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Libraries have an important role to play in promoting equality by providing materials which reflect our diverse society. In this article, LIZ CHAPMAN and BRIONY BIRDI report on research investigating attitudes to LGBT-related fiction for children and young people, and make recommendations for meeting the fiction reading needs of LGBT young people and parents.

The term 'LGBT' stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans. 'Trans' is an all-encompassing term used to refer to transsexual and transgender people.

Background

Government and professional policy documents make it clear that libraries have a duty to provide services and materials to meet the needs of LGBT people (DCMS, 2001a and b; CILIP, 2004, IDeA, 2007); indeed, under the new Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, it is illegal to discriminate on the grounds of sexuality in the provision of goods, facilities and services. The UK government estimates that 5-7% of the population is lesbian/gay/bisexual (Stonewall, 2007b), making this group a sizeable potential user population for libraries.

There are pressing reasons for providing LGBT-related fiction to under-18s. Many LGBT people report that they knew they were 'different' from a young age (Stormbreak, 2000) and research suggests that lesbian/gay teenagers are 2-6 times more likely to commit suicide than teenagers overall (Bridget, 2001). The benefits of reading for pleasure are increasingly recognised (Elkin *et al.*, 2003) and fiction can serve an especially vital role for LGBT teenagers by reflecting their own situations. It can also be argued that fiction featuring LGBT characters can "give heterosexual youth a picture of and perhaps some insight into the larger world around them" (Cockett, 1995:32). However, some librarians may be unaware of this need for materials as LGBT/questioning young people may be reluctant to come forward.

There is also increasing awareness of the need for materials for younger children which reflect a variety of family situations, in order to combat homophobic bullying and promote sexualities equality (Bloom, 2007; University of Sunderland, 2007). The number of LGBT-

headed families may be assumed to be rising since the Adoption and Children Act came into force on 30 December 2005, allowing same-sex couples to jointly adopt children (Stonewall, 2007a).

Despite this, provision of LGBT-related materials to under-18s in public libraries has received little attention in the UK. This research aimed to investigate the quality of public library provision of LGBT-related fiction to under-18s in Sheffield and Cambridgeshire, and in the wider UK context; to compare and contrast the attitudes of library staff and LGBT individuals to LGBT-related fiction aimed at under-18s; and to provide recommendations for improvement where appropriate.

Data collection

A mixed-method approach was used, combining focus groups and interviews, a questionnaire and a checklist survey of stock in Sheffield and Cambridgeshire. The stock survey was based on a list of LGBT-related children's fiction that is readily available in the UK, compiled by the researcher (available on request). The titles fell into two main categories: picture books featuring LGBT families (26 items) and YA fiction (139 items). The Sheffield and Cambridgeshire catalogues were then compared with the Brighton & Hove catalogue, as this authority has a reputation for providing a high-quality LGBT service (Norman, 1999).

The questionnaire was distributed via YLG-LIST@JISCMAIL.AC.UK and LIS-PUB-LIBS@JISCMAIL.AC.UK, as well as through contacts in Sheffield and Cambridgeshire. 88 people responded from a total of 33 library authorities. They were asked for their opinions on a series of statements relating to provision of LGBT-related children's fiction, while respondents with responsibility for children's stock selection were asked additional questions relating to provision in their authority.

Focus groups and interviews were also held involving 4 LGBT parents (or parents-to-be), 4 young LGBT individuals, 12 library staff from Sheffield and Cambridgeshire, and a publisher. The discussions revolved around a selection of children's picture books and young adult (YA) novels with LGBT content.

Research findings 1: Stock provision and procurement

The catalogue check revealed areas in which provision could be improved in Sheffield and Cambridgeshire, notably as regards picture books and items by less mainstream authors. Neither authority stocked any of the four 'trans' titles identified. Where novels suitable for young adults were stocked, they tended to be located in the adult section rather than in a separate YA section.

It proved difficult to assess provision across the rest of the UK as three-quarters of questionnaire respondents were unable to indicate the number of items of this type purchased; in cases where an estimate was given, figures tended to be very low (less than 1% of the total budget). Only six authorities that responded said that LGBT materials were mentioned in their stock purchasing policies, and only two specifically mentioned LGBT materials for under-18s.

Focus group participants from both authorities expressed dissatisfaction with their supplier's provision of LGBT-related fiction for under-18s, as did ten out of 41 questionnaire respondents with responsibility for children's stock selection. Respondents felt that American imprints and material from smaller publishers were unlikely to appear on suppliers' lists; unfortunately, much LGBT fiction for under-18s falls into these categories.

"The majority seem to be American imprints...very few of them we've actually seen on our approvals...we're very much tied by what our suppliers choose to buy in and supply for us." - *Librarian with responsibility for services to children / young people, Cambridgeshire*

A limited supplier selection is not necessarily a problem as long as librarians use other methods of procuring stock and maintaining their awareness. Unfortunately it appears that this is not always the case: although 21 authorities said they retained a proportion of the budget to spend outside the supplier contract and 17 had a clause which allowed them to go elsewhere if the supplier could not provide an adequate range, only four said their

authority used specialist bookshops, while twelve allowed young people to make some selections themselves. The questionnaire responses also suggest that limited use is being made of specialist sources to maintain currency of knowledge. Only 8/41 respondents said that they used such sources (a list of sources is available on request).

It may be that librarians do not see the need to look elsewhere as they are satisfied with supplier provision: 58% of respondents said their supplier provided an adequate range of LGBT-related fiction for under-18s. In some cases this may be because the supplier is genuinely doing a very good job, but in other cases it sounds a warning note, particularly where a supplier was involved that was criticised for its limited range by other questionnaire respondents or the focus groups. A number of respondents also made comments which suggested they were not aware of the full range of materials available. One is forced to consider the possibility that librarians are satisfied with supplier provision because they are not aware of other items; certainly, staff in all the focus groups felt that the research had introduced them to new materials and highlighted an area where provision needed to be improved. This is particularly concerning in view of the trend towards supplier selection.

Research findings 2: the value of LGBT-related fiction for under-18s

The questionnaire responses and focus groups showed a very positive picture here. There was a strong degree of consensus that libraries should provide LGBT picture books and YA novels, and that this material is useful for young people who are LGBT/questioning or in an LGBT-headed family, as well as for promoting tolerance.

“Young people are very vulnerable to feeling insecure about themselves, so we have a duty to make sure that they can access information and fiction that will support them, and encourage them to value themselves, and their feelings, (and those of others).” - *Stock selection librarian, Durham*

Library staff and LGBT participants also tended to concur on the factors which constitute 'high-quality' LGBT fiction. Both library employees and LGBT respondents felt that a

lower-quality book could potentially be counter-productive, as it could reinforce negative stereotypes. Library staff emphasised the fact that a book with an unattractive or old-fashioned cover would be unlikely to be picked off the shelf, particularly by teenagers. As almost all participants agreed that some of the sample books did not attain the quality of mainstream publishing, it was necessary to investigate whether libraries should relax their normal purchasing criteria in order to provide stock which reflects a diverse society. Opinions diverged on this point: library staff in the focus groups and several questionnaire respondents felt that quality standards should be maintained to some degree, both to ensure items would be used and to make the point that LGBT people/families should not have to settle for poorer-quality material. However, some LGBT participants and questionnaire respondents pointed out that 'quality' could be interpreted as suitability for the needs of the community, and felt that a diverse range of books should be provided even if this meant lowering quality standards.

"It depends what you mean by standards, I think it's really important to have these books in there." - *Lesbian married woman, planning a family*

LGBT participants also drew attention to the need for a range of genres (sci-fi, 'literary' fiction, etc. as well as romantic teen angst) and a diverse spectrum of LGBT protagonists within those books: most currently-available books depict white middle-class protagonists, so effort should be made to seek out the few which do not. Some LGBT respondents were concerned that books which focused on problems were inappropriate for very young children, unless they happened to have been experiencing bullying; whereas teen book collections should try to strike a balance between 'gritty realism' and positive endings. Participants also noted the fact that many of the sample books had a very obvious 'message', and felt they would like to read books where 'being gay' was not the sole issue addressed by the book.

Research findings 3: sex, censorship and complaints

Staff from Sheffield and Cambridgeshire reported few complaints to date, and there seemed to be a general sentiment within both authorities that the potential for complaint

should not be allowed to dictate purchasing decisions. Among questionnaire respondents, there was a strong consensus that librarians should NOT remove material simply because it had been the subject of a censorship controversy. Some felt that parental opinions did impose constraints, whereas others felt strongly that the possibility of complaint should not hamper the drive for equality, and that librarians should take a stand against censorship on principle.

“How do we ever expect to achieve equality if library services treat LGBT issues as something to be handled with gloves? LGBT displays and promotions are not, and should not, be treated as any more controversial than a gardening display. Set policy, set standards and enforce them despite potential criticism.” - *Librarian with responsibility for services to children / young people, Derbyshire*

Both LGBT and library focus group participants seemed to be happy for novels with LGBT-related sexual content to be provided in the YA section of a children's library; in fact, some of the LGBT participants emphasised that it is important to provide such material.

“I think teen books should have lots of sex in them, because children when they're teenagers are finding out about it and dealing with it.”

“It's a good thing for them to read about it.”

“Exactly, and it's natural.” - *Focus group of young LGBT women*

Participants felt that one of the purposes of the YA section was to house books with mature content, and nobody seemed to feel that there was any difference between heterosexual and LGBT sexual content. The questionnaire showed a greater division of opinions, although this could have been because the term 'children's library' was used, and some respondents shelved their YA material separately.

Some library focus group participants and questionnaire respondents showed a degree of unease over allowing children to borrow material which might have explicit content. This conflicts with CILIP's statement on intellectual freedom (2005) and could also prove very discouraging for young people trying to find out about LGBT sex and relationships. The

Sheffield stock team and many of the LGBT participants felt that young people would 'self-regulate' in terms of when they started to use the YA or adult library

Research findings 4: location and cataloguing

There is still no consensus on whether LGBT materials should be kept in a separate collection or integrated into the main sequence (see Chapman, 2007, for a discussion of this). As regards picture books, respondents' opinions were divided, with some feeling that interfiling the books would lead to parental complaint, while others thought that creating a separate section would itself attract negative feedback. Still others felt the material should be integrated in order to send a positive message about diversity, and this opinion was slightly more prevalent among LGBT respondents, although ease of location remained a concern.

"They shouldn't be somewhere like an issues section where people don't look unless they have an issue." - *Young bisexual woman*

The Sheffield stock team felt it would be useful to differentiate between picture books with a good storyline which met mainstream standards and could be included with mainstream materials, and books which seemingly existed in order to 'educate' children about LGBT issues, which could be located in a 'parenting' section.

"Some of [the picture books] I would probably put in the Parents collection simply because I think they don't work as picture books, they are more for if a parent wants to introduce the subject with a younger child." - *Sheffield children's stock team member*

In contrast, there was general agreement that teenagers would not wish to be seen looking at a separate 'LGBT' collection, so YA novels should be interfiled.

The need for staff awareness, bibliographic aids and a user-friendly cataloguing system was mentioned by several participants, both LGBT individuals and library staff. As people

might not feel comfortable asking for LGBT-related materials, it would be useful if they could find this material themselves, via either the catalogue or a readily-available list. This would also help to circumvent the problem of interfiled material becoming 'lost' among the rest of the stock.

Conclusions

The checklist study showed that provision of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people could be improved in the two case study authorities. However, focus group participants from both Sheffield and Cambridgeshire felt that it was important to provide such material and were keen to improve their provision; most questionnaire respondents shared this enthusiasm.

There were, however, some areas where library staff opinions tended to differ from those held by the LGBT participants, and in some cases conflicted with recommendations from CILIP. This suggests that the approach to provision of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people may need to be modified in some authorities to better meet the needs of the LGBT community.

Recommendations

The research findings constitute an initial investigation of attitudes to this area, and should not be treated as representative of the general opinions of either LGBT people or library employees. However, by viewing the results of this study in conjunction with previous research, it is possible to make some recommendations.

Stock holdings, procurement and selection criteria

- ~ Stock holdings should include both picture books and YA novels (and fiction for younger children where available).

- ~ Libraries should use sources other than mainstream suppliers to maintain awareness and procure this material.

- ~ Libraries should consult with the local community, but bear in mind that the LGBT community is not homogeneous and the majority opinion may conceal minority needs.
- ~ Normal quality criteria should be relaxed where necessary in order to provide a diverse range of materials.
- ~ Within the constraints of published material, stock selectors should endeavour to provide a diverse range of material with protagonists of various genders, races, cultures and class backgrounds. Trans material should be sought out.
- ~ Selectors should also seek to provide a variety of different novel genres. The YA section should contain copies of adult/crossover novels which are appropriate for teenagers.
- ~ Where material is available, selectors should provide LGBT-related fiction in alternative formats: large print, audiobook, etc.
- ~ LGBT issues/problems should not always be the focal point of the book; selectors should seek out materials where LGBT characters are included as a matter of course.
- ~ Effort should be made to provide a mixture of 'positive' and 'negative' materials, i.e. fiction which realistically depicts the problems faced by LGBT young people and fiction which shows the positive side of being LGBT.
- ~ The library should have a written stock policy and written selection criteria, both including LGBT-related materials for under-18s. The stock policy at least should be publicly available on the library's website.

Complaints

- ~ The possibility of parental complaint should NOT be allowed to dictate libraries' stock purchasing decisions.
- ~ Frontline staff should be aware of the stock policy so that they can respond

appropriately if faced with a complaint.

~ Frontline staff should receive appropriate support from more senior staff in the case of patron complaints.

Sexual content and age restrictions

~ Material with sexual content should be stocked, in an appropriate location, and young people should not be prevented from borrowing it.

~ LGBT-related material (whether located in the children's or the adult library) should not carry age restrictions of any form; young people should not be challenged by frontline staff if they wish to borrow this material.

Location and cataloguing

~ LGBT-related fiction should be included in the YA section as well as in adult LGBT collections. YA material should be integrated rather than separated.

~ At least some LGBT-related picture books should be included with the general stock. Consultation with the local community will help to determine local preferences. One solution may be to separate 'issue-based' picture books and integrate those which 'have a good story'.

~ Lists of LGBT-related fiction should be provided online and in hard copy.

~ If possible, LGBT-related fiction should be keyworded using terms such as 'LGBT fiction' so that borrowers can find it easily via the catalogue.

Staff training

~ Staff should be aware of the materials provided and how to find them.

~ LGBT issues should be covered in diversity training, which should be provided to all staff. Employees should be aware of the need to provide this material and to show sensitivity towards people of any age who wish to use it.

Recommendations for CILIP and the library community as a whole

~ CILIP should expand its statement on intellectual freedom to explicitly address age-related issues, as the ALA has done.

~ CILIP could draw up a list of criteria for assessing LGBT-related fiction for under-18s, following further research on the opinions of LGBT young people and parents.

~ Public libraries and library suppliers should join with LGBT groups and media to lobby publishers for more and better LGBT-related fiction for under-18s.

~ Details of successful **and unsuccessful** initiatives should be shared, to develop best practice.

~ LGBT-related fiction which is less 'issue-based' and is currently falling under the radar should be added to recommended lists.

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