ABSTRACT

The marriage programs are a particular case to discuss with regard to mass media ethics. There are a number of voices from different sections of the Turkish society complaining about those programs and asking for a ban. Some of these voices are academic, egalitarian, anti-capitalist, while some others are conservative, religious and/or nationalist. As of 2017, these programs were completely banned by an executive order in Turkey which is under State of Emergency due to the unsuccessful military coup of July 2016. In this article, various views on the marriage programs are delineated and elaborated. How patriarchal values were promoted in the marriage programs and the former complaints about those programs were presented and discussed, and the situation in Turkey and China with regard to the marriage and dating programs were briefly compared and contrasted. The final section of the article discusses the alternatives to the ban.

Keywords: Mass media ethics, reality shows, dating programs and marriage programs.

INTRODUCTION

Tabloidization of TV channels is not something new. A major part of this process is the programs about the celebrities. Dating and marriage programs perfectly fits this tabloidization process. TV channels in various countries are offering these programs as a subgenre of reality shows. Some of the examples are 'Joe Millionaire', 'Mr. Personality', 'Blind Date', 'Please Marry My Boy', 'Married at First Sight', 'Let's Get Married', 'The Bachelorette', 'The Ultimate Merger', 'Wanted Sweetheart', 'If You are the One' etc.

Turkish TV channels were also influenced by tabloidization as well as by the deregulation and demonopolization of media industry in the early 90s with the licensing of the first private TV channel in Turkey (Star TV) (Demirel, 2011). The replicas of these programs had appeared on Turkish TV channels by the early 2000s. Among the prominent examples, 'Esra Erol'da Evlen Benimle' ('Marry me at Esra Erol') (ATV), 'Zuhal Topaç'la İzdivaç' ('Marriage with Zuhal Topaç') (Star TV) and 'Su Gibi' ('Like Water') (FOX TV) could be mentioned (Demirel, 2011; Sungur, 2011). Other examples are 'Biz Evleniyoruz' ('We are Marrying') (Show TV), "Gelinim Olur musun?"
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(‘Would you be my Bride?’) (Show TV) and “Size Anne Diyebilir miyim?” (‘Can I Call You as Mom?’) (Kanal D) (Ertürk, 2009). 3 TV channels in total had allocated 50 hours to marriage programs per week (Demirel, 2011). One could watch marriage programs non-stop from 11:10 am to 18:30 every week day. Every week 70 people were introduced to marry in total.

Women’s participation to labor force in Turkey is sadly declining due to the marriage laws favoring child marriages and bolstering of the patriarchal values that wouldn’t consider working women as ‘ideal woman to marry’. Thus, these marriage programs were in fact the pastime activity for the increasing number of Turkish housewives (Sümer, 2016). Reis (2013) reported peer pressure for housewives as their friends all talk about what happened in dating shows and they didn’t like to be excluded from social conversations. Thus, the programs also serve socialization functions for the viewers. However, the slots of these programs also match children’s and adolescent’s daily schedule (RTÜK, 2017). That was one of the reasons for why these programs were criticized. Although they were produced for an audience of housewives, they were shown day time. Some of the criticisms would be invalid if they would have been aired on late nights or even midnights.

Unlike some of the international equivalents that focus on dating rather than outright marriage, it was claimed that thousands of couples had been married with the help of Turkish marriage programs (Ergül, 2015). Demirel (2011) named these as ‘screen marriages’ and viewed them to be another form of arranged marriage (‘görücü usulü’ in Turkish):

“*But those programmes can only correspond to the concept of an arranged marriage up to a point because the first principle of an arranged marriage is based on the direct or indirect knowledge that the parents have about the marriage candidates. In the "screen marriage" no one can guarantee the authenticity of the information given. During the broadcast, people can lie to each other or they can expect something different and then the image they encounter can be more negative than they thought, and they can be hugely disappointed. However, the most important issue to be discussed is people’s desperation. Marrying in marriage programmes is like winning the lottery: you need luck. There are some couples who meet in these programmes and have a storybook ending, but this is a remote possibility.”* (Demirel, 2011: 161)

Yıldırım (2007) discusses the reasons for the success of the reality shows including marriage programs and proposes that since those shows portray ordinary people similar to the targeted audience, identification and comparisons with the characters in reality shows are easier and faster. Some even consider the presenter of marriage shows as a family member and a role model for younger generations (Resi, 2013). Another reason is the possibility of interaction with the program and that of changing the course of events by voting through mobile media or internet (Reis, 2013; Yıldırım, 2007). Another point to consider is the presenter’s perceived honesty, sincerity and openness about disclosing the details of their marital life (Reis, 2013). From a cultural industry perspective, the fact that the marriage programs were cost-effective, with low cost and high rating (TBMM, 2005) led to their long-term presence on Turkish TV channels.
BANNING THE MARRIAGE PROGRAMS

Since the unsuccessful military coup on July 2016, Turkey has been under state of emergency. This confers the government to govern the country by executive orders that are published on the official newspaper (which is called ‘Resmi Gazete’) on midnights. More than 100,000 government staff has been fired so far without trial or any formal channel of appeal. Once they are fired, they are not allowed to leave the country nor to work in another job. The executive orders were not only about who to fire. They have also regulated cultural spheres by shutting down hundreds of newspapers, TVs, radio stations and associations. A less common coverage of the executive orders was about the TV programs. An executive order in 2017 banned marriage programs on TV. Once state of emergency would be lifted, the status of the executive orders would be questioned. Although they might be theoretically reversed, the state of emergency is thought to be applicable for an indefinite period. As a result of the indefinite ban, the TV channels had lower ratings which had negative financial consequences as well. The marriage programs were replaced by Turkish melodramas that are not good matches with regard to the ratings.

“Esra Erol’da Evlen Benimle”, one of the well-known marriage programs used to appear on ATV every week day at 15:45 for 3 hours. It was the marriage program with the highest ratings and one of the most watched among the TV programs in general. The program would provide short bios of the participants stating their ages, their jobs, where they live, whether they own a house and/or car etc. The program was promoting the participant as the most handsome, the most beautiful, the most special, the most romantic etc. The participants were stating the criteria for their ideal man/woman. Suspense elements in narrative structure were utilized to increase the ratings with short videos, questions to be answered and by postponing the decisions to the next episode (Akıner & Eren, 2015; Reis, 2013). The presenter of the program, Esra Erol had similar programs in the past such as ‘Dest-i İzdivaç’ (Flash TV) and ‘Esra Erol’la İzdivaç’ (Star TV).

‘Gelinim Olur musun?’, another marriage program was considered to be an originally Turkish marriage program, rather than an imitation (Yıldırım, 2007). It surpassed any other reality show in terms of ratings and was sold to Italy, US and Romania. The main selling point of the program was its focus on the relationship between the mother-in-law and the bride which is known to be a major source of conflict and even divorce in Turkish culture (Yıldırım, 2007). This and other similar programs are criticized to bombard the audience with conservative values (Yıldırım, 2007).

Although no reason is ever stated for any actions to be implemented by the executive orders, the reason for the decision to ban marriage programs on TV is not difficult to infer. The programs were hotly debated and complained of since they were thought to deteriorate the Turkish traditional culture (a nationalistic-conservative critique), were against the religion in certain aspects (an Islamic-conservative critique), offered negative models for child and adolescent development (a parental critique), were commodifying and marketizing the marriage and the people that hoped to marry (an academic critique, e.g. Akıner & Eren, 2015). But what if a program is banned not due to the academic criticisms but by conservative pressure? In other words, what if they are banned for the wrong reason? This obviously appears as an ethical dilemma concerning mass media ethics.
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Official view on the marriage programs stated that they were poisoning the Turkish family structure, dynamiting the institution of marriage, hurting societal morality, destroying the notion of marriage and increasing the number of divorces etc. (Akparti, 2017). It was claimed that the marriage programs threatened traditional marriages which is based on moral and religious values by introducing the wallet to the marriage considerations. In that sense, marriage programs were not only harming the viewers but non-viewers as well. The programs led to insecurity, disrespect, lack of love, intolerance etc. These traumatized the children and the youth. Illegitimate and immoral relationships were normalized by these programs. According to the official discourse, everybody in the society supported the banning of the marriage programs (Akparti, 2017).

PATRIARCHY IN THE MARRIAGE PROGRAMS

From an academic perspective, the top complaint about the Turkish marriage programs was due to the fact that they promoted patriarchal values. In their study on a marriage program on TV, Akın & Eren (2015) concluded that those programs reproduced the gender stereotypes and justified the unequal gender roles. In that sense those marriage programs bolstered the patriarchal values and naturalized them. In the program, women preferred to marry older men and men preferred to marry younger women. Other forms of relationships, e.g. ‘older woman, younger man’ were not even considered. Men were asked of their job, while women were asked whether they worked or were planning to work (Akın & Eren, 2015). Men preferred candidate women who did not marry before, while that was not among the women’s expectations and preferences with regard to male candidates. Women could cry at the program, while men were not expected to do that.

Converging with Akın & Eren (2015), Renkmen (2012) reported the findings of his discourse analysis of the contents of another marriage program (‘Su Gibi’ on Fox TV) with regard to construction and representation of hegemonic masculinity as well as the patriarchal discourse. ‘Su Gibi’, unlike other marriage programs was presented by a male and a female presenter (Reis, 2013). In this program, just like the findings of Akın & Eren (2015), the ideal man was projected to be somebody that was economically powerful to support a family. Thus, male candidates usually referred to their job, salary and financial assets while describing themselves (Renkmen, 2012). The male candidates were willing to talk about their past and especially their successes, while female candidates were not supposed to disclose their past if that was not necessary, since this could be viewed with a negative light due to Turkish cultural expectations. Male candidates would usually state that they had no bad habits such as alcohol, smoking, gambling etc. which implied that men were usually associated with these and capable of doing these, while female candidates by the cultural constraints, were not allowed to have ‘bad habits’. Having no bad habits is, according to Renkmen (2012), one of the characteristic properties of the cultural definition of womanhood in Turkey. Furthermore, in the program, men’s extramarital affairs were tolerated, while that was not the case for the women. It was implicated that such affairs were an essential part of manhood (Renkmen, 2012).

The marriage program not only stereotyped the women but put unrealistic and unequal economic pressure over the men. Men were expected to own a house and earn a high salary to support the family. Women were not expected to do that. Some men in the program even preferred women who would not work. Thus, women were
expected to be dependent on men in the program. The ideal men were expected to be strong and authoritarian in contrast to the ideal women that had to be weak and submissive (Akıner & Eren, 2015). As Akıner & Eren (2015) puts it, patriarchal society not only oppresses women, but also men. Men couldn’t cry, men couldn’t show any weakness.

Similar findings endorsing patriarchal values although in different forms are reported by Mixon (2011) where women were evaluated on the basis of their physical look rather than their intellectual abilities in an American dating show. For women, career and love were projected to be incompatible. This trade-off is another characterization of the patriarchal ideology.

Finally, we need to mention that in Turkish marriage shows, heterosexuality was the norm and the producers were not even aware or were not willing to be aware of their sexually straight-biased understanding of marriage. It appears that for participants of these shows, gay relationships were unimaginable and out of question. Of course, a gay marriage show would be protested and forcibly banned in Turkey. Homosexuality is still a taboo subject in Turkey (Kılıç, 2011). However, Reis (2013) mentions a number of gay marriage programs from other countries such as ‘Fairy Tale’ (Canada) and ‘Boy Meets Boy’ (USA). Reis (2013) also reports that in one of the Turkish marriage shows a participating woman was fiercely rejected as she was looking for another woman rather than a man, contrary to the heterosexual expectations of those marriage programs.

**FORMER COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE MARRIAGE PROGRAMS**

From the citizens’ perspective, there had been two ways to warn or get the marriage programs punished: Sending complaining petitions to RTÜK (the Radio Television Supreme Council) which is the government’s official regulation agency over radios and TVs or to directly contact the parliament (which is shortened as TBMM in Turkish). As a response to the petitions to ban or reform the marriage programs, TBMM stated that RTÜK had no authority to impose restrictions before the release of the program; they could only do monitoring after the release (TBMM, 2005). The sanctions after release were listed in order as the following: Warning/apology, removal of the program from the channel, monetary sanctions and temporary removal of the channel from the network. It also pointed out that the monitoring function of RTÜK was hampered by bureaucracy and paperwork. The time lag due to writing reports, making decisions, communicating the decisions to other relevant government agencies, enforcing the decisions etc. allowed the channels to continue with their programs without any legal hassles for a long time (TBMM, 2005).

It was stated that the fact that the couple that would marry by the marriage program would be receiving monetary rewards from the channel was undermining the whole idea of marriage, as the candidates could marry for the rewards rather than any other criteria of marriage that would be more appropriate. Some of the programs offered a house or a car if they would marry (TBMM, 2016). Likewise, Kaya (2013) claimed that the marriage programs turned unconditional love that was expected to be the foundation of the marriage into that of a formal relationship conditional upon whether material needs were met by the marriage. Economic interests were emphasized in marriage programs at the expense of emotions and other more genuine considerations (TBMM, 2016). As men were expected to be rich and if they were not, it
was thought that something was wrong about the candidate (İnaç & Çokoğullar, 2015), capitalism in addition to patriarchy was promoted and normalized in the marriage programs.

From a constructive approach, RTÜK preferred to balance the marriage programs with family-friendly series as a response to complaints rather than banning them (RTÜK, 2017; TBMM, 2005). This could be, according to RTÜK, better than a punitive approach. However, this approach was not based on a critique of the patriarchal values promoted by the marriage programs. The complaints as well as RTÜK’s responses focused mostly on preserving Turkish family structure and protecting children from the harmful effects of media contents. Although media literacy was a term mentioned in the discussions with connection to the television content rating system (a.k.a. ‘smart signs’) that warned the audience about the media contents, it was not fully utilized as a conceptual foundation to reform the marriage programs (TBMM, 2005). On the other hand, RTÜK’s position drawing our attention to the media rating agency which had enormous power, and which was not regulated by any government agency was notable.

According to a RTÜK report, the agency had received nearly 200,000 complaints about the TV contents in a single year (RTÜK, 2017). RTÜK noted an increasing trend in the numbers of complaints on an annual basis and an increasing use of mobile applications and the website to complain about TV contents in contrast to RTÜK’s complaints phone line. The complainers were equally of various age groups, educational levels and professions (RTÜK, 2017). Strangely enough, marriage programs were the most viewed as well as the most complained programs (TBMM, 2016) which may show “I don’t like, but I watch for other reasons” kind of attitude or internal polarization of the audience.

The top complaints were about ‘Kısmetse Olur’ (Kanal D) which is a marriage program. The program received nearly 1/4th of all the complaints in 2016 (RTÜK, 2017). Other marriage programs (‘Zuhal Topaç’la İzdivaç’, ‘Esra Erol’da Evlen Benimle’ and ‘Evleneceksen Gel’) together received another 1/4th of all the complaints, which means half of the complaints were about the marriage programs in 2016 (RTÜK, 2017). The reasons for why ‘Kısmetse Olur’ topped the list were the following: Unlike other marriage programs, it was a mix of surveillance shows (such as ‘Big Brother’) and marriage programs, it was in a competitive format and the applicants usually fought with each other. Furthermore, it was also fictionalized in a way that what would happen in the next episode was known by the producers, but not by the participants or the audience (RTÜK, 2017). According to the complainers, programs like ‘Kısmetse Olur’ would lead to non-marriages and divorces as marriage was shown in a completely negative manner. RTÜK (2017) reported that marriage programs were sanctioned to pay fees for violation 20 times in a year (RTÜK, 2017). But obviously this did not discourage them, as benefits weighed heavier than the costs.

It is known that at least 3 former participants committed suicide when they were disqualified from the marriage programs or when the program that they participated ended (Yıldırım, 2007). In that sense, a public health perspective about the marriage programs is needed as well. On the other hand, the program producers stated that their programs were merely a mirror to the society and they were educating the audience by their programs (Yıldırım, 2007). It is highly likely that these screen marriages could not last long (Sarıoğlu et al., 2013), as the candidates were asked superficial questions and not always matched with each other on the basis of
reasonable criteria. Sarıoğlu et al. (2013) proposed that for candidates who married and divorced many times, the reasons for divorce were not checked which weakened the foundations of the screen marriages. They were asked about their ideal women/men, but they were not asked whether they would change themselves to be ideal women/men. Furthermore, to increase the ratings, they were asked to make quick decisions which would increase the likelihood of wrong choices (TBMM, 2016).

Although the content of the marriage programs was problematic, screen marriages could be even more sustainable compared to internet marriages (TBMM, 2016) which might involve deception. Contrary to Demirel (2011)’s suspicion and pessimism mentioned before, in screen marriage, it was easier to identify deception as the people who knew the candidate would contact the TV if they lied (Reis, 2013; TBMM, 2016). In fact, in some cases, the men who lied about his marital status were immediately falsified by a call from his wife or somebody else. However, the right questions were not asked and the arrangements in those programs were not conducive for a happy ending. That was another support for the viability of reforming the programs rather than banning them.

While the marriage programs were usually ones to blame for ‘corruption’ of the traditional society, the relationship does not look like unidirectional. In a traditional society, individuals would not be comfortable about disclosing their private life in public. The traditional social norms would bring contempt, ridicule and exclusion for such a person (Sümer, 2016). According to Nebi Sümer, one of the leading social psychologists in Turkey, the marriage programs perfectly matched the new relationships that were getting increasingly more narcissistic. Sümer (2016) was cautious about the negative effects of the marriage programs over the viewers, similar to the discussions of the effect of violent TV content on viewers’ level of aggressiveness. Sümer (2016) implied that the effects of the marriage programs could be transitory, although no firm conclusion would be obtained without scientific research about the matter which was virtually non-existent for Turkish viewers of the marriage programs. One of the hints can be inferred from Zurbriggen & Morgan (2006)’s research with an American undergraduate sample which found that dating program viewing was positively correlated with gender stereotypical attitudes for both male and female respondents. However, let us also note that viewer involvement was a mediator in this relationship which provided support for a constructivist understanding of media effects rather the notion of passive TV viewers (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). However, the direction of the relationship can’t be determined in such a correlational study. It may very well be the case that those endorsing gender stereotypical attitudes are the ones preferring to watch dating programs. Even in that case, it can be stated that these programs fail to hinder people from holding gender stereotypical attitudes. Those watching the dating shows just for fun or for other purposes were both affected by the media content (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Thus, when it comes to the dating shows, it can’t be ‘just for fun’.

MARRIAGE PROGRAMS IN TURKEY AND CHINA

A number of parallelisms can be drawn between Turkish ordeal with the marriage programs and the situation in China, in addition to dissimilarities. Keane (2002) provides an exhaustive list of marriage and dating programs in the Chinese TV world as earlier as 2002. He mentions ‘Special Man and Woman’, ‘Romantic Meeting’, 
'Saturday Meeting', ‘the Square of Kindred Spirits’, ‘Tonight We Become Acquainted’, ‘Ever Lasting Romance’, ‘Good Man’, ‘Good Woman’, ‘Who Does Your Heart Beat For?’, ‘Conjugal Bliss’, ‘Talking Marriage’ and ‘Heavenly Fate’ as dating and marriage programs. One of the marriage programs (‘If You Are the One’) was suddenly banned since it “was accused of tolerating an excessively materialistic view toward life” (Cao, 2014, p.8), but not for undermining the traditional family structure whatsoever. On the other hand, Cao (2014) proposes that dating programs in China are watched for another purpose, as they portray “discussions on the concerns of city dwellers through the dating show format” (Cao, 2014, p.54). Although some of the Chinese dating programs were banned in the past, there are others still offered by Chinese TVs which is not the case for the Turkish TV world.

Furthermore, the broadcasting time of dating programs on Chinese channels are Saturday and Sunday evenings (Cao, 2014) which definitely has implications for the audience. As stated before, the major segment targeted by the marriage programs in Turkey was the housewives while Chinese dating programs aim for a general audience including working people. Finally, as stated in the beginning, while Chinese shows are revolving on dating, their Turkish counterparts aimed at marriage. Dissimilarities abound as we see that educational status is valued in Chinese dating programs which is quite contrary to the situation in the Turkish shows:

For example, during the dating shows, if the participants exhibit their knowledge of classical literature, it is guaranteed that they will not be rejected by the audience on that specific point. In the quiz shows, the participants are interviewed before the quizzes start – such a procedure displays the participants’ education background. Being “bookish” and learned in history or literature is an admired characteristic and is recognized as a potential advantage to winning the game. These shows reiterate the power to judge what is considered a respected education background and knowledge structure (Cao, 2014, p.81).

It appears that Chinese dating programs also serve educational functions, as the audience is taught how to live a healthy life. That is not the case for the Turkish equivalents. On the other hand, the motive to marry a rich man with a house and a car is still visible in Chinese shows. In that sense, the reason stated above for why a Chinese dating show was banned is applicable for both countries. Likewise, patriarchal values are promoted in Chinese dating shows (Cui, 2012) in a similar manner with the situation in Turkey. Chinese male candidates frequently refer to the financial conditions and jobs (Cui, 2012) as in the case in Turkey.

Among some other noticeable differences, having a third presenter, an associate professor representing the government, in addition to regular presenters (an actor and a psychologist) is especially notable (Cui, 2012). The dating shows in China are strictly monitored and controlled by the Chinese government according to Cui (2012). He states that after one of the dating shows was criticized for “its money worshipping, humiliation, verbal attacks, and sex-implied vulgar contents” (p.73), they reformed the show by obscuring the financial statements of male candidates. Since then the financial statements were implied rather than blatantly disclosed (Cui, 2012). Due to the government control, the candidates downplayed the value of their assets and felt the need to mention how hard they fought to make a lot of money or they worked at farms although they came from rich families (Cui, 2012). In China, voting by SMS in dating shows was banned as well (Cui, 2012). Thus, there are alternatives to the outright ban of marriage programs in Turkey although they may be far from ideal.
ALTERNATIVES TO THE BAN: REFORMING THE MARRIAGE PROGRAMS

What would be the alternative to the ban? As stated above, the programs could have been kept in a reformed format as they serve multiple functions for the society. Here are the points of reform to be proposed: First of all, the Turkish marriage programs didn’t question the patriarchal values. But they could have been reformed to promote a more egalitarian understanding of the gender roles. That was possible. In this vein, a year before the ban, a report submitted to TBMM (2016) was proposing to reform the programs by staffing them with qualified marriage experts. But this alternative was not considered by the authorities that issued the executive order.

Secondly, egalitarian values had to go in tandem with demarketing and decommodification of the institution of marriage and the participants of the marriage programs. Considering Turkish government’s neo-liberal agenda (economical side) coupled with religious conservatism (political side), it is not surprising that such an attempt at reforming the programs was not explored. This would have been possible if and only if Turkey had a strong anti-capitalist feminist movement.

Thirdly, there really is a need that the marriage programs matches. People really want to find happiness in a marriage and they think the TV program could be a good channel for that purpose. However, they should also know that tabloidization of marriage would not be conducive for ultimate happiness. Usually women with low socio-economic status and/or negative past marriage experiences left with kid(s) appeared on the programs looking for ‘a prince on white horse’ that owned a house, a car and that would care for the kid(s) (Demirel, 2011). Reis (2013) mentions some other positive contributions of the marriage programs: Some of them provided legal assistance for women for free and the presenter was running a refuge for needy women for free etc. But these may very well be another way of public relations through which the ratings would be increased and self-promotion. Additionally, it was highly likely that at least some of the applicants were motivated by ‘onscreen glory’ or to have fun or both (Demirel, 2011). Some of them moved on to be celebrity figures with their initial fame in the marriage programs (Reis, 2013). This shows that the marriage programs serve other functions as well.

Fourthly, for the ruling class, the subgenre of marriage programs was a handy tool to distract the citizens’ attention from social and economic inequalities. Thus, banning these programs could be risky from government’s side. That might explain why they were not banned earlier. Strangely enough, RTÜK mentioned this function when the agency proposed that the marriage programs built up ‘imaginary agendas’ to move the citizens away from the real social problems of the country (TBMM, 2005; Yıldırım, 2007). This can be explained by the fact that RTÜK is staffed by MPs some of which may be inclined to have a critical approach to the role of media in producing and reproducing the status quo.

CONCLUSION

A marriage program promoting egalitarianism, true love, emotions, companionship, equal share of responsibilities etc. would have surprisingly been successful in terms of ratings, as the women in Turkish society has pent-up anger against inequalities. This format would turn the marriage programs into on-screen marriage training programs that would teach as well as entertain the audience in a form of edutainment. With the support of certified marriage experts, the reformed marriage programs would pave the
way for the first torch of a long-lasting relationship. Banning would not be a solution. Those who ban these programs would ban others due to their conservative ideology. Thus, their ban for wrong reasons can't be academically supported. Reform should be preferred over ban.
REFERENCES


