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‘WHERE IS THE SAFE SPACE?!’

From Drag Queen Storytime to LGBTQA+ Inclusive Practice

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Abstract

Drag queen storytime (DQS), also known as drag (queen) story-hour, has been implemented in selected libraries and schools across North America, Oceania, and the United Kingdom, to open safe spaces for drag queens to read children’s books that may involve LGBTQA+ characters or subject matters. Unfortunately, despite its popularity with many children and families, DQS has faced intense public protests regarding the perceived LGBTQA+ themed texts, and violent threats against the performers and organisers. Underpinned by queer, transgender, and feminist theory as well as intersectionality, this creative essay probes the current affairs of DQS as it relates to LGBTQA+ human rights. As a platform to highlight LGBTQA+ digital, visual, and print texts, this essay channels the authors’ ‘inner drags’ and draws on queer narrative inquiry to critically reflect and face our own fear and vulnerability in professional and queer undertaking. Using a recent DQS incident as a case in point, we demonstrate how unleashing our inner queerness through drag can empower us as queer academics and allies to counter ‘dragphobia’ and celebrate gender and sexuality diversity. This creative work aspires to provide provocations for further exploration of queer inclusivity across social, cultural, and political intersections, with the intent to promote LGBTQA+ inclusive practices.

'WHERE IS THE SAFE SPACE?!': From Drag Queen Story Time to LGBTQA+ Inclusive Practice

Julian Chen, Wendy Cumming-Potvin, Kim Andreassen, Bri McKenzie

Introduction

Drag queen storytime (DQS), also known as drag (queen) story-hour, is a program that encourages children's literacy development through reading and drag performance in a safe, family orientated environment, such as a library or book shop (Ellis 2022: 95). Originating in San Francisco in 2015, DQS has been implemented successfully in libraries and schools across North America, Oceania, and the United Kingdom, opening safe spaces for drag queens to read LGBTI+ themed books to children. As DQS' visibility and popularity has increased, with shows such as RuPaul's Drag race introducing 'drag beyond niche audiences' (Ellis 2022;2023), so too have protests and resistance against DQS in the form of online and face-to-face intimidation and harassment with protestors conflating 'gender fluidity, same-sex attraction and transgender identity with deviance to justify hateful conduct' (Ellis 2022:104).

The ongoing protests, which include hate speech, physical violence, and property damage (Ellis 2022; Martiny and Lawrence 2023) are associated with an intensification of polarised politics worldwide and the growth of the alt-right movements through social media; some of these groups now classified as extremist (Ellis 2023: 48). In the US, protests against DQS have include hate speech, violence, and property damage (Ellis 2022: 95; Martiny and Lawrence 2023).¹ Protestors also pathologise same-sex attraction and gender expansiveness. In the UK, angry protesters outside libraries brandished signs saying, 'Welcome Groomers' and shouted at parents who took their children to DQS (Jonze 2022), and protests in Canada also include 'slogans that compare drag to paedophilia, sexual exploitation and grooming' (Zoledziowski and Sheldon 2023). DQS events in Boorloo/Perth (Western Australia), have also attracted protestors and the police to ensure the safety of children and general public. After reading Kate Emery's piece in *The West Australian* (2023),² we decided that, as research practitioners living and working in Boorloo/Perth, it was paramount to express our support as queer academics and allies for the artists who facilitate, the families and children who attend, and the staff who organise these DQS events.

Positionality: Who are we as practitioner researchers?

To provide the personal and professional contexts for this essay, we consider it pivotal to share our authentic intersectional identities as queer academics and allies and why we joined forces to contest anti-DQS homo/trans/dragphobia, setting the stage for our queering narratives:

Kim's True Self: *a trans, non-binary, queer, neurodivergent, and chronically ill parent of two young children and an education officer in the intersection of sexuality and disability who spends their time researching sexuality and gender.*

I am ever aware of the large trough of labels that are assigned to me and that 'other' me. Contradictorily, these labels affect my capacity to do, to achieve, and to be, yet are why I can do, can achieve, and can be who I truly am. I worry that changes to the law could take away my basic human rights as they have for others like me across different parts of the world. On top of this, as a parent, I must handle many

judgmental comments, and questions that hetero parents do not. For example, my young child recently was asked ‘which is your real mum?’ by a gaggle of children who are not yet ten.

Most parents aim to maintain their children’s innocence. Let them remain in their magic, made-up worlds where all people are kind, and they do not have to deal with the sobering ‘adult’ realities of discrimination and oppression. Children of queer parents learn quickly about the cruelty and hurtful ignorance in the world. They learn fast that their family is not accepted in the same way as others, and that others can not only judge their family negatively, but promote these views as the norm.

Now here I am diving into the discomfort of exposing myself with a fabulous team of individuals all advocating for acceptance and beyond. Although, I worry about revealing myself and putting a target on my family. Wendy, Bri, Julian, and I all come from different backgrounds and have different perspectives on the rolling waves of oppression towards the LGBTQIA+ community. The most recent onslaught of hate has been directed towards drag queens who provide joy, understanding, acceptance, and a break from the heteronormative patriarchy.

Julian’s True Self: *a queer academic of colour in Applied Linguistics and Inclusive Education*

‘It’s scary to be vulnerable in a public space like this. Queer identity is something that I have never dodged, but I never wear my rainbow flag deliberately’ (McKenzie, Chen and Veliz 2024).

The vignette above is from the first trioethnography of queerness in TESOL education, which I co-authored with my my colleagues Bri McKenzie (also a co-author of this paper) and Leo Veliz and exemplifies how I faced my biggest fear and vulnerability in openly declaring my sexuality as a queer applied linguist and educator in academia. During the project, I realised that my training and teaching practices had been conditioned by textbook-perfect, Eurocentric, and hetero/cis-normative pedagogy. It was not until an opportunity presented itself during the pandemic for me to collaborate with Bri and like-minded colleagues on queering the curriculum and building allyship in education, did I start soul searching for who I really was as a (queer) academic. Since then, I have started using they/them pronouns and updated my academic profiles to reintroduce my queer identity to my professional community. It feels liberating to embrace queerness by bringing light to the darkest and most vulnerable side of my academic pursuits and practices. Enacting queerness in my academic and professional life, rather than masking it or using it as a tokenistic gesture, has shed light on advocating queerness in (language) education from this new home base. Now I am picking up momentum to dive deep into another queer journey with our new Fantastic Four: Wendy, Bri, Kimberley, and me. The recent news article about a DQS session at the City of Perth library in March 2023 being stigmatised and protested against triggered our justifiable anger to fire back at this unjustifiable bigotry and social injustice that is wrong on so many levels. It is also vital for queers, and allies to advocate for humanising pedagogy and queering curriculum through creative and inclusive performance such as DQS. I am channelling my inner drag queen, ‘Sayuri THE Fab’, to contest this injustice in education, and to stand with my drag sisters and

brothers. The audience will see her sashay on the runway in the section below where we introduce our drag personas.

Bri's true self: *A late 30s, White, straight, cisgender woman and queer ally working in Higher Education.*

Channelling my inner drag-queen' was not something I thought I would ever do. My performance of gender has not regularly entered contested space. I did perform gender in a marginally contested way as a teenager. For me, this meant not shaving my legs, not wearing makeup, dressing in bright-coloured flares I bought from the op shop and actively not engaging in the 'girly' space of fashion or hair styling. This led to the perhaps inevitable question from classmates 'are you a lesbian now?' As an adult, my performance of gender has been considerably more muted; I aim to blend in, not stand out. I do not wear bright colours – blues, greys, blacks, and cream for me and I shave my legs on special occasions. When I first watched RuPaul's Drag Race I found myself confronted by the over-the-top performance of stereotypical 'woman-ness.' The bright clothes, the avant-garde designs, the loudness, the nails, the makeup, the mock outrage, and the judgement. This wasn't really my scene; it was all so performative.

But of course, this is the exact point of drag as it forces us to see gender as a performance. My muted gender presentation is still a performance even if it's saying, 'nothing to see here'. Understanding that drag allows us to access parts of our identity that are not easily available to us was how I channelled my inner drag king. Maybe this was a pathway that might enable me to feel confident to take up more space, be a little louder and stand out more?

Wendy's True Self: *A straight, cis-gender ally*

In Cumming-Potvin (2023), I shared my narrative as a straight, cis-gender woman, who identified as an academic ally in support of LGBTQA+ human rights. This professional positioning emerged through a research project showcasing diversity in families and segued into a study exploring how schoolteachers used literature to approach (or avoid) diversity in gender and sexuality. Collaborating with ingenious queer colleagues to contest the othering of expansive genders and sexualities, we critiqued the narrow conceptions of diversity and equity that pervade many institutions. My academic work also allowed me to unearth my childhood memories of becoming an 'imperfect' ally in family, community, and school settings.

Expanding on my previous research, this exciting collaboration with Julian, Bri, and Kim provides a rich opportunity to unpack how my gender identity and expression have been shaped through rigid policies, institutions, and more. I reflected on the ways that my secondary school education in Canada enforced strict gender binaries and codes of sexuality where 'hyper-masculine' boys who played for the football team were revered, and 'hyper-feminine' girls were encouraged to cheerlead and strut their 'stuff'. The rare occasions when a student expressed gender creatively were met with disdain. If a boy practiced ballet, he would be ostracised, and if a girl dressed or acted in a 'masculine' way, she was strewn with derogatory comments. As a teenager, I implicitly understood the rigidity of these codes, and like most students, surveyed my physical demeanour and clothing. Across Canada at that time,

homophobia, transphobia, and discriminatory laws were rampant; apart from inner-city gay clubs, drag shows were generally unheard of. When someone cross dressed at school or community events, it was slapstick comedy where a man would play the character of a large breasted woman in a tight dress to mock the character, not laugh with her.

Queering and dialoguing the literature

Although drag shows have historically been associated with evening theatre in hidden gay bars, the gestural, vocal, and bodily genealogy of these performances is reminiscent of the late nineteenth century (Horowitz 2020). Over the past few years, drag performers have expanded their entertainment circuits to include daytime drag story hours in well-lit classrooms and libraries (Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess 2021). In a complex political context whereby marriage equality and military inclusion have been won, oppressive legislation and gender and sexuality-based discrimination continue to impact LGBTQA+ people, especially those of colour and those living in poverty (Duberman 2020). Drag story hours create opportunities for children and rainbow families to creatively engage in safe spaces through play-based learning and aesthetic transformation (Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess 2021). In this way, a pedagogy of drag serves to authentically communicate queer lives through a destigmatising narrative that connects learning to community.

A pedagogy of drag goes beyond media representation, such as RuPaul's Drag Race, which has gained immense commercial success with mainstream, heteronormative audiences (Horowitz 2020). Due to the global popularity of this televised series, the term drag has often been equated with 'glamorous queens in bedazzled dresses and outrageous wigs', who confidently strut stages in 'impossibly high heels' (Horowitz 2020: 2). However, as Horowitz explains, this stereotypical representation of drag, which is dominated by cis gender, gay men, is a mere fraction of the panoply of drag expressions. Examples of the endless queer characters include drag kings (usually queer cisgender women or trans men performing as men), bio femmes (cisgender women critically performing feminine stereotypes), and bio males (cisgender men critically performing masculine stereotypes).

Given the queering, transformative, and creative nature of our piece, we have decided to deconstruct a conventional 'literature review' section. Instead, we aim to bring the literature to life by weaving our own queerness, and co-construction of knowledge and understanding of the related literature through collective conversations. Truth be told, none of us had been avant-garde enough before this piece to disrupt academic conventions, so this debut is our rebellious trial to challenge the status quo and acknowledges that it is only when we bring our queerness to the fore can we do this creative essay justice. If readers are still with us, we seek your openness to how we approach queer theory while advocating queer narrative inquiry as a legitimate research approach for conducting our own scholarly work related to LGBTQIA+ issues. We hope that readers will appreciate how we turn our own emotional vulnerability into transformative experience by revealing our drag selves through queer narrative inquiry, in our collective responses to a 2023 anti-DQS protest in Borloo/Perth.

Julian: Richard Sawyer (2021) advocates queering narrative theory as a method of queer self-study, an approach which differs from conventional 'storytelling' or self-studies regulated by Eurocentric standards set by Whitewashed institutions and journals. Queer narrative inquiry disrupts the hetero/cisnormative structure, which is linear,

fixed, authoritative, and focused on individual self who is not part of the LGBTQIA+ community. If in this paper we only followed the same Eurocentric model to spin a yarn about DQS, we would be doing it an injustice. Rather, we need to centre on queerness on all bases, and use it to 'evok[e] the doubt, uncertainty, and blurred vision attendant upon the articulation of queer lives and a caveat against taking 'clarity and precision', as methodological goals potentially inadequate to 'messier and blurrier' (queer) textual performances' (Warhol and Lanser cited in Sawyer 2021).

If this line of queer reasoning also speaks to you all, I would suggest enacting queer narrative inquiry in our DQS piece by queering our own stories as academics and allies. Recall the quote above that queering is not always clean-cut, smooth, and linear, and cookie-cutter? The unjust discrimination, prejudice, marginalisation, and bullying against our LGBTQIA+ community daily makes it less rosy. It is much darker and messier, as this queering approach could sometimes make us feel uncomfortable, uncertain, and even fearful yet isn't it also a real world in which we live now? Informed by queer narrative theorists, Sawyer provides some strategies for queering our narratives such as 'nonlinear plurality, the open sense of temporality' (Matz, 2015:242), 'revers[ing the] positions of speaking authority' (de Villiers, 2012, p. 11), 'spinning positionality in different directions' (Sedgwick 1993), and 'breaking with causal, deterministic, natural, and pre-ordained plot lines' (Roof, 2015 cited in Sawyer 2021: 27).

Bri: I hear you Julian, and I relate to the points you make about the 'messiness' of queering our practices. When I consider queer approaches to learning, I orientate towards practices and ways of being, as both educator and learner, that are 'deliberately disruptive' and that purposefully destabilise cultural, political, and social structures (Whitlock 2010). Looking at this through a theoretical teaching lens, queer critical pedagogy extends the dynamics of critical pedagogy by insisting on the exploration and deconstruction of hegemonic and normative ideas, particularly as they relate to sexuality, gender, and bodies (Hackford-Peer 2019). But let's also deconstruct hegemonic expectations of how we might design this piece itself and how we might, as queer academics and allies, come to explore DQS through queer narrative inquiry as our own drag personas.

Kim: The critique of hegemony Bri mentions reminds me of a paper written by Earles (2016) exploring gender in children's books. A rich subject line and one that as a non-binary parent I have not been able to ignore. Earles noted the binary nature of children's books and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. They disrupted this process by changing the gender of book characters confirming that girls' characters were more able to dabble in masculinity, whilst male characters became unrecognisable without the traditional masculine tropes. Noting the research indicating the link between family and domestic violence and traditional gendered stereotypes, it is easy to see how the queering of research and education is vital (Our Watch, 2021). The intersection of the queerness of DQS and exploring our own drag personas also creates a shift that allows us as researchers to break down what the narrative allows us to explore and plan in a way we haven't before – and that is truly exciting.

Bri: I love how DQS as a queer project, interrupts and destabilises the ordinary activity of an adult reading to children in a library. It does this in part by doing what drag

always does, drawing attention to gender as a performance. I feel that narrative inquiry as a research approach is ideal for us as researchers because using narrative research methodologies allows for the construction and reconstruction of our stories as they evolve with our developing identities. Narrative inquiry is ideal for research that deals with the complexity of (un)knowing our ways of being in the world. We assert that our narrative inquiry is queer because we consciously seek to embody and better understand queerness through our drag alter egos. We also seek to destabilise normative approaches to research by handing over some sections of this piece to those alter egos as they explore their identities and responses to DQS.

Wendy: Bri, I agree that queer epistemologies and the narrative form can support our re-imagining of research inquiry. I am reminded of the work of Bradway (2021) who pondered the relationship between queer theory and the narrative. Bradway suggested that far from being reductive, queer narrative forms can involve multiple, threaded lines of conflicted temporality, which can be characterised by surprise, tension, and parallel intrigues. Significant to queer culture are (re)imagined possibilities, such as stories of coming out and spilling the tea. A vivid example argued in Bradway is Gloria Anzaldua (1987) who has written in Spanish and English about their conflicted narrative of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which involved being a queer mestiza, who was raised a Catholic. However, as Julian has argued, much queer, scholarly work has been whitewashed, thereby eclipsing diverse ethnic, and linguistic voices. Similarly, Hames-Garcia and Martinez (2011) highlighted the often-forgotten narrative of Sylvia Rivera, a Latina transgender woman, who played a significant role in the New York Stonewall riots and advocated for transgender rights in the United States for approximately three decades.

Let's spill the tea: Our queer narratives

All: In the following, we take it up a notch by demonstrating how to champion queering practices through creating and dialoguing our inner drag personae; in this we are playful, free, and give creative expression to our inner drag selves. Motivated by queer/feminist theory (Anzaldua 1987; Bradway 2021) and aiming to subvert authoritative, hetero/cisnormativity, our queering approach liberates us to enact our queerness by awakening our inner drag identity and transforming into drag queens, drag kings, or in between so that we can vicariously and collectively connect to the lived experiences of drag performers/storytellers. Whilst we Fantastic Four are holding a safe third space for each other throughout the process of dialoguing this creative essay, our drag personae are at different stages of development and are thus expressed in different formats. Truthfully, most of us are drag newbies, except for Sayuri THE Fab who was only in full drag once at a friend's birthday party. Despite our 'noviceness' in physical drag form, we are emboldened to unlock our creativity and audacity to experiment with play-based pedagogy by juxtaposing our selfies with drag filters, afforded by digital technology such as Instagram and Snap filters. Thus, you see our four fledgling drag queens/kings trailblazing, blurring, and blending the physical, virtual, and queer spaces whilst disrupting the normative academic genre by bringing drag performance, queering narrative, criticality, and creativity to life. Our intention is to experiment with play-based pedagogy and creative transformation

(Horowitz 2020; Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess, 2021), inspired from the context of drag story hour.

Meet Julian's inner Drag Queen: *Sayuri THE Fab*

We're born naked, everything else is drag. [Drag's] a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture' (RuPaul in Aitkenhead 2018).

Yes, mama Ru, I totally agree with your definition of 'drag' and like to add that it is not only a 'f-you to male dominated culture', but also a f-you to a neoliberal system that is fuelled by White supremacy that favours social and gender conformity and discriminates against vulnerable groups such as LGBTQIA+ students and teachers. My drag, Sayuri THE Fab, is a bold, quick-witted (OK, sometimes bitchy), bubbly, funny and deep down a caring and loving queen. Besides her normal academic life, she uses her drag as a colourful and creative form to express her fun loving persona and gorgeousness without fear, savouring the moment of kicking some Eurocentric and heteronormative ass. Her F-A-B-U-L-O-U-S persona emboldens her advocacy and allyship to approach hard conversations around any forms of injustice and discrimination against gender diversity, race, and sexuality.

Meet Kim's inner Drag Monarch: *Hellen Bak*

Revealing my drag persona and pulling faer out of myself was a wild ride.³ For someone who is already so colourful, so eclectic, and does not fit the traditional society norms, where was there to go? Also, had I not been performing gender for over 30 years before I realised my true self? How could I separate the individual identities and ensure I was doing them all justice? The digital age and photo effects and filters on social media allowed the exploration of my drag monarch self, resulting in the welcoming of Hellen Bak! A self distinct from selves that have come before. Hellen is an ethereal queer fairy who broke out from a trained 1950s housewife pixie dream. Fae is sexy and filthy, whilst also being the epitome of a manic unicorn's most feminine pastel dream. Fae brings joy and rainbows to the world, whilst balancing the lightness and darkness that exists within each person. One day Hellen may have a moustache and man bun, the next fae has a pussycat wig and fabulous glasses. Within Hellen is a non-binary parent who, for the sake of their children, wants to dismantle the patriarchy and gender binaries reinforced throughout society. Hellen oscillates between the masculine and feminine in a way that highlights the variability of all people. Fae is born from the hope that one day all people will feel free to be themselves and dress, act, behave, and do the things that bring them joy regardless of the stereotype attached to them. Fae has travelled to hell and back to unlearn bigoted views and beliefs and learn true acceptance of themselves. It took fae over 30 years to achieve this feat and thus, Hellen truly believes that all people have this journey in them and are ready to be awoken!

Meet Bri's inner Drag King: *Jett Setter*

Who am I? I guess you'd like to know. But I won't tell you much. I make my own plans, go my own way; make my life up as I go along. I won't stick around for long in any one place so, if I'm in town, don't expect me to answer your call. You might find me at the bar, a half-drunk G'n'T in my hand. Or at the beach, lounging and working on my tan.

But usually, I don't have time for chit chat; I have another place to be. Jett Setter is free of connections, and he does exactly what he wants. He accepts others on face value and expects the same in return. Jett Setter explores his freedom by indulging in beautifying activities, lounging, and travelling at will.

Meet Wendy's inner drag: Marie-Philippe

My inner persona Marie-Philippe is often perceived as non-binary, sometimes as feminine and occasionally as masculine. Through their core sense of self, Marie-Philippe demonstrates confidence to establish safe spaces for being, acting and moving. Marie-Philippe wears purple eye shadow and dons a short, layered bob, dipped in pink-brunette balayage. On most days, no matter the weather, they pull on a grey bowler's hat, a dark double-breasted, suit, and black lace-up combat boots. Sometimes, underneath the suit jacket, Marie-Philippe wears lacy white blouses with long frilly sleeves. Often, Marie-Philippe is addressed as them and prefers to be called, Marie-Philippe. Sometimes, Marie Philippe uses the pronoun she, and prefers to be called Marie. Occasionally, Marie Philippe opts for Philippe and the pronoun he.

Marie-Philippe regularly speaks English, but other times, they speak French, and sometimes, Franglais or a combination of other languages. Wherever they find themselves, Marie-Phillippe attempts to observe people attentively, and 'read the room', before speaking. In a multiplicity of situations, they feel comfortable: from dancing at trendy ballrooms in New York, trekking in Nepal, to delivering meals at homeless shelters in Vancouver, visiting remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, attending haut couture pride parades in Paris and teaching at corporate events in Sydney. Marie-Philippe advocates for LGBTQ human rights and is not afraid to call out homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, dragphobia, racism and sexism. When the going gets tough, and uncomfortableness overtakes people's emotions, Marie-Philippe confronts their own biases and continues to seek social justice.

Our Drag Reactions to DQS

Sayuri THE Fab: So here comes my drag sister, Cougar Morrison, who was reading a children's book to kids during City of Perth's DQS in March 2023. Regrettably, a 'giving back to the community' event was being politicised and egged by hetero-/cishnormative protestors outside the City of Perth Library, shouting 'Say no to Drag Queen Storytime' and accusing participating parents of 'child abuse'. Cougar Morrison's experience epitomises what other drag queens, allies, and even parents who support this form of creative education must endure across the nation and globe. As sister Cougar rightly put forth, '. . .people think we do something very different to what we do here. I'm just going to read some books to you' (Emery 2023). This no-hidden-agenda, well-intentioned volunteer service provided by drag queens was also supported by Nat Latter, head for Boorloo/Perth DQS, who states/believes/argues that DQS promotes 'literacy and a love of storytelling by engaging with kids' love of pageantry, dress-ups and self-expression' (Emery, 2023). Who can tell me what is wrong with using performing arts to bring love, joy, colour, and animation to children's literacy development, and increase their motivation to read? Is it wrong to some people because the storyteller is a drag queen who dresses and acts differently

from the so-called 'normal' people? I need to summon my other three drag siblings to help me debunk this myth.

Hellen Back: DQS would have meant to me so much as a young child. Using the immortal question that Ru asks of all of her finale queens: 'Here's a photo of 3-year-old Kim, if you could time travel, what would Hellen Bak have to say to little Kim. My message would be:

Love yourself, love what you are and who you are. Do not change that for anyone! Forget what everyone expects (and demands!). Do not allow yourself to be squashed down and to limit yourself by the definition of femininity forced upon you by books, movie, TV, school, parents...life. Push all the shame of being different to the side and be proud of your uniqueness. Be joyous, and happy, and your amazing self. Authentic you is going to inspire people including your children to be authentically themselves. So much so, that one of your children is going to throw away the idea of having a superpower because they love themselves the way that they are! That kind of self-assurance would have been so important for three-year-old you, and all throughout your life. In all those hard times where you have dealt with the fear of people finding out the real you. The queer, neurodivergent, non-binary FINERY!!

Be the example of how you can be yourself, in your own way, not hurting others (despite constantly being hurt by others) and show how fantastic and truly bright that can be. People are people, fabulous is fabulous, and drag queens are pure innocence, joy, and animated fun.

Jett Setter: I feel privileged to know my queer compatriots Julian/Sayuri and Kim/Hellen who do their own thing. I'm a live and let live kind of guy, but to read your thoughts and reflections is to better understand true queer lived experience, including the pain and exhaustion of dealing with day-to-day violence. I'm learning that to 'queer' something is not to sexualise it. Fear of drag queens and of DQS itself is rooted in irrational ideas of 'sexual emergency' and the notion that non-conforming gender identities are somehow 'deceptive' (Ellis 2022). If we want to make early childhood education more inclusive and accessible to all families and children, DQS is one powerful tool we can draw on. Queering the reading of books to children is about disrupting normalcy, in a safe and inclusive environment. What message does it send to children? That there are endless ways to think, act and be; that all bodies, shapes, colours and expressions are legitimate. The energy of DQS events is fun, expressive, creative, and perfect for kids. We as a community, must not let our unfounded fears crush this beautiful thing!

Marie-Phillippe: I agree with Jett Setter, Sayuri and Hellen. The banning of drag story times can impact negatively not only on the performer but also on the children and families who wish to engage with this genre of storytelling. As an experienced educator, I am cognisant that reading aloud to children promotes language and literacy development, whether through family, community, or classroom practices. Valuing literacy programs organised in safe public spaces, such as libraries, allows children to be scaffolded in learning to read and reading to learn. As children learn to read, their engagement with read aloud sessions can strengthen reading fluency, build vocabulary and solidify graphophonic knowledge. But reading aloud can also support

the creation of collaborative learning spaces, which as Freire noted, can encourage learners to shift their gaze from the word to the world (1976). Discovering more about their world through stories allows children to develop curiosity and empathy. When reading out loud sessions are intertwined with critical discussions, learners can be scaffolded to better understand humanity through diverse landscapes, points of view and characters.

Our Collective Reflections

Kim: When I first started writing this piece it was easy to describe the litany of recent abuses done to the trans and gender-diverse population, and to me, Kim. The pain is palpable and there is a shared sense of loss throughout the global queer community, and raising awareness is valuable. When I came to reflect from Hellen's perspective, however, there was joy, togetherness, and hope. So rather than listing atrocities, I want to approach this in true drag fashion and embrace the FUN. For what is drag and DQS if not a celebration of individuality, self, labels, and life!

DQS opens the door to promoting the LGBTQIA+ rainbow. It allows openness in discussions and learnings beyond the binary. It lets people who have been oppressed and discriminated against to feel seen and heard. It also allows them to enjoy progressive non-heteronormative books being read, whilst reinforcing uniqueness and individuality. The glorious conversation sparked by DQS allows for subtle (or not!) shifts in gender roles and allowing people to stop being limited by perceived masculinity and femininity. In turn, the acceptance and celebration of trans and gender-diverse people is promoted.

Julian: As a queer academic, I am all for creativity and free form of expression in arts and education. DQS is the epitome of bringing colourful art form, literacy, and above all, playfulness to children, allowing them to be part of those storybooks animated by our fabulous Queens to bring characters to life! Being a language educator, I also like to share that younger kids learn and retain the reading text better when they can also be fully immersed in a literacy circle by performing (using gestures to make meaning) along with the drag queen storyteller, whilst listening to the narration that comprises the storyline, vocabulary, queer protagonist, climax, and resolution. There is also more to those DQS books than meets the eye—it is not just drag queens wearing exaggerative makeup and costumes to entertain kids; rather, the combined performing art and literacy can educate our next generation what it means to respect, acknowledge, and celebrate gender diversity and inclusion in all aspects of our lives. Though long overdue, it is about time to call for promotion of non-heteronormative books and materials that are gender diverse and inclusive in education.

Bri: It took this exercise for me to really realise how gender is performative. Like I understood it intellectually, right? But to recognise it and enact it? While I used a social media filter to gently ease myself into the exercise, and while my drag persona isn't, at this stage, embodied, he is nonetheless performed here, in this publication. In this way, technology serves to support my initial efforts to 'put my toe in the water'. So, when we're talking about educating allies and we talk about how gender is performative well, try this, you know? When you do it, all these things are going off in your brain all the time; like 'ding, ding'! All these things that I do in the day to day

that are performative elements of my gender that are just, you know, me; because it's easy for me to get to do that, right? I don't even have to think about it because of my inherent privilege in being cisgender. So, I feel very lucky doing this exercise and discovering Jett, because I learned so much about my secret yearnings and how I can, if I choose, enact this performance of gender differently.

Wendy: Writing this piece was a daunting but rewarding process, characterised by intensity and vulnerability. Early in the drafting process, when I pushed the leave button on our group TEAMS meetings, my confidence would evaporate. My train of thoughts would straggle, pushing, and pulling, like gum boots across rain puddles. For comfort, I would turn to my kettle and afternoon cups of tea. My thoughts would stumble through thick cognitive bog, permeated by my negative interior monologue 'The researcher's inner drag. . . 'Sounds glamorous . . . glittery . . . creative. . . 'But is it frivolous?' My researcher's identity fractured into minuscule pieces. 'What would people think? What would they say?' I imagined a splashy headline in the daily news: 'White, middle-aged, cisgender, straight female academic appropriates drag character. . .' Images of rainbow clouds, ruby stilettos, and pink boa feathers spun in my head. I quizzed myself, 'How can I spill the tea? 'Finding my inner drag, seems. . . so ephemeral, so. . . scary'.

Fortunately, I have been privileged to work with this supportive team of practitioner researchers who accepted me, with all my foibles and insecurities. When I drafted long distractions and roundabouts, these same colleagues encouraged me to continue. When I delved into sensitive material about my childhood, the team stood by me shoulder to shoulder. Over time, I learned to ask for help and to listen intently. I started to draft online, in front of the group, without fear of criticism. I learned to trust in the solidarity of collegial friendship. The application Bitmoji also served as a tool to scaffold a liminal space where I could playfully explore the beginnings of an alternative identity. Through concerted, patient efforts, the team has been able to achieve outcomes, which have significantly strengthened my empowerment as a researcher, ally, and activist educator.

As We Sashay Away

In the future, drawing on our theatrical 'queens', 'kings' and non-binary personae, we as drag performers in full makeup and fabulous costumes, may engage children and families to animate queer characters and events in storytelling. Behind the glamour is the hope to nurture children's love for reading, develop literacy skills, build understanding of inclusion, and above all, foster appreciation for diversity. Unfortunately, vehement opposition towards the DQS is symptomatic of ongoing discrimination against rainbow communities, including anti-transgender legislation, book bans and erasure from formal and informal school curricula.

In this creative essay, we enacted queering narratives to channel our inner drags to challenge, disrupt, and call out homo/trans/dragphobia vis-a-vis DQS. As professionals and academics in fields that privilege traditional qualitative research methods, we initially found this queering approach, particularly in a public space, pushing us outside of our comfort zones as can be seen in our most honest narratives that unearth our fear and vulnerability. However, throughout our authentic, critical queering inquiries, we have also gained newfound knowledge and understanding of how to employ queer narratives as a legitimate approach to explore LGBTQA+

issues as practitioner researchers. We were also able to transform our initial fear into queer power that helped us really investigate our true selves and reclaimed our intersectionality. Hence, this queering practice has impacted us profoundly, empowering us to take risks by bringing innovation, creativity, and playfulness to normative academic undertakings. As our narratives unfold, we aim to further unleash queerness in our pedagogy, advocacy, allyship training, and above all, our research dissemination in creative forms, such as in this collective piece. Future transdisciplinary collaborations across larger groups of educators, researchers and community stakeholders will provide new arenas for us to showcase the implications of these drag story processes for research, teaching, and even ways of thinking.

Notes

¹ Across the US, protesters at DQS events include members of White nationalist and supremacist groups such as the Proud Boys (see Laviertes 2023; Livingston 2023; Martiny and Lawrence 2023).

² Anti-DQS protestors called DQS a form of 'child abuse' (Emery 2023) and at a protest the following month at a different library justified their actions in the name of child protection (Ho 2023).

³ Fae/Faer/Faers is a set of neopronouns someone (e.g., non-binary people) may use to refer to themselves as it aligns with how they feel about their identity. For more information on neopronouns see: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-neopronouns>. To learn how to use different pronouns including neopronouns: <https://www.minus18.org.au/pronouns>.

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