

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

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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.

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 special needs but limited resources – the Internet notwithstanding. This is especially true in rural areas and in smaller urban centres.

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.

Canadian Policy Framework:

The place to start (or review and reflect) 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,
- provincial mandates for public schools, for example the Alberta School Act,
- teachers' associations codes of conduct, and
- 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 / Charte des droits de l'élève à l'ère de l'information.”

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:

A 2004 checklist study of LGBTQ fiction for teens in nine urban public libraries across Canada 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 seem to be hit and miss. A small sample of headings found in the Alberta study titles that reflected LGBTQ content 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: 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.

Library Service and Collection Strategies for Supporting LGBTQ Communities:

Librarians are advised to adopt a holistic strategy in providing library services and collections for and about LGBTQ users. Librarians should build on community support; for example, City of 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."

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!

To Sum Up:

Just remember, the worst part of LGBTQ censorship is...

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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 the Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said at the BC Library Conference in 2006, "We show wisdom in how we present information to the public."

Otherwise, what message are librarians giving to teenagers, children, their families, friends, and indeed our communities, if we leave the life experiences of sexual minority youth out of our library collections and services?

Key References:

- Alberta Teachers' Association "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity" website.
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- See No Evil: How Internet Filters Affect the Search for Online Health Information*. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002. www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Chart-Pack.pdf