

Challenging Silence, Challenging Censorship, Building Resilience: LGBTQ Services and Collections in Public, School and Post-Secondary Libraries

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Many young people who identify as LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer, or questioning – do not have support at home or at school, and certainly not at traditional faith centres. So where can they turn for support, safe space, confidential access to information, and materials that speak to their lives? Young people are particularly vulnerable because they have distinctive needs but limited resources – the Internet notwithstanding. This is especially true in rural areas and in smaller urban centres.

At the 2007 Stonewall Book Awards, sponsored since 1971 by the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table, award winner Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*) told us: "Libraries are so often how we learn about who we are, not family, etc." As a young teen, her feelings took her "to the symbolic world of language" in the library – and that sent her back to feelings, and to people; and then to more books. It was a life-altering experience to learn of the category "lesbian," she remarked, and then to discover that it was also a library subject heading! "We will never know," she said, "how many have found validation on the

shelves of libraries and in LCSH [Library of Congress Subject Headings]."

Power to act

Time and time again, sexual minority adults say that as young people they turned to libraries to try to find out something about LGBTQ realities and identities – usually, until recently, to little or no avail other than for dictionary definitions. Silence is "a text easy to misread." Indeed, silence is complicity.

Librarians have the power to act as catalysts for social change. They have the potential to build inclusive library policies, collections and services within a framework of human rights and social justice, reflecting core values of access and intellectual freedom, inclusivity, diversity and equality, and, particularly in the school library context, duty of care and safety.

Ultimately, librarians have the power to enhance the social climate and everyday life experiences of sexual minority young people so that they become more resilient and thereby lead more meaningful lives as members of communities and as citizens.

Now that same-sex marriage is the law – and no longer just the talk!

– of the land, perhaps members of the Canadian Library Association will step up to the plate to advocate for greater awareness of the urgent need for LGBTQ policies, services and collections in all library sectors. I have had the good fortune to make presentations at many library conferences across the country, and I welcome expressions of interest from CLA colleagues in achieving greater collaboration for more advocacy, perhaps initially through the formation of a CLA interest group. One person wrote in their conference feedback to me that they would have "preferred a teen librarian to be addressing these issues." I'm still waiting!

Myths, rationalizations and excuses

Some librarians have gone to extraordinary lengths to downplay LGBTQ library needs, making excuses limited only by human imagination and creativity: "Gay people don't live in my community – at least they don't seem to use my library" or "My library doesn't provide materials geared to specialized needs" or "It's too difficult to find reviews of these materials" or "My library's vendor doesn't handle those items" or "My library can't afford gay/lesbian

materials” or “The library’s books about AIDS are enough” or “Buying library materials for gay and lesbian library users endorses the way these people live.”

Library collections research

Among the several collection studies undertaken of Canadian library holdings during the past decade or so, one example is the checklist study by Boon and Howard of LGBTQ fiction for teens in nine urban public libraries across Canada. They found wide variations, with 80% or more of the checklist titles held in Edmonton, Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa, but only 60% or so in Halifax, Regina, Winnipeg and Victoria.

A 2006 study of all public libraries in Alberta similarly found wide variations, with Calgary and Edmonton holding 73% of the checklist titles, Grand Prairie 65%, and eight other urban centres at 50% or fewer titles. The most frequently held LGBTQ teen and children’s titles in that study were *True Believer* (63 libraries), *Bad Boy* (58) and *Touch of the Clown* (53); same-sex children’s picture books were very poorly represented.

Subject access

LGBTQ-related subject headings found in library catalogues seem to be hit and miss. A small sample of headings found in the Alberta study titles were Bisexuality–Fiction, Gay Teenagers–Juvenile Fiction, Gay Men–Fiction, Gay Parents–Fiction, Homosexuality–Fiction, Homosexuality–Juvenile Fiction, Lesbians–Fiction, and Lesbianism–Juvenile Fiction.

But many of the subject headings did not reflect LGBTQ-related content at all, including Coming of Age–Fiction, Conduct of Life–Fiction, Emotions–Fiction, Erotic Stories, Friendship–Fiction, High Schools–Fiction, Identity–Fiction, Love Stories, and Sex–Fiction.

Internet access and censorware

Although commercial software filters have marketed themselves from the beginning as protective tools, in reality they are merely censorware, the latest digital incarnation of old-fashioned censorship. Thousands of innocuous terms are blocked, among them, at various times: breast, alt.sexy.bald.captain, marsexpl, couple, Super Bowl XXXI, groin injury, and the Archie R. Dykes Medical Library. At the same time, many sites on targeted topics are missed.

An important study by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2002 tested access to health information sites for teens by surveying seven commonly used filters (CyberPatrol, Symantec, BESS, 8e6, SmartFilter, Websense, and AOL Parental Controls). The study found that filters had a major negative impact on access, with 25% of general health sites blocked, 50% of sexual health sites such as those dealing with safer sex, and 60% of lesbian and gay health sites. There is little doubt from this study that homophobic censorship by many commercial filters is pervasive; some even target by category in addition to keywords.

Canadian policy and strategy framework for supporting LGBTQ communities

Librarians should adopt a holistic strategy in providing library services and collections for and about LGBTQ users. The place to start (or review and reflect on) is with a Canadian policy framework grounded in human rights concepts of non-discrimination, inclusion, safety and duty of care. Supporting concepts, principles, and language are found in:

- constitutional and legislative jurisprudence, both national and international
- the administration of justice, for example the Hate and Bias Crimes Unit of the Edmonton Police Service
- provincial mandates for public schools, for example the Alberta School Act
- teachers’ associations codes of conduct; for example, the Alberta Teachers’ Association has an educational website on sexual orientation and gender identity issues and resources, and in 1999 became the first teachers’ association in Canada to include gender identity as a prohibited ground of discrimination, a prohibition extended in 2006 to include trans-identified students and staff
- library associations position statements, both national and international, for example IFLA, UNESCO, ALA and CLA statements including the May 2008 “Statement on Diversity and Inclusion” and the 1995 “Students’ Bill of Information Rights.”

In developing services and collections, librarians should proceed systematically and build on community support. For example, Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel declared at his annual Pride Brunch in June 2007 that “The health of the LGBTQ community is a barometer of the entire community.”

Policy is protection. The following elements should be considered in strategic policy planning: board policies and legislation, community development, professional networking, selection criteria, challenges and reconsideration of materials, collection development, collection access, web access, library access, promotion and marketing, community advocacy, professional development, and a library service charter. And whatever the occasion, seize the teachable moment to educate your community!


But all of these ideas are merely conversation starters, not prescriptive solutions.

Summing up

Librarians can play a critical role in fostering diversity and resiliency. They can create safe places. They can turn pain into opportunity, tolerance into celebration, despair into hope. As Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said at the BC Library Conference in 2006, “We show wisdom in how we present information to the public.”

Just remember, the worst part of LGBTQ censorship is...
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Otherwise, what message are librarians giving to teenagers, children, their families and friends, and indeed

our communities, if we leave the life experiences of sexual minority youth out of our libraries and schools, and out of our library collections and services? 

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