Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown library service in Dublin in June 2019, the library initially cited the same reason for cancellation being that this followed a ‘review in age appropriateness’ (DLR Libraries, 2019)

“Over the weekend we have been inundated with extremely violent homophobia from a frighteningly large group of bigots who believe that a few drag queens reading books to children amounts to child abuse… The library decided that the event was a safety risk, which we accepted given the scale and gravity of the vitriol that was being spewed on twitter. However, the statement issued by DLR last night cites “age appropriateness” as their reason for cancellation…. The implication here is that the content of our drag shows for adults has deemed us inappropriate children’s storytellers. There is no mention in this statement of the safety concerns for the performers and audience of the event due to the ongoing abuse we’re receiving online.” Spokesperson for Glitter Hole to The Independent IE (Farrell, R., 2019)

As the Glitter Hole spokesperson points out, there is an initial implication that the storytime events would have the explicit nature of some of their adult nightclub acts as reported elsewhere (Moloney, 2019). Jamie Campbell Naidoo (2018, p. 14) addresses that many drag performers may have to adjust and consider what is age appropriate for a drag queen storytime for children, suggesting that during training drag queens think about tweaking any stage names that may have adult humour and ruling out any of their usual stage costumes with short skirts or cleavage.

Finnessy (2002, p. 149-150) had also addressed concerns over LGBT children’s books being ‘age appropriate’. Finnessy considers the psychological definition of ‘age appropriate behaviours’ as established by Jean Piaget. Finnessy concludes that ‘because children of all school ages are coming from homes with gay and lesbian parents, children are coming from homes where a sibling identifies him/herself as gay or lesbian, these discussion and readings are age-appropriate’. 
Conclusion

For children who come from LGBT families, may one day grown up to identify as LGBT or do not fit into a binary gender identity themselves (which at early years, children are not likely to developed articulate gender identities), drag queen storytime is a fulfilling and beneficial experience. It is clearly important to have reflections and possibilities included in their early experiences of literature and storytelling, with evidence children also develop literacy skills by making meaning from stories and relating to their own experience. As the study by Elizabeth Chapman (2015) established, LGBT family provision in libraries has been incredibly poor, so DQS can only be a welcome improvement to hopefully bring more and varied events for LGBT citizens into libraries.

Drag queen storytime is a highly visual and aural multimodal reading experience. With many modes for children listening to interact and make meaning from, DQS builds on established skills and knowledge delivered by early years librarians and storytellers to bring a new and refreshing experience for children and adults alike.

Misunderstandings around LGBT awareness and programming only exemplify why LGBT experiences need to be given a platform and empathised at early years stages, British legislation (Section 28), not providing LGBT education for a whole generation has likely distorted views (as identified by Finnessy) by not promoting community cohesion. Resources and programming are needed across society to help celebrate difference, foster inclusion, reduce scaremongering and diminish misunderstandings around the over-sexualisation and age appropriateness of LGBT literature and entertainment. Drag queen storytime is a fun inclusive phenomenon of event programming and with adequate considerations and training can be an excellent addition to early years library provision.
References


