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“They Kind of Rely on the Library”: School Librarians Serving LGBT Students

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Abstract

This research examines school librarians’ perspectives on collecting LGBT materials. Based on qualitative interviews with thirty-one school librarians, this project found generally strong support for collecting LGBT materials. School librarians discussed serving their communities, having resources for all students, and meeting the needs of diverse students. In addition, they shared several ways that school libraries can counter bullying: creating a bully-free zone in the library, collecting LGBT and anti-bullying materials, collaborating with guidance counselors and teachers, suggesting particular books for certain students, being a supporter of students, and positioning the school library as a safe space.

Introduction

LGBT students are in nearly every high school in the United States.ⁱ Some researchers report that approximately 3 to 10 ten percent of the student population,ⁱⁱ or 5 to 6 percent of teens in grades 7–12,ⁱⁱⁱ self-identify as LGBT. Mehra and Braquet estimated that there are 2.5 million LGBT teenagers in the United States.^{iv} Given these numbers, it is clear that virtually all school libraries in the United States serve at least some LGBT students. Furthermore, even if a school has no LGBT-identified students, it is highly likely that the heterosexual students know of LGBT friends, family members, and other individuals. Martin and Murdock estimate about 80 percent of teens know someone who is LGBT.^v

Previous literature has examined the occurrence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)^{vi} resources in school libraries.^{vii} Most of this literature has performed a count of resources, such as a list check.^{viii}

The current study is a follow-up to Oltmann, which analyzed the holdings of high school libraries in two different states, one in the South and one in the Northeast.^{ix} This follow-up study

provides an in-depth investigation of the perspectives of school librarians, the individuals who are responsible for collecting (or not collecting) LGBT resources in school libraries. There have been anecdotal reports and autobiographical reflections,^x but to date there has been no systematic investigation into the perceptions of school librarians. Thus, this paper fills an important gap in the research.

In addition, library and information science (LIS) research on LGBT resources has only touched lightly, if at all, on bullying of LGBT teens. However, this may be a fruitful area, drawing connections between efforts to reduce bullying in schools and the collection of LGBT resources.

Research Questions

This research sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are school librarians' views on collecting LGBT resources?
2. For those who do collect LGBT resources, what are their reasons for doing so?
3. What roles can school librarians play to counter bullying of LGBT students?

Literature Review

As described above, LGBT teens face a number of obstacles, including bullying, which has been connected to various problems later in life. There are a number of programs or interventions designed to aid bullied students, though to date the role of the school library has rarely been considered.

Bullying and Associated Problems

Within the past few decades, there has been “a particular emphasis on issues of bullying” in high schools.^{xi} Fedewa and Ahn noted that research shows “the rates of bullying for GLB[T] students are reportedly significantly higher.”^{xii} Their own research indicated that GLB youths were 2.24 times more likely to be teased or bullied than their straight peers.

In 2007 the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducted a National School Climate Survey to capture the environment of LGBT teens in high schools. In that survey, 86 percent of LGBT teens reported being verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and 67 percent reported experiencing verbal harassment because of their gender expression.^{xiii} Over half (61 percent) reported feeling unsafe at school.^{xiv} Gardes noted that LGBT students hear antigay slurs as often as twenty-six times per day, with faculty intervention rarely occurring.^{xv}

Four years later, in a follow-up survey by GLSEN, 80 percent of LGBT students reported receiving verbal harassment due to sexual orientation. Thirty-eight percent reported being physical harassed due to sexual orientation, and 27 percent due to gender expression. As Perez, Schanding, and Dao noted, these rates of harassment are lower than the reported rates in previous years, though they are still higher than the rates of non-LGBT harassment.^{xvi} A significant percentage of “adolescent students experience what is referred to as gender-based, homophobic, and anti-LGBT bias/bullying.”^{xvii}

The frequent harassment and bullying experienced by LGBT students is correlated with “high levels of health risk behavior.”^{xxviii} Fedewa and Ahn noted that homophobic bullying was “significantly related to their psychological, physical, and social problems.”^{xxix} Research has found that LGBT students are more likely to participate in risky behaviors such as using drugs and alcohol, not practicing safe sex, becoming homeless, and having suicidal thoughts and behaviors.^{xx} Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris explained that “the isolation and despair LGBTQ youth experience places them at a high risk for a variety of other problems including homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide.”^{xxxi} Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, and Greytak found that diminished academic achievement was correlated with bullying and harassment of LGBT students.^{xxii} Summarizing the current literature, Savage and Schanding noted that LGBT teens have higher rates of feeling isolated, using alcohol and other substances, having difficulty focusing on schoolwork, feeling ostracized by their families, engaging in sexually risky behavior, and experiencing mental health and suicidality issues.^{xxiii}

Frameworks to Support LGBT Students

Because of the findings that LGBT students face frequent harassment and that this harassment has measurable negative effects in their lives, several frameworks have emerged that attempt to support LGBT students. Three of the most common are anti-bullying policies, gay-straight alliances (often referred to as GSA groups or clubs), and development and designation of “safe spaces” at schools and other locations.

Several researchers mention the presence of anti-bullying or harassment policies as an important step toward protecting LGBT youth and reducing the incidence of harassment they experience.^{xxiv} In particular, the explicit “inclusion of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as protective classes” can have beneficial outcomes.^{xxv} This sort of school-based support can improve the overall environment for LGBT students.^{xxvi} Greytak, Kosciw, and Boesen cautioned, however, that many school policies focus on reporting procedures and processes, which may limit their effectiveness in actually reducing bullying.^{xxvii}

The second type of supportive framework mentioned in the literature is the existence of a GSA group. The general purpose of GSAs is “to provide safe environments for LGBTQ and heterosexual youth to socialize, receive support, and engage in advocacy efforts.”^{xxviii} These are typically student-run organizations, similar to other high school groups. They may meet regularly, host events, and provide opportunities for LGBT students and straight allies to support one another.^{xxix} The number of GSAs nationwide has increased substantially over the past decade (reaching approximately four thousand as of 2012), indicating both a need for such an organization and the increasing acceptability of them.^{xxx} GSAs can play four different roles in a school: offering counseling and support, providing a safe space (see below), acting as a vehicle for raising awareness and increasing visibility, and being part of a broader schoolwide effort for increasing visibility and awareness of LGBT issues.^{xxxi} The presence of a GSA can improve students’ perception of safety and acceptance at the school.^{xxxii} Kosciw et al. found that the existence of a GSA was positively correlated to “a decreased incidence of anti-LGBT victimization.”^{xxxiii}

The third type of framework for supporting LGBT students is the development and designation of “safe spaces” or “safe zones.”^{xxxiv} The concept of a safe space is often vague and imprecise,^{xxxv} but it generally means a program that provides some training to faculty and staff, who then publicly show support for LGBT students with stickers or signs. For example, a faculty member might hang a pink triangle or a rainbow sticker on her door, which signifies that her classroom is a safe space for LGBT students; as a safe place, the classroom should have fewer incidents of slurs, bullying, and harassment.^{xxxvi}

Safe place programs “help raise awareness about LGBTQ issues, increase support of LGBTQ students, it helps LGBTQ students feel more safe [*sic*], valued, and it instills in them a sense of belonging.”^{xxxvii} As Ratts et al. noted, the presence of a safe space program provides visible evidence of LGBT allies in the school.^{xxxviii}

Role of School Librarians

In addition to the three supportive frameworks discussed above, the literature also frequently mentions curricular support. This involves classroom or library materials that discuss LGBT history, politics, events, and individuals in a positive way.^{xxxix}

There are several reasons for inclusion of LGBT-positive information and materials in schools. Kosciw et al. reported that an inclusive, LGBT-positive curriculum was correlated with less victimization, having an increased benefit “in schools with poor climates or for students who are more severely victimized.”^{xl} Similarly, Szalacha found that students felt safer in schools that had LGBT issues incorporated in the curriculum.^{xli} In addition, students reported being more resilient when they had access to information about sexual orientation and gender identity.^{xlii}

As Patterson explained, “Less is known about the influence of curricular material than about legislative and policy responses to the problems of LGBT students in schools, but the available evidence suggests that curricular changes may contribute to safer schools.”^{xliii} Given the paucity of research into informational resources, perhaps it is not surprising that school libraries are rarely mentioned as a possible avenue for attaining and sharing such resources. Cianciotto and Cahill’s call for school libraries to “include age-appropriate books about LGBT people, history and culture” is unusual; every other article that mentioned curricular and informational resources for LGBT students failed to mention school libraries.^{xliv}

Yet school libraries could be a vital, important asset in the efforts to make schools safer and more accepting of LGBT students—a point frequently asserted in the library science literature, though overlooked in most of the LGBT research. Downey noted that “librarians are in the powerful and important position of being able to help reduce these risks [faced by LGBT students] by providing access to quality GLBT-themed young adult (YA) materials.”^{xlv} Whelan and Garry argued that libraries can be “safe havens” for LGBT students searching for information.^{xlvi} Vaillancourt and Rauch both suggested that LGBT students can benefit from access to information as well as a sense of community that the library can foster.^{xlvii} Students benefit in two ways: LGBT students have access to information that can support them and enrich their lives, and straight students have access to information to better understand LGBT history,

culture, and individuals.^{xlviii} Phillips noted that librarians could offer pastoral care to support teens who are victimized by bullying.^{xlix}

Some authors suggest that libraries, including school libraries, explicitly reach out to LGBT students, “publicly inviting and welcoming a group that is often excluded and marginalized” by conducting outreach, hosting programming, and celebrating LGBT-related events (such as acknowledging the Stonewall anniversary).¹ Even if a school does not have LGBT-related information in the curriculum, the library can collect such information; one of the school library’s missions is to “enable students to access ideas unavailable in the school curriculum.”^{li}

Censorship in School Libraries

As Boon and Howard note, however, “a young adult’s access to fiction with LGBT content differs considerably depending upon his or her location.”^{lii} Oltmann and Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris similarly found variance in the number of LGBT titles held by high school libraries.^{liii} The 2007 GLSEN study found that most students said they did not have access to LGBT materials in their school libraries.^{liv} “A lack of LGBTQ-themed literature in school libraries can send a message to LGBTQ teens that the school library is not the place for them, and that their lives and their concerns are not valued there.”^{lv}

Garry investigated the tension between selection and censorship when school librarians purchase (or do not purchase) LGBT-related resources. She reported that “administrative and community support” was particularly important, with “those who felt supported [seeming] more comfortable with potentially controversial materials than did those who felt stifled.”^{lvi}

Some scholars focus on self-censorship, or “making collection management decisions on the basis of avoiding conflict . . . self-censorship decisions are often made on the basis of religious, sexual, political, or health factors.”^{lvii} Whelan argued that self-censorship by school librarians is “rampant and lethal.” She reported on a survey which found that 70 percent of school librarians said they would not buy certain materials if they thought parents would object to its presence in the school library.^{lviii}

The current study brings together these various threads in the literature. School librarians could be a part of the framework meant to support LGBT students who experience bullying at school; conversely, school librarians could be practicing censorship (or self-censorship) by not supplying relevant resources. However, this question is overlooked in the relevant research.

The current study draws upon strands in the literature, particularly Oltmann and Garry.^{lix} Similar to Garry, this project is based on qualitative interviews with school librarians, asking them about their reasons for collecting (or not collecting) LGBT materials.^{lx} Similar to Oltmann, this study focuses on two states, one in the South and one in the Northeast. (See Oltmann for a detailed depiction of the two states.^{lxi}) These two states were chosen because they are very different on a number of demographic variables (such as political leaning, rural/urban, and, at the time of the study, variance in whether same-sex marriage was legal).

Methods

The data for this project was collected via qualitative telephone interviews. As Lilleker explained, “Interviews can provide immense amounts of information that could not be gleaned from official published documents or contemporary media accounts.”^{lxii} Qualitative interviews seemed particularly apt for this research project, which sought to uncover school librarians’ perspectives on a sensitive, potentially controversial, subject.

Subjects were recruited in multiple waves. First, a general recruitment e-mail was sent out via the official Listservs for school librarians in the southern and the northeastern state. Second, school librarians from smaller schools were targeted with individualized e-mails; this was done on the premise that smaller schools were likely to have fewer LGBT books (as supported by Oltmann^{lxiii}). These steps resulted in thirty-one total interviews, with twenty-four from the southern state and seven from the northeastern state. It is not known why the number of respondents varies so much, but the responses from the two states were remarkably similar and will be analyzed together.

The goal was to recruit public high school librarians exclusively. Inclusion of LGBT materials in elementary or middle schools—or in private schools—may be more controversial than their inclusion in public high schools, due to students’ age and maturity and the mission of the schools. However, focusing on public high schools proved somewhat difficult because there were relatively few respondents and because school librarians from middle and elementary schools were eager to be interviewed. The final sample includes respondents from two private high schools, two public middle schools, one middle/high school combination, and one elementary school (see table 1). Although variance was anticipated based on the respondents’ location (northeastern or southern), type of locale (urban, suburban, or rural), and school size (large or small enrollment), no variance was found; in other words, regardless of these demographics, the respondents’ comments were substantively the same.

The interviews lasted from eight to thirty-two minutes, with an average of eighteen minutes. All but two respondents were female, but to protect the male respondents’ identity, all were given female pseudonyms. Table 1 displays the pseudonyms, the location (southern or northeastern state), the school setting of each respondent, and the length of their interviews.

Every interview was conducted via telephone and recorded with the respondents’ permission. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed with QSR NVivo 10.0 following standard content analysis procedures for qualitative data.^{lxiv} The data was coded deductively, based on the content in the interviews themselves; it was organized into categories (similar to the headings in the “Results” section), with key quotations noted.

Initially, the interviews focused on inclusion of LGBT books in high school library collections. As the interviews continued, the topic of bullying and libraries’ roles in combating bullying emerged as important themes; questions about bullying were then added to subsequent interviews. This is elaborated below.

Table 1. Summary of interviews

	Location	Type of school	Length of interview
Alexa	Southern	HS, public	17.01
Allison	Southern	HS, public	24.50
Courtney	Southern	HS, public	11.44
Diana	Southern	MS, public	21.52
Emily	Southern	HS, public	23.11
Erin	Southern	HS, public	21.39
Gemma	Southern	HS, public	8.03
Ginny	Southern	HS, public	11.05
Holly	Southern	HS, private	14.37
Ivy	Southern	HS, public	28.24
Jody	Southern	HS, public	12.53
Kelsey	Southern	HS, public	17.49
Kerri	Southern	HS, public	24.05
Kyla	Southern	HS, public	13.01
LaToya	Southern	HS, public	15.41
Lynn	Southern	HS, public	18.16
Madeleine	Southern	HS, public	17.31
Mia	Southern	MS/HS, public	22.40
Nora	Southern	HS, public	18.38
Pamela	Southern	E, public	13.25
Patricia	Southern	HS, public	12.11
Rose	Southern	HS, public	20.51
Serena	Southern	HS, public	23.42
Terry	Southern	HS, public	16.31
Amelia	Northeastern	MS, public	16.28
Annabelle	Northeastern	HS, public	15.33
Dorothy	Northeastern	HS, public	16.48
Gwyneth	Northeastern	HS, public	24.17
Jamica	Northeastern	HS, public	32.22
Phoebe	Northeastern	HS, private	14.52
Velda	Northeastern	MS, public	26.16

Note: HS = high school, MS = middle school, E= elementary school.

Findings

The most significant finding is that all thirty-one respondents felt that collecting LGBT materials was important and valuable. For example, Erin said, “Your collection should absolutely mirror your students. . . . They’re the people who are reading books, and I think there should be some books about them, too.” Similarly, Rose explained, “I do feel strongly that there’s a high need for that. Kids need, teenagers want to see themselves in the literature.” These respondents emphasized the importance of reflecting one’s population in the materials collected.

If one considers the research indicating that LGBT-identified individuals live in every county in the United States,^{lxv} then these librarians are correct: including LGBT resources reflects their

population. Patricia further explained, “I do really think it’s important that we have literature to reflect all of our kids, our white, our black, our Hindu, our gay, I don’t care. I think it’s important that they be able to see some of themselves in a positive light.” Kelsey further elaborated on this point:

At this level [high school], you have kids who are really trying to figure out who they are and even who other people around them are, and I feel like it’s important for them to be able to read about things that either they may be feeling or questioning. And they may see themselves in the characters of a book, or other people around them; it helps them understand. I think that that’s good for them to be able to kind of internalize that in a private setting such as reading a book. . . . I think that books give them the opportunity to have kind of a private conversation with themselves about an issue.

Other respondents focused on the thoroughness of their collection. Gemma noted that LGBT books “are necessary if you want a well-rounded collection, a well-rounded library.” Emily added, “I think it’s our responsibility as librarians to have books on all manner of topics.” Madeleine also focused on the librarian’s role: “Our job as a librarian is to have something for all of the students, something that is interesting for everybody where they can connect with” the literature.

Allison demonstrated that she was aware of some of the problems faced by LGBT teens; she noted that “the highest suicide rate of teenagers is for GLBT kids, and so I don’t want that to ever be on my conscience that I have not provided those kids with the same kind of materials that would make them realize that they’re not alone in the world.”

This research relies on the interviews of thirty-one respondents; there are approximately 225 high school librarians in the southern state and approximately 160 in the northeastern state. Clearly, this small sample cannot be seen as representative of the broader population. There are many perspectives missing from this sample, as seen in the general agreement on collecting LGBT resources. Librarians who were ambivalent or negative about collecting LGBT resources are not represented here. Essentially, they declined to participate in the study; there are many possible reasons for this, but the non-participation of some librarians cannot really be studied from this data.

However, there is rich, saturated representation of the positive perspective. Saturation occurs in qualitative research when “no new themes, findings, concepts, or problems were evident in the data.”^{lxvi} The nuances of the positive perspective were fully captured, as described below.

Variation in Responses

While all of the respondents thought inclusion of LGBT books was appropriate, the comfort level and enthusiasm for this position varied greatly. Twelve respondents indicated some hesitancy or reluctance when discussing collecting LGBT materials, though only seven of those twelve were from public high schools. Kerri expressed a neutral stance, saying, “I’m okay with it. I have not sought out material, but when things come in, I’m okay with it.” Mia echoed her,

saying, “I wouldn’t say I shy away from those titles, but I don’t intentionally set about making sure that I’m really stocked up. I probably am a little bit more conservative in general about my choices”; then she added: “I never shy away from a book because there might be openly gay characters in the story, but I am really cautious when that is the story.” Similarly, Gwyneth reported that sometimes “I don’t really feel comfortable with this book so I’ll send it back. . . . I do exercise some judgment—I don’t know if censorship’s the right word.”

Ivy said, “I want to say I’m all for it, but my community is a little stodgy, so you’ve got to look for what’s going to push it without pushing it so far that your community’s going to be in a complete uproar about it.” Serena explained, “I’m not purposely going out and looking for those per se, but if they’re popping up on a list, that’s not an automatic negative for me.” However, as she elaborated, she displayed some caution:

Personally I don’t have any trouble with having those types of topics in the library . . . but there are a few newer books that are coming out that are a little more, I don’t want to say *graphic* per se, but a little more in your face than others. I don’t know what the technical word for that would be. David Levithan was one recently [who] came out with *Two Boys Kissing*. The cover of that and the title of that—if it had had a different name and a different cover, I would’ve put it in the collection in a heartbeat because my kids love David Levithan. But that particular title and that particular cover—I’m in a very rural, very conservative, Christian area, and to put that on my shelf, I think would have been just pushing it a little too much.

Even though Serena’s students would have likely enjoyed the book, she did not buy it. Note that there was no actual challenge or hostility from the community; the *potential* of such problems was enough to dissuade her from purchasing the item. Here, we see some evidence of self-censorship. Several of these respondents declined to purchase items that they felt could be challenged, the very definition of self-censorship. While less than half of the respondents indicated that they self-censored, its presence in regards to LGBT literature is troubling.

In contrast, nineteen respondents expressed strong, willing opinions about including LGBT materials. Nora simply stated, “I 100 percent think we need that in the library.” Ginny similarly said that “it needs to be here. It’s not offensive or whatever; it’s a must.” She added that it ought to be done “because of the kids. When the kids come in and find a book, it’s like, ‘Wow, you really got this!’ So it’s just part of the curriculum; it’s part of who I am and [what] the library is.”

Lynn was even more emphatic: “I definitely think it’s a *must*. Every school in every county across the country needs to have that, and I’m a big believer in that.” Kyla explained, “If I didn’t have those books, that would not be serving part of my population, and not only that, but I think all students should have access to books in that genre.” Dorothy noted that the northeastern state where she worked was known for being fairly liberal, “so it’s probably easier for me to justify inclusion than it might be in some parts of the country or some communities.”

Several respondents noted that high school is a time of exploration and self-discovery. Gwyneth, for example, said: “I think these kids need to find out if this is what they want do to with their

life, if this is what speaks to them, if this is what's in their hearts." Alexa added that "kids who are struggling with that sexuality, kids who are exploring and just trying to figure out who they are" need resources to help them.

Patricia added, "[LGBT materials] should definitely be included. We've got GLBT kids. So what? Like, you're not allowed to be reflected in the literature? That's *crazy*." Again, as many respondents did, Patricia emphasized the importance of students seeing themselves reflected in the available literature. This was a strong theme in several responses. Alexa noted, "I have students who want to read that, and they're exploring their sexuality at this point and they need to be reading about real people and fiction that looks like them. Kids are exploring and just trying to figure out who they are." Rose added that "kids need to see themselves in the literature."

Some respondents compared the inclusion of LGBT materials to the inclusion of other specialty literature that focused on other minorities or other sensitive topics. Diana said, "I try to always include the best African American characters [and] books, and it's a reflection of our world and our reality." Allison, likewise, noted that she also collected "the same thing for African American kids or poor kids or . . . there's a new books about a girl [who's] mixed race." She worked to make sure the diversity of her student population was reflected in her library's collection. Finally, Jamica compared LGBT materials to resources that feature African American characters, noting that she collects both, even though the corresponding populations may be small: "I want students who are not gay and not African American to have access to materials about people [who] are not just like them."

Many of the respondents reported that they personally knew LGBT individuals, often family members, friends, current or former students, or school officials. Terry, for example, said, "As a teenager, I had a couple of friends who were gay, but they moved away because they knew there wasn't going to be any acceptance." Serena noted, "I've had a lot of kids who have graduated from here, and after they've graduated, they have come out and openly said that they're gay or lesbian or whatever." One librarian told the story of a student who came in searching for material because his brother had just come out as gay; the librarian was able to point the student to several resources that provided him with a better understanding of the situation.

Jamica said that a former student, now in college, wrote a letter explaining he was transgender and thanking her for her support: "He was saying 'thank you for making me feel that I was understood.' . . . I just felt like, I'm doing my job if that person felt supported and represented." The respondents were frequently moved as they described these situations and the LGBT individuals with whom they were close. It was clear, for several of them, that personally knowing LGBT individuals was one of the reasons their libraries contained LGBT materials. Amelia said, "I knew I had some students [who] were struggling with their identities in a very conservative town. And so I immediately realized I had a very vulnerable audience that these books could help."

Support from Administration

Respondents were asked about the levels of support they felt they received from their principals

and other administrative staff. The responses were mixed. Several people indicated that their administration was unlikely to know whether the school librarian collected LGBT materials—or anything else. Alexa said, “I don’t think they’re aware that I have as much as I do and, honestly, most administrations don’t know what’s in their library.” Mia added that it “probably has not crossed their minds,” and Dorothy went further, saying that the administration was “pretty oblivious about what’s in the library.”

Some individuals indicated that they were unlikely to receive much support from their administration for having LGBT materials in the school library. Ivy said, “I suspect they might be a little uncomfortable with it, because I think maybe in the climate that we’re in.” Several respondents noted that they had had worked for several principals over the last several years who displayed varying levels of interest in the school library. Because of this frequent turnover, the librarians did not have a sense of support from the administration. Patricia added, “Actually, [the principal] can be open-minded, but he’s much more conservative than I am.”

However, most respondents said that they believed their administration would support having such materials in the school library. Nora, for example, explained: “I would say that they probably support my choices as a library professional to have all kinds of books in the library. . . . I’ve never received any kind of pushback.” Pamela added, “We’ve never had that discussion, [but] they trust me in my selections. . . . It might warrant a discussion, but I think that they would support whatever my thoughts were.” Here, we see the school librarians relying on their expertise and professionalism and assuming that other professionals—the administrators—will similarly recognize and respect this professionalism. Lynn was a bit more guarded, explaining that her administration would be “supportive but yet cautious, always wanting to make sure that we can defend what we have here.” Serena extended this point:

I talk to my administrator on a routine basis, and he’s very supportive of what I have at the library. If there’s something I think that’s may be a question at some point, I’ll say, “Hey, heads-up, I’ve got this, it’s new, the kids are liking it, and I’m putting it on the shelf.” And he’ll say, “Okay, fine.” He trusts my judgment and my selection of what I’m doing, and that I’m doing what’s best for the kids. So I feel very supported. . . . I feel absolutely they would stand behind me on whatever I’ve got. And because what I choose, for the most part, is based on good reviews and awards and recommended lists, that’s support enough for it.

Ginny noted that her principal “never asked, never questioned anything that I put in,” while Annabelle said, “I can’t imagine them giving me a hard time.” Gwyneth said that her administration “would not be surprised to know that I have it because we do have the gay-straight alliance in the building. So I’m assuming they are [supportive of LGBT resources in the school library].” Rose said, “The administration does support my library [in many ways],” and she thought that support would extend to LGBT resources: “They’re very inclusive, and I would think that they would be shocked if I did not try to be inclusive of all of our students.”

Jody explained that the administration knew there were LGBT students at the school, and thus the administration should conclude that the library has resources for this population. She said,

“We have to service these kids. My principal is also a Christian, but never once has he come to me to say, ‘What are you doing?’ He gets it.” Holly, at a private religious school, had a more nuanced response. She did collect some LGBT resources because her collection development statement “simply says that we will provide materials that are balanced without over-sensationalizing and we will focus on accuracy.” She added:

The administration is fully aware [that I have LGBT resources]. I did give them a sampling of some of the things we had, and I was asked to remove some of the books and I was allowed to keep some. I wish I knew their criteria for making those demands, but I honestly don’t.

Role of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Groups

A number of respondents noted that their schools had gay-straight alliances or similar groups designed to show support for LGBT students and their allies. For example, both Gwyneth and Nora indicated that their schools’ GSA groups were very active; Nora added that she “will highlight those particular books and put them on display so that the students know we have books about everyone here” when the GSA meets. Terry noted that her school had a group similar to the GSA, which indicated to her that “our administration is pretty open” and respectful of those students. Annabelle explained that “several of the people in my book club belong to an organization in our school called the Gay-Straight Alliance and are very interested in making sure that it’s a well-rounded collection.” LaToya indicated that her school’s GSA met in the library, another way that libraries can demonstrate support for LGBT students. Jamica, Allison, Dorothy, Patricia, Emily, and Amelia also mentioned their schools’ GSA groups.

All of the respondents who discussed GSA groups volunteered the information without prompting during the interview. They saw providing LGBT resources as one way to establish support for LGBT students, similar to a school allowing a GSA. Perhaps the schools’ GSA groups prompted the librarians to be assertive about searching for and collecting LGBT resources.

Bullying and the Librarian’s Role

The majority of respondents said they saw little evidence of bullying. Sometimes this was attributed to the general school atmosphere, with a zero-tolerance policy for bullying—for example, illustrated by Erin’s comment that the administration is “very, very good about picking up on that stuff and nipping it in the bud. They take it very, very seriously.” Others reported that there may be less physical bullying in the school halls, but a lot of it has moved to the online environment, where it is less visible to teachers and staff. As Nora said, “I think they’re going more online. It’s more subversive so it’s not necessarily an outright thing in front of the teacher . . . but it definitely exists. It’s definitely still around.” Respondents noted that students are bullied about a variety of things, including weight, dress, appearance, family background (such as economic status, being in jail, drug use, etc.), race, ethnicity, being socially awkward, and also sexuality and gender identity.

Many respondents also talked about the school library's role in combating bullying. For example, several respondents indicated that they saw little evidence of bullying because they explicitly created no-bullying zones in their libraries; they did not allow teasing, name-calling, or other negative behaviors. Velda explained: "I am pretty careful, and I keep a really close eye out. . . . If I see it and hear it, I immediately speak to that student. . . . I make it very clear at the beginning of the year that I have a zero tolerance for bullying." Phoebe also made a point to intervene if she saw bullying, modeling appropriate behavior, because "I really do think that librarians can be that person who shows kids the right way to intervene and the right way to deal with things."

Other than enacting a no-bullying zone in their libraries, the respondents indicated several ways that school librarians could play a role in reducing bullying: collecting materials for the school library, collaborating with the guidance counselors and teachers, suggesting particular books for certain students, being a supporter of students, and creating a safe space.

Amelia, for example, said that "building those collections that address [bullying], that take it on and show kids different ways to maneuver situations, is so important." Ginny felt that the main support a library could offer was "just the books that you keep. I have a lot of books on bullying and [it's] in the storyline." Similarly, Madeleine was concerned about "making sure we have books and literature and that kind of thing." LaToya agreed, noting, "I have books on suicide and other topics that are not particularly comfortable but again might be necessary for a student who has a need." Erin explained that her school had done a big anti-bullying push a few years ago: "I went ahead and bulked up the collection and got every book about bullying that is recommended for high schools. And those have been helpful. I have seen a lot of kids check those out." Several respondents emphasized that they promoted anti-bullying materials. Mia noted that she promoted them, not as anti-bullying books per se, but just as good books, with the result that "the kids will read them."

In addition, several respondents indicated that they worked closely with teachers and guidance counselors to build an anti-bullying collection and incorporate it into the curriculum. Nora said, "My counseling office approached me earlier in the year; they wanted more video resources about bullying. So we were able to get some of those on DVD. . . . We found a couple that would support what they were also doing." Dorothy noted that incorporating anti-bullying resources into the curriculum "really gets the kids talking . . . something that the whole class reads [and] when you hear them talking afterward, you know they've absorbed something." Velda explained:

I work closely with our school psychologist and social work[er] and our school counselors by writing them lists of books and lists of materials and lessons because it's imperative: How are kids going to learn and function if they feel left out, different, weird, strange, that they don't belong, or that other kids can bully them? How are they going to be able to focus and do well in school?

Another way that school librarians combat bullying is through bibliotherapy, or suggesting particular books for particular students. Rose noted that "there are lots of young adult novels out there that kids can be pointed to for helping with bullying." Ivy explained:

If you are good at being able to match up books with kids, then you can say, “Hey, come over here, I’ve got a great book; I think you’ll like it.” If it’s for somebody who bullies, then you can hand them a book on bullying that has . . . redemption: “You can do this.” If it’s somebody who is bullied, then it’s like, “You’re not all by yourself; you’re not alone.” In a high school, a librarian is like a counselor.

Kyla added that school librarians can help “through providing the books that have characters in those situations where the student can read that and see how those characters deal with it in positive ways. . . . I’m a firm believer in bibliotherapy.”

Librarians sometimes discussed deeper relationships in their efforts to reduce bullying. For example, Gwyneth said that the library is a place where “kids can come and get away from things and maybe process” whatever they are going through. Madeleine noted that she tries to be “an advocate” for the students, especially those who are socially awkward and spend time in the library. Alexa explained, “I feel like my role here is a ministry because not only do I supply them with books, but I love them and I give them attention and life advice.” Diana related that “these kids, most of them have nobody to talk to, and they do experience bullying at school, so they kind of rely on the library once they discover that I’m not going to be mean.”

School Libraries as Safe Spaces

A final way that school librarians can aid bullied students, according to the respondents, was by positioning the library as a safe place. Half of the respondents used the phrase “safe place” or “safe space” (without prompting from the interviewer) when describing their library, LGBT students, and the library’s role in combating bullying. Gemma, for example, said, “We offer a place for kids to come, a safe place for kids to come and get away . . . where they’ve got somebody who can look out for them and make sure they’re in a good environment.” Lynn concurred, saying, “Anything the library can do to help promote a safer, more inclusive learning environment.” Ginny added that “the library is your safe haven. The library is a safe haven for kids [who] are different, being picked on. This is where they want to come and be safe. It’s a huge role.” Alexa said:

My library has sometimes been called “the Isle of Misfit Toys” because a lot of my kids, the kids who just hang out here at lunch and before and after school, are the kids [who] just don’t really fit in anywhere. I think [the library] is a safe place for them.

Ivy, similarly, said that students enter her library before school “because it’s a safe place; it’s a place where they don’t feel like anybody’s going to make fun of them . . . just because it is a place they can go.” Phoebe explained that her goal was to “make my space the safest place possible, always; safe physically, safe mentally, safe emotionally because there are so many places, especially in this digital world, [where] kids aren’t safe.” Terry shared, “A lot of students come to the library for safety because they feel safe [there].” Gwyneth noted that “the library is kind of a sanctuary for those who have been thinking that they are . . . that they might be gay.”

She recalled boys who felt ostracized because of their sexuality coming to the library to relax and be themselves. Courtney added, “I really want kids to feel welcome and find a home, because a lot of the kids [whom] we service aren’t necessarily mainstream, and they find a place [in the library] to hang out where they like to be.”

For some respondents, thinking of the library as a safe space had a more formal conceptualization. For example, Emily explained that she received a “safe space” sticker from the GSA group and was proud to hang it by the library door. Velda said she had a large sign in her school library, stating that it was a safe space. She elaborated, “It’s imperative that kids have a safe place where they can just be themselves and not worry that someone’s judging them.”

Discussion

These school librarians were vocal about the importance of collecting LGBT resources and about the roles that school libraries can play in countering bullying in schools. All of the respondents interviewed for this project indicated that they collected LGBT materials, though some expressed a certain degree of reluctance or hesitation. Most, though, were enthusiastic about collecting LGBT resources, noting that it is important for students to see themselves reflected in the school’s resources; just as important, non-LGBT students need opportunities to learn about LGBT issues. Finding this much concurrence in the interviews was unexpected and leads to a few tentative conclusions.

First, this research demonstrates acceptance of having LGBT resources in school libraries, although, as explained above, negative perspectives were not represented in the data. Overall, the respondents were comfortable with collecting LGBT materials and were unafraid of stating so. They indicated that, even with conservative administrations or communities, they still thought they should have these materials. Many respondents relied on their professionalism and professional ethical principles to support their decision to collect LGBT resources. The similarity in responses, across thirty-one respondents from two very different states, is striking. This may be in part because librarians open to collecting these materials were more likely to agree to take part in the study.

A second, and related, conclusion is that many respondents had personal reasons (in addition to the professional ones) for maintaining an LGBT collection. Several told stories of LGBT individuals they personally knew, such as family members or close friends. They knew that these individuals had gone through difficult times in school, and the school librarians wanted to ease the way for other LGBT individuals so that the pain and difficulty of harassment and bullying would not be repeated. Others told of current or recent students who had found value and comfort in the school library’s LGBT collection. Some linked the school library’s collection with the school’s GSA group, indicating that library collections were another way that the school environment could be supportive of LGBT students. Respondents discussed bibliotherapy and reaching out to marginalized students (many of whom were openly or suspected to be LGBT), demonstrating their deep caring and commitment to serving students.

Third, this research found evidence of some self-censorship in public high school libraries with regard to LGBT resources, as predicted in previous literature. Some respondents indicated hesitation about purchasing LGBT materials, while others flatly stated that they avoided items

which had the potential to spark challenges. Doing so is clearly a form of self-censorship. This is cause for concern, especially since other librarians explained how beneficial LGBT resources were for many students. It is important to note, however, that the evidence for self-censorship was limited. Most respondents did not say anything that indicated they practiced self-censorship.

Fourth, respondents noted several ways that libraries could aid schools in reducing bullying. These efforts included making the library a bully-free zone, collecting anti-bullying books, collaborating with teachers and guidance counselors, conducting bibliotherapy, connecting deeply to students, and making the school library an explicit safe zone. For many respondents, this latter role was the most important thing that the school library could do to counter bullying.

Fifth, this research illuminates the roles of school libraries in combating bullying—a fact too often overlooked by researchers of youth, LGBT youth, and bullying. As discussed in the literature review, only one source mentioned school libraries as a possible resource; the overwhelming majority of resources on bullying and LGBT victimization did not even consider school libraries as a possible ally in the charge against bullying. This is something that school librarians and library advocates need to correct, by reaching out more assertively to anti-bullying groups and researchers.

Conclusion and Future Directions

These conclusions can be evaluated and tested in other states and other school libraries. Most of the data for this project came from public high school librarians; it would be interesting to compare these results with research that focused on middle or elementary school or private schools. Although this data came from two very different states, one mostly conservative and one mostly liberal, additional variation would be useful; do these similarities, for example, hold true across the nation?

An additional area for future research is the recruitment of school librarians who are neutral or negative about collecting LGBT resources. It seems unlikely that *all* school librarians in either the southern state or the northeastern state approve of and eagerly seek to collect LGBT materials. It is likely, rather, that those librarians who disagree with collecting LGBT resources deliberately chose to not participate in this research. This may be particularly true in communities that are conservative or in schools where the administration is conservative (however, recall that some respondents indicated that they collected LGBT resources in conservative communities or under conservative administrations). It cannot be determined, from this research, why those school librarians with neutral or negative perspectives on LGBT materials did not participate; we may speculate that selecting LGBT materials carries some social and professional approval, and choosing to not have these items may have some negative stigma attached. Perhaps the school librarians who chose to not collect these items feared negative perceptions of their actions. Others, however—those who participated in the interviews—focused on the positive aspects of providing LGBT materials.

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Notes

ⁱ Elisabeth W. Rauch, “GLBTQ Collections Are for Every Library Serving Teens!” *Teacher Librarian* 39, no. 1 (2011): 13–16; S. M. Oltmann, “Variables Related to School Media Center LGBT Collections,” *Libri*, 65, no. 1 (2015): 25–33.

ⁱⁱ Tim Gardes, “Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Teens in Your Library Media Center,” *California School Library Association Journal* 32, no. 1 (2008): 23–24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicole E. Rossi, “‘Coming Out’ Stories of Gay and Lesbian Young Adults,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no. 9 (2010): 1174–91.

^{iv} Bharat Mehra and Donna Braquet, “Progressive LGBTQ Reference: Coming Out in the 21st Century,” *Reference Services Review* 39, no. 3 (2011): 401–22; see Jason Cianciotto and Sean Robert Cahill, *LGBT Youth in America’s Schools* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012) for a smaller estimate.

^v Cited in Rauch, “GLBTQ Collections.”

^{vi} This paper uses the abbreviation LGBT to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Some of the relevant literature adds a “Q” for queer and questioning. Some of the relevant literature changes the order of these letters. When citing literature, I will follow the author’s format.

^{vii} Oltmann, “Variables Related to School Media Center”; Laurel A. Clyde and Marjorie Lobban, “A Door Half Open: Young People’s Access to Fiction Related to Homosexuality,” *School Libraries Worldwide* 7, no. 2 (2001): 17–30; Candi Pierce Garry, “Selection or Censorship? School Librarians and LGBTQ Resources,” *School Libraries Worldwide* 21, no. 1 (2015): 73–90; Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Elizabeth Overberg, and Shannon Harris, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ)-Themed Literature for Teens: Are School Libraries Providing Adequate Collections?” *School Library Research*, 16 (2013), http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol16/SLR_LGBTQThemedLiteratureforTeens_V16.pdf.

^{viii} Garry, “Selection or Censorship?”; Oltmann, “Variables Related to School Media Center.”

^{ix} Oltmann, “Variables Related to School Media Center.”

^x Gardes, “Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Teens.”

^{xi} Joseph G. Kosciw, Neal A. Palmer, Ryan M. Kull, and Emily A. Greytak, “The Effect of Negative School Climate on Academic Outcomes for LGBT Youth and the Role of In-School Supports,” *Journal of School Violence* 12, no. 1 (2013): 46.

^{xii} Alicia L. Fedewa and Soyeon Ahn, “The Effects of Bullying and Peer Victimization on Sexual-Minority and Heterosexual Youths: A Quantitative Meta-Analysis of the Literature,” *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 7, no. 4 (2011): 399.

^{xiii} Cianciotto and Cahill, *LGBT Youth*.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 4.

^{xv} Gardes, “Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Teens.”

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- ^{xvi} Evelyn R. Perez, G. Thomas Schanding Jr., and Tam K. Dao, "Educators' Perceptions in Addressing Bullying of LGBTQ/Gender Nonconforming Youth," *Journal of School Violence* 12, no. 1 (2013).
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 65. See also Charlotte J. Patterson, "Schooling, Sexual Orientation, Law, and Policy: Making Schools Safe for All Students," *Theory into Practice* 52, no. 3 (2013): 190–95.
- ^{xviii} Stephen T. Russell, Caitlin Ryan, Russell B. Toomey, Rafael M. Diaz, and Jorge Sanchez, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescent School Victimization: Implications for Young Adult Health and Adjustment," *Journal of School Health* 81, no. 5 (2011): 224.
- ^{xix} Fedewa and Ahn, "The Effects of Bullying," 410.
- ^{xx} Kosciw et al., "The Effect of Negative School Climate"; Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris, "(LGBTQ)-Themed Literature for Teens."
- ^{xxi} Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris, "(LGBTQ)-Themed Literature for Teens," para. 3.
- ^{xxii} Kosciw et al., "The Effect of Negative School Climate."
- ^{xxiii} Todd A. Savage and G. Thomas Schanding Jr., "Creating and Maintaining Safe and Responsive Schools for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youths: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Journal of School Violence* 12, no. 3 (2013): 1–6.
- ^{xxiv} Pat Griffin, Camille Lee, Jeffrey Waugh, and Chad Beyer, "Describing Roles That Gay-Straight Alliances Play in Schools: From Individual Support to School Change," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 1, no. 3 (2004): 7–22; Kosciw et al., "The Effect of Negative School Climate"; Patterson, "Schooling, Sexual Orientation, Law, and Policy"; Cianciotto and Cahill, *LGBT Youth*.
- ^{xxv} Fedewa and Ahn, "The Effects of Bullying," 414; Emily A. Greytak, Joseph G. Kosciw, and Madelyn J. Boesen, "Putting the 'T' in 'Resource': The Benefits of LGBT-Related School Resources for Transgender Youth," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 10, nos. 1–2 (2013): 45–63; Russell et al., "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescent School Victimization."
- ^{xxvi} Savage and Schanding, "Creating and Maintaining Safe and Responsive Schools."
- ^{xxvii} Greytak, Kosciw, and Boesen, "Putting the 'T' in 'Resource,'" 57.
- ^{xxviii} V. Paul Poteat, Katerina O. Sinclair, Craig D. DiGiovanni, Brain W. Koenig, and Stephen T. Russell, "Gay-Straight Alliances Are Associated with Student Health: A Multischool Comparison of LGBTQ and Heterosexual Youth," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 23, no. 2 (2012): 319–30; see also Sean Currie, Maralee Mayberry, and Tiffany Chenneville, "Destabilizing Anti-Gay Environments through Gay-Straight Alliances: Possibilities and Limitations through Shifting Discourses," *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 85, no. 2 (2012): 56–60; Savage and Schanding, "Creating and Maintaining Safe and Responsive Schools"; and Greytak, Kosciw, and Boesen, "Putting the 'T' in 'Resource.'"
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- ^{xxx} Griffin et al., "Describing Roles That Gay-Straight Alliances Play."
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxxii} Poteat et al., "Gay-Straight Alliances."

^{xxxiii} Kosciw et al., “The Effect of Negative School Climate,” 55.

^{xxxiv} There is some overlap here with GSAs, as some research indicates that “school-sanctioned GSAs are an increasingly common strategy employed to afford sexual-minority youth a ‘safe space’ within which they can receive social support and develop social networks.” Currie, Mayberry, and Chenneville, “Destabilizing Anti-Gay Environments,” 57.

^{xxxv} Fetner et al., “Safe Spaces.”

^{xxxvi} Kerry John Poynter and Nancy Jean Tubbs, “Safe Zones: Creating LGBT Safe Space Ally Programs,” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 5 no. 1 (2007): 121–32; see also Patterson, “Schooling, Sexual Orientation, Law, and Policy.”

^{xxxvii} Manivong J. Ratts et al., “Safe Space Programs in K–12 Schools: Creating a Visible Presence of LGBTQ Allies,” *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 7, no. 4 (2013): 392.

^{xxxviii} Ibid.; Fedewa and Ahn, “The Effects of Bullying.”

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^{xl} Kosciw et al., “The Effect of Negative School Climate,” 59.

^{xli} Laura A. Szalacha, “Safer Sexual Diversity Climates: Lessons Learned from an Evaluation of Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students,” *American Journal of Education* 110, no. 1 (November 2003): 58–88.

^{xlii} Cianciotto and Cahill, *LGBT Youth*.

^{xliii} Patterson, “Schooling, Sexual Orientation, Law, and Policy,” 193.

^{xliv} Cianciotto and Cahill, *LGBT Youth*, 178.

^{xlv} Jennifer Downey, “Public Library Collection Development Issues Regarding the Information Needs of GLBT Patrons,” *Progressive Librarian* 25 (2005): 90; see also Bharat Mehra and Donna Braquet, “A ‘Queer’ Manifesto of Interventions for Libraries to ‘Come Out’ of the Closet! A Study of ‘Queer’ Youth Experiences during the Coming Out Process,” *LIBRES Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal* 16, no. 1 (2006); Linda B. Alexander and Sarah D. Miselis, “Barriers to GLBTQ Collection Development and Strategies for Overcoming Them,” *Young Adult Library Services* 5, no. 3 (2007): 43–49.

^{xlvi} Debra Lau Whelan, “OUT and Ignored,” *School Library Journal* 55, no. 2 (2006): 46–50; Garry, “Selection or Censorship?”; see also Morya Lang, “Library Rhetoric: The Canadian Library Association Statement of Diversity and Inclusion and LGBTQ Advocacy,” *Progressive Librarian* 32 (2009): 36–54; and Rae Helton, “Diversity Dispatch: Reaching Out to LGBT Library Patrons,” *Kentucky Libraries* 74, no. 2 (2010): 14–16.

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^l Kim Becnel, “Sticks, Stones, and Sneering Tones: The Librarian’s Role in Ending the Bullying Epidemic,” *Children and Libraries* 11, no. 3 (December 2013): 13; see also Rauch, “GLBTQ Collections”; Gardes, “Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Teens”; Ann Curry, “If I Ask, Will They Answer? Evaluating Public Library Reference Service to Gay and Lesbian Youth,” *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2005): 65–75; and Angie Manfredi, “Accept the Universal Freak Show,” *Young Adult Library Services* 7, no. 4 (2009): 26–31.

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^{liii} Oltmann, “Variables Related to School Media Center”; Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris, “(LGBTQ)-Themed Literature for Teens.”

^{liv} Cianciotto and Cahill, *LGBT Youth*.

^{lv} Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris, “(LGBTQ)-Themed Literature for Teens,” 10.

^{lvi} Garry, “Selection or Censorship?,” 84; see also Gardes, “Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Teens.”

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