

GOING BEYOND BOOK DISPLAYS

PROVIDING SAFE SPACES FOR LGBTQ YOUTH

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Lisa's Story

Imagine: it's the late 1980s and kids in high school still check out books to get information. A student walks into the school library, looking a little nervous. The librarian, familiar with such timidity, asks the young girl if she needs assistance. The student quickly refuses, grabs a book off the nearest shelf, and leafs through the pages. The librarian recognizes overwhelming reluctance when she sees it and leaves the girl alone, never finding out that the student was trying to sneak to the back of the library where the books about SEXUALITY are located. Though the section is actually unmarked in the 300s, the young girl imagines everyone can see that big, bolded word above the stacks—and that word terrifies her.

School libraries should be a space where students of all ages feel welcome and safe. I (Lisa) can speak from experience when I say this is not always the case, not in the 1980s and not today. Even in the school library, a place I now cherish, I was fearful of ridicule and harassment. I was frustrated because I did not see myself—a young, questioning, and confused lesbian—in any of the books. Gay and lesbian characters didn't exist on those high school shelves. "But that was the 1980s," you say. It hasn't gotten much better for much of the LGBTQ community.

In 2019, I was back in a high school library, but this time the school librarian was my mentor; I was attending Old Dominion University to earn my MLIS with a school library endorsement. One of my first tasks was learning how to enter a new title into the collection. By coincidence, the very first young adult book I processed was *The Past and Other Things That Should Stay Buried*. Examining the book's leaf, I learned the author, Shaun David Hutchinson, is gay and the book was

on Book Riot's Most Anticipated 2019 LGBTQ Reads. I thought, "Yes! Change is here. It's in my hands! Young people must feel so supported and safe in their quest for information!" After some discussion, I found the reality to be more complex. Even though my mentor had more LGBTQ materials available than librarians of the past and expressed a desire to better serve those students, she had no approach for providing access to those materials, assisting LGBTQ youth with complicated and private information queries, or helping those youth feel safe in the library. It felt like one step forward and two steps back. As I shared this story with my professors at Old Dominion University, we sought to make a change and help others create that space.

It Is Essential to Serve All Students

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 34 percent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth have been bullied on school property (2017). (Transgender and questioning/queer youth have not historically been surveyed.) Our schools, including our school libraries, should be safe spaces for all.

We believe that most school librarians want to provide a safe space in their libraries, but may not know how or may feel restricted in what they can do. After their 2017 survey, GLSEN stated, "less than half (41.0%) of [middle and high school] students reported that they could find information about LGBTQ-related issues in their school library" (2018, 8). We believe that 41 percent isn't nearly enough.

LGBTQ youth and their allied peers are desperate for characters in books where they can see themselves and their friends. As Gross explains:

A good coming-out novel can be a window or a mirror... Coming-out novels have an important role as cultural educators, allowing some readers to walk in the shoes of those unlike them and develop empathy and understanding. However, these books' role as mirrors is equally important; they may offer affirmation, guidance, and hope for young readers who are challenged to find those things outside the world of words. (2013, 68–69)

This seems easy enough for a school librarian to accomplish. Simply create an LGBTQ book display or add books with LGBTQ characters to the collection. But we know it's never quite that simple.

The challenges are significant with some stemming from local culture and community location. Still, we need to work hard to ensure that libraries in all communities are welcoming, safe spaces. Perhaps even more so in conservative regions where diversity may not be as celebrated or visible. As school librarians, we must confront our own bias and discrimination. Regardless of one's personal beliefs or the opinion of your school or district administration, and perhaps breaking with some of the cultural norms of your community, access to ideas and information in the school library is a civil right for all students. In addition to it being a civil right, it's also in the AASL *National School Library Standards* under the Shared Foundation of Include. This Shared Foundation emphasizes the idea that best practice for a school librarian is to ensure that displays and communications focus on resources that reflect a variety of viewpoints, cultures, and experiences.

Many school librarians may not even be aware a problem of access exists for LGBTQ youth. Our hope is that this

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article and the included ideas and resources will help school librarians create more safe places for LGBTQ youth.

Challenges in Supporting LGBTQ Youth

Even though it's been thirty years since Lisa's experience in a school library and things have changed a great deal for the LGBTQ community, librarians still struggle in supporting LGBTQ youth. Serving vulnerable populations must be handled carefully. Major challenges for school librarians in serving LGBTQ youth include obstacles to ensure visibility of materials, cataloging and providing access to materials, and a lack of professional development. All these challenges are evident in Lisa's story.

Serving Vulnerable Populations

Some school librarians may feel uncomfortable finding information and resources about sexuality due to perceptions regarding what is appropriate to discuss and present to students. Sexual orientation is so often associated with sex that some school librarians may feel it is not their place and that it should be

left to parents' discretion. School librarians also may fear backlash from administrators, parents, and/or the community based on the "controversial" nature of discussing sexual identity. The stigma, discrimination, and bias surrounding gender identity and transgender students can make it even more difficult for present-day school librarians.

Visibility of Materials

"Maintaining a quality LGBTQ collection may literally save lives by supporting an environment of tolerance and acceptance" (Garry 2014, 75). While exposure and visibility are important, school librarians must provide opportunities for discovering and viewing materials privately for those students who remain closeted or who may need to avoid social stigma or discrimination. As indicated in Lisa's personal story, a reader may not want to be approached. So, how do school librarians get the materials into the hands of the students who need it? One children's bookstore owner "avoids segregating LGBTQ titles, she says—partly to show readers

that the store is inclusive in a city that is socially conservative" (Green 2019, 28).

Cataloging and Accessibility

Lisa's internship mentor wanted to support LGBTQ youth, and she did an excellent job of sprinkling books with LGBTQ characters throughout the non-fiction collection in her high school library. However, the only way for students to locate a book with an LGBTQ theme was to browse the shelves, a labor-intensive task, or to ask the librarian, which a student may be too embarrassed or ashamed to do. Collection development, outdated cataloging techniques, and improper tags are reasons why LGBTQ youth have difficulty finding books on the shelves. Further complicating access, even if a student is confident in searching the catalog, many school librarians do not know the proper terminology with which to label materials.

Many of the sources that we reviewed often used the acronym LGBTQ interchangeably with the phrase “gay and lesbian,” which excludes bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning youth. It is also important for librarians to educate themselves so that they are using the terminology that LGBTQ youth themselves use (Chuang et al. 2013, 26).

Mandated filters on school computers can also prevent access, creating an obstacle for LGBTQ youth as they attempt to locate valid and accurate information in their school library. This is a real dilemma because when LGBTQ youth are not provided with materials and resources in their school, home, or community, they will turn to online resources. It is reported that “LGBT youth were five times as likely to have searched for information online on sexuality or sexual attraction as non-LGBT youth (62% vs. 12%) and LGBT youth were also more likely to have searched for health and medical information compared to non-LGBT youth (81% vs. 46%)” (GLSEN 2013, x).

Professional Development for School Librarians

Loretta Gaffney fondly remembers her first Ally training because, “The facilitator looked around the (nearly) full room of teachers and librarians and said, simply, ‘My gay fifteen-year-old self thanks you.’ As a teenager, he would have given anything for even one visible teacher ally” (2017). A school administrator who is interested in providing professional development (PD) for their staff on project-based learning will find a variety of opportunities. In contrast, searching for PD on supporting LGBTQ youth in schools will produce little to no options. “Ensuring a safe and welcoming school environment for all students, including [LGBTQ] students, is an important responsibility of

educators. Yet research indicates that educators regularly fail to take action in the face of anti-LGBTQ bias and are often not equipped to address these issues” (Kosciw et al. 2012).

Making Your School Library a Safe Space for LGBTQ Youth

Former ALA President Julie Todaro emphasized the necessity in supporting our youth:

The Trump administration’s decision to revoke important protections for transgender students couldn’t conflict more with the library community’s fundamental values and the principles upon which libraries are founded... Every student deserves to learn in an environment free from discrimination... ALA, its members, all librarians and library professionals are committed to diversity, inclusiveness, and mutual respect for all human beings, and we will work tirelessly to ensure full representation of all members of society. (2017)

Regardless of the reason, it is a challenge for school librarians to support LGBTQ youth in their schools, so all librarians must model a clear and consistent message that *all* are welcome. Nearly 60 percent of LGBTQ students report feeling unsafe at school (GLSEN 2018). LGBTQ youth (and others) will benefit from a school library space where they feel welcome, safe, and supported. “LGBTQ students are hardly the only ones to feel under-represented and alone, and it’s important for school libraries to support every student. The strategies and mindsets used to support LGBTQ students can and should be used to help support all students” (Altobelli 2017, 11). Here are some

suggestions to help meet the needs of a group of students that is often dismissed, ignored, or overlooked:

Visibility and Access

- A first step: If you haven't done so before, it's great to start with building a display with the resources you have. "While we do not have the power to dictate how a space is viewed, we can 'set a tone and invite people in' by providing interesting topics and interactive displays" (Cardoso and Russo 2018).
- Check availability: Conduct a search within your library collection to see if you can locate LGBTQ information/books easily. Are there enough materials? If not, start a wish list. Need recommendations? Check award winners and

lists online. Or collaborate with a local LGBTQ organization for recommendations.

- Create visibility everywhere: LGBTQ material should be incorporated into other areas, not just a centralized location or event. LGBTQ titles should be included in *any* book clubs.
- Go digital: Suggest a search of e-books to your students. The evolution of the e-book market, and the ability to easily tag books online as belonging to multiple genres, makes it easier to label subcategories of YA, including when there are major and minor LGBTQ themes and characters (Jones 2015).
- Make a path: Provide instructions on how a student can privately

find other materials in the library.

Create a pathfinder related to LGBTQ topics, particularly as you disperse LGBTQ resources throughout the collection and online. As an example, the ACLU has created a resource library at www.aclu.org/library-lgbt-youth-schools-resources-and-links.

- Broadcast inclusion: Designate your school library as a safe zone by exhibiting diversity around the library with posters and bulletin boards. Safe space signs are a great way to nonverbally communicate to students that you're LGBTQ friendly and will not tolerate "hate" in your library.
- Wear your support on your sleeve: Wear safety pins to identify as a person in the library who is safe to talk to about anything. The

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symbol identifies the wearer as “a safe person for anyone to talk to regardless of their race, religion, gender, abilities, or sexual identity” (Boog 2017, 29).

- Declare your pronouns: Wear and create name badges with your pronouns in support of transgender youth, i.e. “Lisa Gay-Milliken (she/hers).”

Services and Events

- Provide meeting space and support, become the faculty liaison, and recruit for a Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) that begins in the school library. Key findings from a GLSEN survey indicate that LGBTQ students experienced a safer, more positive school environment when their school had a GSA or similar student club (2018).
- Celebrate, support, partner with, and advertise LGBTQ events in your community.
- Facilitate a panel of LGBTQ authors and community leaders after school. Following the event, build a display with the authors’ books to celebrate the event.

- Match kids and books in a gender-neutral way. By providing this service school librarians can serve everyone better. For example, during songs, rhymes, and games in storytime, change the pronouns in familiar songs; for instance, “Old McDonald had a farm, and on her farm” (Nichols 2016).
- Participate in professional development. A great place to start is at The Trevor Project with a Trevor Ally Training (The Trevor Project n.d.).
- Create a presentation for your PTA about LGBTQ-related materials in the school library.

Useful LGBTQ Resources

There are numerous organizations, websites, book titles, articles, and other resources to assist you in providing services for LGBTQ youth from kindergarten on up. We have brought a number of these together in an annotated bibliography: <http://bit.ly/LGBTQforKQ>. You’ll find the bibliography with more than 45 resources fit to learn more, gather ideas, find help for others, and entertain. If you have suggestions, please e-mail us and we will be sure to add to the bibliography.

Seize the Opportunity

As we are both individuals in the LGBTQ community, we understand what it means to be a 15-year-old in a confused and vulnerable position and happen upon an accepting, welcoming, and inclusive environment. Whether it’s because we’ve seen a Pride flag, heard about an event or group that openly states it is “welcome to all,” or heard someone talk about something as simple but as impactful as their pronouns, the value of finding such a safe space as an individual who is often wary of discrimination and even danger

cannot be overstated. The school library can be a gateway to so much learning and community. We encourage everyone to take the opportunity to make the library a place for all our students, including the vulnerable LGBTQ youth who may have difficulty finding such spaces anywhere else in their lives.



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