

Welcoming Spaces and Going Viral: Asking Children to Leave the Library

In early April 2018, a staff member at the Franklin Lakes Public Library (FLPL) in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, asked a child with autism and his mother to leave the library. The mother, Jacqueline Laurita, a star of the reality television show *Real Housewives of New Jersey*, posted about the incident on her social media accounts. These posts included video of her son Nicholas tapping on the cases of DVDs and vocalizing along with an explanation that they had been asked to leave their local library by a staff person (Kuperinsky 2018, J. Laurita April 8, 2018).

The FLPL responded to the incident and the social media response with the following statement on their Facebook page:

Statement from the Board of Trustees: It is our joy to welcome any patron to enjoy the Franklin Lakes Public Library and we expect all to respect others doing the same. Our policy of inclusion is demonstrated daily. Our staff has years of expertise catering to patrons who are physically challenged, visual or hearing impaired, as well as special education students from our public school system, and developmentally delayed children and adults.

We welcome all visitors and we happily accommodate everyone.

No patron is ever asked to leave the Library unless and until their actions are depriving other patrons of the ability to enjoy our services. (Franklin Lakes Public Library 2018)

This statement received upwards of 400 comments on the post along with unfavorable media publicity headlining how an autistic child was asked to leave a library. Ms. Laurita and her husband both responded with dismay to the statement (J. Laurita April 9, 2018, C. Laurita 2018) and advocated for further training and education about children with autism. A recent post from Ms. Laurita indicated that she and her husband have connected with the FLPL to work on different solutions but the exact nature of those solutions is unknown at this time (J. Laurita May 2018). A post on the Association for Library Service for Children (ALSC) blog also highlighted

this situation and called for further education about welcoming children with disabilities in the library (Grassi 2018).

The online fervor around the incident has died down since the initial headlines appeared, but the overall challenge for how a public library handles this kind of situation still exists. It cannot be known with certainty exactly what transpired in this situation at the FLPL without video, incident reports, or other direct evidence or interviews. However, the overarching issues of how to welcome children with disabilities in the library, how to (or how not to) ask children to leave the library, and how to handle the repercussions of this kind of situation are essential for a public library leader to consider.

In this situation, the first issue at hand from the Structural frame is the policy at the library that determined that a child should be asked to leave. The statement from the Board indicates that the child customer in question was asked to leave because his “actions [were] depriving other patrons of the ability to enjoy [library] services” (Franklin Lakes Public Library 2018). Looking at this statement from a structural frame, that reasoning is too broad to be considered a clear policy for staff to follow. What defines depriving other patrons of the ability to enjoy library services? Is there a system in place for giving children warnings about noise or behavior, as would be developmentally appropriate for children of all abilities and especially necessary for a child with autism? Is asking child patrons to leave at the discretion of any individual staff member? These policy ambiguities helped put the staff into this uncomfortable situation.

Considering the Human Resources frame, the next point of interest flows directly from unclear policy to wondering how staff were trained to follow existing policy. In this situation,

the Laurita family implied on a social media post that they had experienced positive interactions with this library staff prior to the incident (J. Laurita April 8, 2018). According to the library's own statement on Facebook, their staff have a history of including children with disabilities. Was there a gap in training, then, that led to this viral situation? One possibility could be that staff was empowered to ask child patrons to leave unilaterally and one member acted too rashly. Perhaps the child was indeed excessively disruptive, but staff did not provide enough information or support to the family. Whatever the case, further training would give staff tools to handle these kinds of situations differently.

How these types of situations are approached in the future is vital to the story that the FLPL wants to tell about itself. With the viral nature of the incident, the story currently being told about the library branch is that the staff certainly does not welcome children with autism and that, in fact, they outright reject them. As the Symbolic frame suggests, the meaning of the event is more important than what actually happened (Bolman and Deal 2017, 378). It is unlikely that the staff member in question asked the child to leave in a vindictive manner nor that every child with autism would be asked to leave. The overall perception of the incident and the FLPL, though, is colored with the lens of both outrage and discouragement that many people with disabilities and their families feel in regards to their ability to exist in public spaces. For the FLPL to move forward, it has to write a new story of welcome and inclusivity to replace the viral one that says it kicks out children with autism from the public space.

From the perspective of the Political frame, a number of warring factions are at odds in this scenario. The first group is the staff at the FLPL. The next group is the FLPL Board of Trustees who presumably wrote and shared the response statement on the FLPL Facebook page.

Third is the family asked to leave. Fourth in this situation is the online community of advocates for people with autism. The online community has the power of noise and numbers but no authority. The Laurita family has the power of social media amplification and mild fame; the family seems to have leveraged that perceived power to gain access to the library's board. Based on the statement, the FLPL Board of Trustees supports staff, but it is unknown from the available information how much power the staff has. This complicated web of power heightens the tension of an already fraught situation playing out on social media.

Based on the information that is publicly available, the response of the FLPL to this challenging situation was troubled. When looking at the situation from the outside with the perspective of all four frames from policy to training to response to the imbalance of power, the library in question has a lot of work ahead in order to move forward. Despite the issues handling this situation, the bright spot is that, according to the family involved, the Board is interested in change and moving forward in an inclusive manner (J. Laurita May 2018).

The statement published on Facebook from the Board of Trustees is problematic. While the Board statement rightly supported the library staff, as is important for staff morale in a difficult situation, they erred in publicly placing implicit blame on a child. Not offering any apology opened them up to pushback from the public. In their appropriate quest for a prompt response, they instead exacerbated an already delicate situation. Staff did not need to be thrown under the metaphorical bus but neither did a child. What was left unsaid in the statement was more damaging than what was actually said.

If the library's policy regarding asking patrons to leave the library is solely based on disrupting other patrons, that policy is too broad. It is not appropriate for a library that wants to

serve children with or without disabilities. Children and parents need concrete rules to follow so they understand behavioral expectations. Disruption needs to be clearly defined as does the procedure for asking someone to leave.

A public library leader has many lessons to learn from this situation at the Franklin Lakes Public Library. Any time that a story “goes viral,” the details can become distorted, confused, or altered. That possible confusion, though, should not stop a leader from learning about and from these public lessons. Broad themes and concrete ideas can be gleaned from difficult and viral scenarios.

One way to prepare a similar situation is to review the branch’s policy about how and when children and families are asked to leave the library. There are many situations in which adults may be asked to leave a library location, including ones where the safety of children is at stake. However, asking children to leave the library should be approached with great care. Is removing a child from the library part of the story the library wants to tell? Is it part of the policy? How are staff empowered (or not) to ask children to leave the library? Who holds the power in a situation when a child may need to be asked to leave the library? Staff need to feel supported in their decision making by management; however they also need to be properly trained to make the right decisions.

A leader also needs to research what other libraries are doing to support children with disabilities and their families. Renee Grassi’s (2018) post on the ALSC blog responding to the incident highlights information that integrate all four frames for someone preparing for similar situations. With links to extensive resources and guidelines, she provides ways for a leader to bring clear structure to a new policy and training for a more empowered staff. By addressing

Ms. Laurita directly, she acknowledges the complicated power dynamics inherent in the library to customer relationship and gives agency and power back to a customer who was hurt by a difficult situation at a library. Last, she focuses on story and symbolism with her impassioned call for librarians to work to prevent situations like that of the Laurita family, rewriting the story of library interactions with children with disabilities and their families. Grassi writes of her hopes for the library community, directed at Ms. Laurita, which include, “I hope your story will motivate the broader library community to reflect on its own awareness and capacity regarding inclusive customer service to those with autism and other disabilities.” Grassi’s ideas and suggestions work together to provide a path forward for those leaders looking for better solutions for children with disabilities and their families in the library.

Overall, the possibility of going viral is a difficult reality in the modern digital age. Considering and combining the four frames will help a library leader be prepared for this challenging possibility. In this case, the FLPL seems to have rushed to make a statement when taking more time to consider more angles would have been beneficial. No one can mistake-proof an organization. However, safeguards and precautions can be put in place to help mitigate the ripple effects of mistakes.

What happened with the Laurita family and the Franklin Lakes Public Library is a scenario that could play out in any public library. Children with and without disabilities can cause disruptions, staff can make an ill-advised decision, and library leadership can respond in a disappointing manner. Problems and crises will happen. However, when library leaders approach difficult situations through multiple frameworks and perspectives, they are well-equipped to make good decisions for their libraries and communities.

Works Cited

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