

“I’ve never really thought about it”: librarians’ attitudes to the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in English public libraries

Elizabeth L. Chapman
Information School, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
e.chapman@sheffield.ac.uk



Copyright © 2014 by Elizabeth L. Chapman. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>

Abstract:

This paper presents findings from broader doctoral research into the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in English public libraries. The study seeks to investigate whether this material is provided and factors affecting provision, including the attitudes and opinions of librarians involved in children’s and young people’s stock procurement.

Keywords: LGBT, fiction, children, young adults, public libraries, England

Background

There are pressing reasons for providing LGBT-related fiction to children and young people. Librarians and scholars working in the field have argued that LGBT-related fiction can help teenagers who are LGBT or questioning their sexuality or gender identity to form a positive, stable sense of self, while also expanding the horizons of young people who are not LGBT (e.g. Clyde & Lobban, 2001; Martin & Murdock, 2007; Pavao, 2003; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006; Rothbauer, 2004). Research on school libraries in the UK found that young LGBT people expressed a strong unmet need for provision of LGBT-related materials, including fiction (Bridge, 2010; Walker, 2013).

Similarly, picture books featuring LGBT characters serve to validate the lives and experiences of children in LGBT-headed families, while also teaching other children about families different from their own (Naidoo, 2012; No Outsiders Project Team, 2010). Research has found that homophobic bullying starts at an early age (Guasp, 2010), and it is therefore important that young children should have access to accurate, positive materials depicting diverse family situations. Social psychology research has demonstrated that reading stories about friendships between children from different ‘groups’ (e.g. children with and

without disabilities) has a positive impact on children's attitudes towards members of the other group (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Cameron et al., 2006).

Despite this, little attention has been paid to the provision of LGBT fiction to children and young people in public libraries in either research or practice (Chapman, 2013). The small amount of research that has been carried out on the topic in Canada and the US has found provision to be patchy (Boon & Howard, 2004; Howard, 2005; Rothbauer & McKechnie, 1999; Spence, 1999, 2000). A small-scale UK study by the present author found room for improvement in stock provision, particularly as regards picture books, books with trans content, books in different formats and books from less mainstream authors and publishers (Chapman, 2007, 2013), and this has been confirmed by preliminary findings from the present study (Chapman, 2011). Holdings of LGBT-related fiction in school libraries have also been found to be limited (Bridge, 2010; Chapman and Wright, 2008; Wright, 2007).

A small number of studies have looked at attitudes to LGBT materials in general, and materials for children and young people specifically, among public and school library staff members. The extant studies suggest that attitudes are generally positive, but all report evidence of a minority of participants who had less-than-positive attitudes and/or were lacking in awareness of the need for provision (Brett, 1992; Bridge, 2010; Carmichael & Shontz, 1996; Chapman, 2013; Currant, 2002; Walker, 2013). Moreover, the research suggests that library staff members have concerns about particular aspects of LGBT provision. A previous study by the current author found that participants had concerns about the quality of materials, provision of materials to younger children, and the possibility of parental complaint (Chapman, 2013). Wright (2007) similarly found that a small number of the secondary school librarians who participated in her research felt that LGBT materials were not suitable for younger pupils, while some of the public librarians interviewed in a broader study by O'Leary (2005) were cautious about allowing young people to check out LGBT materials due to fear of parental disapproval.

Methods

The doctoral study uses a mixed-methods approach based on a pragmatic philosophy (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). A checklist study was used to investigate levels of provision in 13 English public library authorities, and preliminary findings from this section of the study have been presented elsewhere (Chapman, 2011).

To investigate factors affecting provision, an online questionnaire was sent to all staff members involved in children's and young people's stock procurement in the 13 authorities. The questionnaire used a mixture of Likert scale questions, closed-ended yes/no questions and write-in text boxes to assess respondents' attitudes to the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in public libraries and to gather data on stock procurement policies and practices. Twenty-eight usable responses were received, giving a response rate of 52%.

Finally, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 individuals across four of the participating library authorities in order to investigate interesting questionnaire findings in more depth. The interview schedule was piloted with five individuals with experience of children and young people's stock procurement in public libraries, and these interviews were also incorporated into the data set as they generated useful data. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo 10.

1.1 Limitations

Participants were necessarily self-selecting, and it is therefore possible that homophobic and transphobic staff members may have chosen not to participate. Moreover, participants may have given the answers that they felt to be ‘politically correct’, leading to social desirability bias in the data. The sample focused only on staff at the 13 participating library authorities and is therefore too small to be generalisable; however, when viewed in conjunction with the extant literature, the findings suggest trends which may be transferable to other contexts.

Findings

Attitudes to provision were generally positive. 100% of questionnaire respondents (n=28) agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Picture books with LGBT content are valuable for children with LGBT parents’, ‘Picture books with LGBT content can help children with non-LGBT parents to understand others’ and ‘Young adult novels with LGBT content can help young people who are LGBT or questioning their sexuality to feel more comfortable about themselves’. All but one respondent (96.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that ‘Young adult novels with LGBT content can help non-LGBT young people to understand others’. There was therefore a general acceptance of the value of LGBT-related fiction among respondents, which is in line with the findings of previous research (Brett, 1992; Bridge, 2010; Carmichael & Shontz, 1996; Chapman, 2013; Currant, 2002; Walker, 2013; Wright, 2007). Many participants made comments in both the questionnaire and interviews which emphasised their support for providing LGBT-related fiction to children and young people:

“It’s very important to have fiction that represents young people and their experiences and what they’re going through, because that will support them in anything they’re going through but then it also makes them want to read, if they can identify with the books.”

“I think it’s really important, both for children in LGBT families, for young people who are questioning their sexuality, but also for children who are in traditional families to see different sorts of people represented generally across the stock that we provide, so it’s not a very narrow view of the world that we’re presenting.”

Participants throughout all stages of the research drew heavily on the rhetoric of equality and diversity, asserting that they would treat fiction with LGBT content in the same way as non-LGBT fiction:

“Our collections are inclusive and LGBT content is not singled out.”

“I mean one of the things in our stock policy is that provided something is, you know, is legal, we will provide it and we must not be discriminatory in any way, as it falls under a protected characteristic.”

However, this frequently translated into an essentially passive stance: participants emphasised that they would not censor LGBT-related fiction, or exclude it from displays, but nor did they make any effort to seek it out or promote it within the library:

“I normally browse the shelves for material [to include in displays], and if I come across LGBT titles would include some. I have not specifically searched for LGBT titles though.”

“Maybe we don’t make a conscious effort to buy LGBT stock, but we don’t... I, I hope none of us discriminate in any way. If it’s there and it’s available we’d definitely buy it.”

Walker (2013) also identified a passive, ‘neutral’ stance among several respondents, who focused on the similarities between all pupils in a way that failed to address the unmet needs of LGBT youth. Walker concludes that, *“Neutrality is problematic, however, as... it maintain[s] the status quo (where LGBT youth are ineffectively served)”* (2013, p.56). The concept of ‘neutrality’ has been critiqued in the wider professional literature as an ideological position which implicitly supports established interests; the processes of creating, managing and disseminating information can never be truly neutral (Graham, 2003; Lewis, 2008; Smith, 2010).

Nearly all of the research participants showed a lack of awareness of the need for provision of LGBT-related materials to children and young people; variations on the phrase *“we just haven’t thought about it”* recurred in the data. A few respondents made comments which suggested that LGBT-related fiction was perceived as an area of niche interest:

“We may have one or two books for each of the age ranges, I don’t know if that is proportionate to the number of LGBT families or not.”

Jenkins (1990) challenges this assumption, pointing out that LGBT-related fiction may be of interest to many young people who have family, friends or acquaintances who identify as LGBT. Moreover, as discussed in the ‘Background’ section above, LGBT-related fiction can be of value in promoting understanding and empathy among straight, cisgender young people who are not in LGBT-headed families.

There was little evidence of pro-activity among participants, with several commenting that they had never been asked to provide LGBT fiction for children and young people:

“I’m conscious that it’s something we haven’t really been asked for, in terms of, we respond to people’s requests, and some topics you’re more aware than others that, er, the question is out there, so you make the provision. So I would admit to saying that I didn’t feel that it crops up regularly, as a request, but that’s not to say that I have any objections to actually providing it.”

This stance is problematic when dealing with a group of people who still experience stigma and oppression from many quarters. This was acknowledged by one of the pilot interviewees:

“I think it’s an easy excuse as to, we don’t buy it because 1) Nobody wants it, as, well, nobody’s requested it, because teenagers, especially gay teens, they don’t want to be a bigger target than they already are, and they don’t want to be seen to be requesting such titles openly and, yeah. It’s a vicious circle. The books aren’t bought because there’s no recognisable group that would borrow

them, and the group that does borrow them often aren't out and proud, and they just want to keep a low profile and not be recognised."

Gough and Greenblatt (2011) identify the assumption that no requests equals no demand as a key myth forming a barrier to adequate LGBT library provision, and previous studies have found that LGBT people are often reluctant to ask for the materials they want (Bridge, 2010; Carrant, 2002; Wright, 2007). In fact, research by Bridge (2010), Linville (2004) and Walker (2013) has identified a high demand for LGBT materials, including fiction, among young LGBT people. Recent research with trans adults in the UK found that around half of respondents read fiction and non-fiction with trans or wider LGBTQ content, and there was a strong demand for library provision (Waite, 2013).

The lack of awareness among library staff members extended to knowledge of the books themselves, and potential sources for library supply:

"Speaking as someone who hasn't sought it out, I wouldn't know where to start."

Some specific areas of concern emerged from the data. As in the previous study (Chapman, 2007, 2013), some participants expressed concerns about the quality of the materials available:

"We have found it really difficult to identify picture book level titles with the quality of story that we would generally expect to provide for our borrowers."

However, another participant reported receiving feedback from LGBT parents that *"anything's better than nothing!"* Again, this tallies with the findings of the previous study (Chapman, 2007, 2013), in which LGBT participants felt that standards of production quality might need to be relaxed to some extent in order to provide a representative collection, until LGBT picture book publishing catches up with the mainstream market.

A few participants expressed anxieties about the provision of materials to younger children, in line with the findings of previous research (Chapman, 2013; Wright, 2007). This was frequently linked to a fear of complaint, coupled with a lack of understanding about why provision of LGBT-related picture books might be relevant or necessary:

"I think there may be a case for including LGBT fiction for young people as they become aware of sexual and gender issues, but it is more difficult to justify for younger children. Some of our client groups are from very conservative backgrounds."

"I can't see the relevance for children."

There were also concerns about promotion. Less than half of questionnaire respondents (46.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that public libraries should put on displays of picture books or YA novels with LGBT content. Qualitative comments revealed that in many cases this was due to an awareness of stigma and a reluctance to inadvertently 'out' young people:

“Some young people find it difficult approaching displays with this type of content and sometimes even more difficult actually borrowing from the library.”

Similarly, the majority of school librarians surveyed in studies by Bridge (2010) and Wright (2007) said they did not promote LGBT materials. In this context, it is interesting to consider Walker’s (2013) research, which found that better promotion of LGBT resources was the second most popular suggestion for improving school library provision among young LGBT respondents. Displays were specifically mentioned by a number of respondents as a good way of achieving this. It therefore appears that librarians’ caution regarding displays does not tally with what young LGBT people actually want.

In a few cases there appeared to be some discomfort with promotion, or concerns about complaint or media reaction:

“Excessive concentration on the subject would seem to be counter-productive. Present but not obtrusive would seem to be best.”

“You want to promote the fact the material’s there so people can take it out, but... I also want to avoid promoting it in one respect so that you don’t get the, you know, the negativity around it... Because it would get picked up, I reckon, by the press, and then they would turn it into something... they’d turn it into a horrible kind of issue which it doesn’t need to be at all.”

However, the majority of participants felt that complaint was unlikely, and only one or two could think of an instance in which a complaint had actually been received about existing LGBT provision. Several participants also made the point that fear of complaint should not be allowed to dictate provision:

“They are more likely to receive complaints from the public than other areas of stock, however a robust stock policy should stand staff in good stead to explain why we provide specific titles.”

Once again, these findings are in line with previous research; the majority of participants in the author’s previous study felt that complaint was unlikely, but some questionnaire respondents expressed concerns (Chapman, 2007). In this context, it is important to bear in mind that children and young people have intellectual freedom rights, including the right to access materials (IFLA, 1999; OHCHR, 1989). Moreover, in the UK, it is illegal under the Equality Act 2010 to discriminate against LGBT individuals by failing to provide the same level of service as that provided to heterosexual, cisgender individuals. It is therefore imperative that libraries should uphold the right to access LGBT materials and should not allow the potential for complaints from a minority of people to inhibit provision.

Conclusions

When asked directly about their attitudes towards the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people, the majority of participants expressed very positive opinions. However, the large majority openly acknowledged that they had not previously considered this area of provision, and many had little knowledge of the materials available or where to find them. Participants drew heavily on the rhetoric of equality and non-discrimination, but this often translated into a passive stance which did nothing to improve provision.

Some particular areas of concern emerged among study participants, notably relating to the quality of materials, the provision of materials to younger children, promotion of materials and the possibility of complaint.

Recommendations

- Public libraries should improve holdings of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people. Particular effort should be made to seek out picture books, books with trans content, books in different formats (e.g. large print), and books from less mainstream authors and publishers.
- Stock policies and supplier specifications should include LGBT-related materials for children and young people.
- It may be necessary to use specialist suppliers, such as Gay's the Word bookshop (<http://www.gaystheword.co.uk>) and Letterbox Library (<http://www.letterboxlibrary.com/>) to procure these materials.
- It may be necessary to relax quality criteria in order to provide a diverse range of materials. However, librarians also have a role to play in lobbying publishers to make them aware of the need for high-quality LGBT-related materials for all ages.
- The possibility of complaint should not dictate collection development decisions. The website of the American Library Association has a plethora of useful information on dealing with complaints (<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials>)
- LGBT materials should be actively promoted, for example through displays, booklists and book talks. Displays and promotional events could coincide with LGBT History Month (<http://lgbthistorymonth.org.uk/>) or Pride.
- Spread the word! The majority of librarians in the study showed positive attitudes and a willingness to learn. Potential forums for discussion and dissemination of information include listservs, professional and scholarly journals, blogs, newspapers and social media such as Twitter (the present author tweets as @lgbtlibrarian). There is scope for collaboration with other professionals with an interest in diverse children's literature, such as the Inclusive Minds collaboration (<http://www.inclusiveminds.com/>). Library and information provision for LGBTQ individuals and other disadvantaged groups should also be covered in LIS degree

Acknowledgments

This doctoral research was funded by a University of Sheffield studentship. The researcher would like to thank her supervisors, Briony Birdi and Professor Nigel Ford, and all of the research participants.

References

- Boon, M. H., & Howard, V. (2004). Recent lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender fiction for teens: Are Canadian public libraries providing adequate collections? *Collection Building*, 23(3), 133-138. doi: 10.1108/01604950410544674
- Brett, P. (1992). Politics and public library provision for lesbians and gay men in London. *International Journal of Information and Library Research*, 4(3), 195-211.
- Bridge, S. (2010). *No Place on the Shelves? Are Northern Ireland's school libraries addressing the information needs of their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered*

- students?* MSc dissertation, Aberystwyth University. Retrieved April 24, 2014 from: <http://cadair.aber.ac.uk/dspace/handle/2160/5714>
- Cameron, L., & Rutland, A. (2006). Extended contact through story reading in school: Reducing children's prejudice toward the disabled. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 469-488. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2006.00469.x
- Cameron, L., Rutland, A., Brown, R., & Douch, R. (2006). Changing children's intergroup attitudes towards refugees: Testing different models of extended contact. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1208-1219.
- Carmichael, J. V., & Shontz, M. L. (1996). The last socially acceptable prejudice: Gay and lesbian issues, social responsibilities, and coverage of these topics in MLIS/MIS programs. *Library Quarterly*, 66, 21-58.
- Chapman, E. L. (2007). *Provision of LGBT-Related Fiction to Children and Young People in Public Libraries*. MA dissertation, University of Sheffield. Retrieved April 25, 2014 from: http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dispub/dissertations/2006-07/External/Chapman_Elizabeth_MALib.pdf
- Chapman, E. L. (2011). *LGBT fiction for children and young people in public libraries*. Poster presented at the 9th Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services, York, UK. Retrieved April 25th, 2014 from: <http://www.york.ac.uk/media/abouttheuniversity/supportservices/informationdirectorator/do/documen/northumbriapresentations/York%20poster%20liz%20chapman.pdf>
- Chapman, E. L. (2013). No more controversial than a gardening display? Provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in U.K. public libraries. *Library Trends*, 61(3), 542-568. doi: 10.1353/lib.2013.0010
- Chapman, E. L., & Wright, C. (2008). Provision of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) materials for young people in UK public and secondary school libraries. In S. McNicol (Ed.), *Forbidden Fruit: The censorship of literature and information for young people* (pp.19-40). Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker Press.
- Clyde, L. A., & Lobban, M. (2001). A door half open: Young people's access to fiction related to homosexuality. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 7(2), 17-30.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles; London: Sage.
- Currant, S. E. (2002). *In or Out? An examination of public library staff attitudes towards the provision of gay and lesbian materials in South Yorkshire*. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Sheffield.
- Gough, C., & Greenblatt, E. (2011). Barriers to selecting materials about sexual and gender diversity. In E. Greenblatt (Ed.), *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on outreach, service, collections and access* (pp.165-183). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Graham, J. (2003). Now's not the time to be neutral? The myth and reality of the library as a neutral entity. *The Alabama Librarian*, 53(1), 9-11.
- Guasp, A. (2010). *Different families: The experiences of children with lesbian and gay parents* [Online]. London: Stonewall. Retrieved April 25, 2014 from: <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/other/startdownload.asp?openType=forced&documentID=2222>
- Howard, V. (2005). Out of the closet... but not on the shelves? *Progressive Librarian*, 25, 62-75.
- IFLA (1999). *IFLA statement on libraries and intellectual freedom* [Online]. Retrieved April 25, 2014, from <http://www.ifla.org/en/publications/ifla-statement-on-libraries-and-intellectual-freedom>
- Jenkins, C. (1990). Gay and lesbian issues for school libraries and librarians. In C. Gough &

- E. Greenblatt (Eds.), *Gay and Lesbian Library Service* (pp.11-24). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Lewis, A. (Ed.). (2008). *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press.
- Linville, D. (2004). Beyond picket fences: What gay/queer/LBGQT teens want from the library. *Voice of Youth Advocates*, 27(3), 183-186.
- Martin, H. J., & Murdock, J. R. (2007). *Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning teens: A how-to-do-it manual for librarians*. New York/London: Neal-Schuman Publishers.
- Howard, V. (2005). Out of the closet... but not on the shelves? *Progressive Librarian*, 25, 62-75.
- Naidoo, J. C. (2012). *Rainbow Family Collections: Selecting and using children's books with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer content*. Santa Barbara/Denver/Oxford: Libraries Unlimited.
- No Outsiders Project Team (2010). *Undoing Homophobia in Primary Schools*. Stoke on Trent/Sterling: Trentham Books.
- OHCHR. (1989). *UN convention on the rights of the child* [Online]. Retrieved April 25, 2014, from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>
- O'Leary, M. (2005). *Pink Perceptions: The information needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender library users as perceived by public librarians and by the LGBT communities within Sheffield UK and Denver CO, USA*. MA dissertation, University of Sheffield. Retrieved April 25, 2014, from http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dispub/dissertations/2004-05/External/Oleary_Meagan_MALib.pdf
- Pavao, K. (2003). Out of the closet. *Publishers Weekly*, 250(48), 23-25.
- Ross, C. S., McKechnie, L. E. F., & Rothbauer, P. M. (2006). *Reading Matters: What the research reveals about reading, libraries, and community*. Westport, CT/London: Libraries Unlimited.
- Rothbauer, P. M. (2004). *Finding and Creating Possibility: Reading in the lives of lesbian, bisexual and queer young women*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Western Ontario.
- Rothbauer, P. M., & McKechnie, L. E. F. (1999). Gay and lesbian fiction for young adults: A survey of holdings in Canadian public libraries. *Collection Building*, 18(1), 32-39. doi: 10.1108/01604959910256526
- Smith, L. (2010). *'A Cradle of Democracy': Democratic engagement and public libraries*. MA dissertation, University of Sheffield. Retrieved April 24, 2014 from http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dispub/dissertations/2009-10/External/Lsmith_Smith_090200991.pdf
- Spence, A. (1999). Gay young adult fiction in the public library: A comparative survey. *Public Libraries*, 38(4), 224-243.
- Spence, A. (2000). Controversial books in the public library: A comparative survey of holdings of gay-related children's picture books. *Library Quarterly*, 70(3), 335-379. doi: 10.1086/603196
- Teddle, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2003). Major issues and controversies in the use of mixed methods in the social and behavioral sciences. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddle (Eds.) *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (pp.3-50). Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi: Sage.
- Waite, J. (2013). *To What Extent Do Public Libraries in the UK Provide Adequate Resources for Trans People?* MA dissertation, University of Sheffield. Retrieved April 25, 2014 from http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dispub/dissertations/2012-13/External/Waite_J_Y74.pdf

- Walker, J. (2013). *Secondary School Library Services for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) Students*. MA dissertation, University of Sheffield. Retrieved April 22, 2014 from http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dispub/dissertations/2012-13/External/Walker_J_Y83.pdf
- Wright, C. (2007). *An Investigation into Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Provision in Secondary School Libraries in the UK*. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Sheffield.