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## **Developments in LGBTQ provision in secondary school library services since the abolition of Section 28**

### **Introduction**

2013 marked the 10th anniversary of the abolition of Section 28 in England and Wales. Section 28 was a piece of legislation introduced in 1988 as a result of fears regarding the 'promotion of homosexuality' within schools and other local authority services. Section 28 banned local authorities in the UK from "intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality...publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting homosexuality... [and] promot[ing] the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (H.M. Government, 1988). Whilst the legislation technically only applied to local authorities and not schools, the impact on how schools dealt with issues of sexuality and gender identity during this period was significant. Many teachers believed that Section 28 applied to them and feared over-stepping the legal boundary. Resultantly, engagement with topics related to LGBTQ sexuality and gender identity were actively avoided by schools (Burton, 1995; Ellis and High, 2004; Vincent, 2014<sup>1</sup>).

The aim of this article is to begin to explore progress made in the provision of LGBTQ<sup>ii</sup> services within school libraries in Britain since the repeal of Section 28 in 2003, and offer recommendations for further development. The article reports on two exploratory surveys that were undertaken in 2013. The first sought the views of young LGBTQ people, who had been a pupil of a UK school at some point during the period 2003-2013, regarding their use of the school library to access LGBTQ-related resources. The second sought to gather information on the attitudes and knowledge of school librarians towards provision of LGBTQ services.

The article begins with a review of the limited literature on LGBTQ library provision and the information needs of young LGBTQ people. It is proceeded by an overview of the research methods. The section following presents and discusses the results of the two surveys. The article concludes with a series of recommendations regarding the future development of LGBTQ provision within school libraries.

### **Literature Review**

School library provision of LGBTQ services is a severely neglected area of research. Whilst some research on LGBTQ provision in school libraries has been published in the US and Canada (Jenkins, 1990; Jones, 2011; Schrader and Wells, 2011; Schrader, 2007), in the UK only two Masters level studies address the topic directly. Bridge's (2010) dissertation gathered the views of both librarians and LGBTQ students in Northern Ireland, whilst Wright's (2007) is UK-wide but only focused on the views of school librarians. Both studies found provision to be lacking. Within the wider literature, however, two relevant themes emerge: the vulnerability and information needs of LGBTQ young people and the provision of LGBTQ services in libraries in general.

#### *The vulnerability and information needs of LGBTQ young people*

A recent survey conducted by the LGB charity Stonewall shows that 55% of UK secondary school students have experienced homophobic bullying, and at least 96% of pupils have heard homophobic comments such as "poof", "lezza", or "that's so gay" (Guasp, 2012: 2). Further, deeply embedded heterosexism - "the assumption that everybody is heterosexual" (Chapman and Wright, 2008: 21) -

within schools is widely attested in the literature, with concern over the damaging and exclusionary impact it has on LGBTQ young people being raised (Bridge, 2010; Chapman and Wright, 2008; Epstein, 1994; Forrest, 2000; Mehra and Braquet, 2006).

The harm that negative school climates can have on the mental health of young LGBTQ people has long been recognised. Hostile school environments mean that young LGBTQ people are at a greater risk than their heterosexual peers of alcoholism and substance abuse, depression and suicide (Birkett et al, 2009; Savin-Williams, 1994). Poor school performance is also an issue. In their UK study, for instance, Hunt & Jensen (2007) found that seven out of ten LGB teens who had experienced homophobic bullying felt that the experience affected their school work, while half of those bullied admitted skipping school because of the bullying they experienced (see also Kosciw et al., 2013).

In the literature, it is acknowledged that LGBTQ teens require information on a range of topics including:

- Sexual health (Jones, 2011; Linville, 2004; Norman, 1999);
- 'Coming out' (Alexander and Miselis, 2007; Linville, 2004; Mehra and Braquet, 2006; Norman, 1999);
- Self-acceptance (O'Leary, 2005; Taylor, 2002);
- LGBTQ rights and activism (Linville, 2004);
- LGBTQ history (O'Leary, 2005);
- How to access support networks (Alexander and Miselis, 2007; Taylor, 2002);
- Fictional stories with LGBTQ characters (Clyde and Lobban, 2001; Levithan, 2004; Linville, 2004);
- Real life stories of LGBTQ people (Linville, 2004; Taylor, 2002).

The need to provide specific information to different groups under the LGBTQ umbrella is also recognised. Taylor (2002), for instance, points out that trans individuals have very different information needs to LGB people, since they may require information on issues such as hormone therapy or gender re-assignment surgery.

The internet has been found to be an invaluable information resource for LGBTQ people. Bridge (2010) found that the internet was the first information source used by over 80% of LGBTQ teens when they were seeking information or help related to their sexuality. Taylor's (2002) study has similar findings. The popularity of the internet for LGBTQ users has been linked to the fact that it allows people to privately and anonymously access information (Holt, 2006; Mehra and Braquet, 2011; Taylor, 2002).

The importance of privacy for young LGBTQ people when they are looking for information is noted in the literature. A study by Bridge (2010), for example, reports that 73% of young LGBTQ people questioned felt uncomfortable asking library staff for help locating LGBTQ related information.

### *LGBTQ library provision*

Studies highlight the need for provision of varied collections of material on a diverse range of LGBTQ topics (Linville, 2004; Taylor, 2002). Two key rationales are given for the importance of providing LGBTQ-themed resources and library services.

Firstly, it is argued that the display of LGBTQ materials and positive portrayal of LGBTQ issues can have encouraging impacts on the physical and mental well-being of LGBTQ young people (Black et al., 2012; Birkett et al., 2009; Hunt and Jensen, 2007; Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2012). This is particularly important in relation to provision in secondary schools since most LGBTQ people begin to question their gender identity and/or sexual orientation during adolescence (Bridge, 2010; GIRE, 2008; Stormbreak, 2000). It is also broadly accepted that LGBTQ-related services and resources are needed to support more than just LGBTQ individuals. Strongly advocated is the importance of LGBTQ-related resources for people who regularly work with adolescents (Alexander and Miselis, 2007), for children who have LGBTQ friends and/or family members (Chapman and Wright, 2008; Clyde and Lobban, 2001; Jenkins, 1990; Rothbauer and McKechnie, 1999), and indeed for everybody in order to raise awareness and to widen people's views on LGBTQ identities and issues (Clyde, 2003; Clyde and Lobban, 2001; Schrader and Wells, 2011).

Secondly, failure to provide access to LGBTQ information is argued to be a breach of intellectual freedom and a violation of human rights (Clyde, 2003; Holt, 2006; Maycock, 2011). Furthermore, in some jurisdictions, such as the UK, provision for the LGBTQ community is mandated by legislation (Chapman and Wright, 2008). In the UK, the Equalities Act (2010) directs that UK schools must provide equal support and access for LGBTQ students (H.M. Government, 2010). In line with this legislation, CILIP (2010a; 2010b) advocates the "duty" of libraries to support all people, and provides some guidance for librarians on serving LGBTQ users.

Despite the obvious benefits of high quality LGBTQ provision in libraries, almost unanimously in the literature it is stated that library services for the LGBTQ community remain poor, despite strong advocacy for improved services over the years.

Poor provision has been identified in several areas, including:

- The low quantity and range of LGBTQ-related resources in library collections (Boon and Howard, 2004; Bridge, 2010; Chapman, 2007; Clyde, 2003; Rothbauer and McKechnie, 1999; Wright, 2007);
- Poor provision of materials specifically addressing bisexual and trans issues (Chapman, 2007; Clyde, 2003);
- Poor provision of LGBTQ materials in alternative formats (Chapman, 2007);
- Unhelpful and stigmatising subject headings used in library catalogues (Bates and Rowley, 2011; Jenkins, 1990; Mehra and Braquet, 2006; Wright, 2007);
- Poor quality LGBTQ reference services (Curry, 2005; Mehra and Braquet, 2011; Schrader and Wells, 2011);
- Low levels of promotion of LGBTQ services and resources (Bridge, 2010; Chapman, 2007; Clyde, 2003; Linville, 2004; Mehra and Braquet, 2006; Wright, 2007);
- Restricted access to online LGBTQ-related information (Bridge, 2010; Wright, 2007).

Several explanations for poor library provision are outlined in the literature. These include:

- LGBTQ materials infrequently appearing on the major publication lists (Boon and Howard, 2004; Bridge, 2010; Chapman, 2007; Wright, 2007);
- Library staff being largely unaware of any demand for LGBTQ-related services (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Bridge, 2010; Currant, 2002; Wright, 2007);

- Library staff receiving little, or no, training in how to support LGBTQ users (Bridge, 2010; Carmichael and Shontz, 1996; Carrant, 2002; Wright, 2007).

It is clear from the literature that LGBTQ teens are a vulnerable minority who face challenges exacerbated by negative school climates. However, despite the obvious need for, and benefits of, providing LGBTQ-related information, library provision generally appears to be poor.

## **Methodology**

Given the lack of research on the topic of LGBTQ provision in UK school libraries, this study was exploratory in nature and, consequently, a qualitative, inductive approach was taken, guided by a critical interpretive methodology.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and in order to reach as wide an audience as possible, qualitative questionnaires were used for data collection purposes. Two groups of potential respondents were contacted for the study: library staff currently working in UK secondary schools and LGBTQ individuals who were either still at secondary school in the UK, or who left secondary school in the UK since 2003 when Section 28 was repealed.

LGBTQ participants were contacted via the LGBTQ societies of two local universities and a local LGBTQ youth-support group for under 18s. The three groups allowed the researcher to attend their meetings and/or use their mailing lists to disseminate the questionnaire. School librarians were contacted via the School Librarians' Network (SLN) mailing list, through which the questionnaire was disseminated. Additionally, social media (Facebook and Twitter) were used to distribute and promote both questionnaires.

Twenty-seven responses were collected for the librarian questionnaire and 104 were gathered for the LGBTQ questionnaire. The respondent group was fairly diverse for both samples. The librarian respondents had varied experience ranging from 0-5 years to over 15 years, they worked in a variety of school-types, including comprehensive, academy, and private schools, and in various locations across the UK. One area where a lack of diversity was observed, however, was sexual orientation and gender identity; only one of the twenty-seven respondents identified themselves as a member of the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ respondents went to a variety of school-types across the UK. The majority of respondents described their sexual and gender identity using the terms 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual' or 'trans' (all of which were options provided on the survey). A minority identified using their own preferred terms that were not suggested by the survey: 'queer'<sup>iii</sup>, 'pansexual'<sup>iv</sup>, 'genderqueer'<sup>v</sup>, or 'asexual'<sup>vi</sup>.

A lack of sample diversity was present within the LGBTQ population as almost all respondents had already left school, only one had not. The response rate for school age respondents is unsurprising because to comply with University ethics policies it was necessary to obtain parental consent for participants under 18; a factor which dissuaded many under 18s from participating in the study.

A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken using a four-stage process that involved a preliminary reading of all results, a response-by-response comparison, and a read-through of each survey group's responses collectively. Finally, the themed findings for the librarian and LGBTQ surveys were compared against one another.

## Findings and discussion

### *How and why LGBTQ pupils use school libraries to access LGBTQ-related information*

Overall, the questionnaire revealed that school library use among LGBTQ teens is low; almost 78.5% of respondents reported never using their school library to look for LGBTQ information. Similar studies reveal comparable patterns (Bridge, 2010: 39). Three themes were identified in the questionnaire responses which help explain this finding: LGBTQ invisibility, levels of fear experienced by the young people, and the value of school libraries as a source of support. All reveal greater insight into why and how LGBTQ secondary school pupils use and do not use their school library.

### *Invisibility of LGBTQ issues*

In schools there appears to be general silence around LGBTQ issues:

“In my school there is [...] a complete ignoring of the existence of LGBT people”

“In general, the school offered no advertised LGBT advice”

There is also an apparent lack of LGBTQ-related support in school libraries. Almost unanimously, LGBTQ respondents stated that their library did nothing to support them, or if it did, they did not see it:

“There was no support regarding LGBT issues in the library”

“Nothing, or if they did it wasn't advertised”

Though most respondents said that their library offered no support, eight did detail some provision. However, they referred to that provision as hidden or limited:

“Fiction books containing same-sex relationships or exploring queer issues were stocked, but not usually clearly signposted”

“One or two books about LGBT romances”

From the questionnaire responses it is clear that the invisibility of LGBTQ-related resources influenced pupils' use and perception of their school library in several ways. Firstly, of the respondents who stated that they never used their school library to look for LGBTQ-related information, the most cited reason was the assumption that the library would have nothing on the topic or that internet access would be blocked:

“I didn't expect to find anything”

“Assumptions about internet filtering”

Many of those who gave an explanation for their assumption equated it with a lack of visibility and/or silence on LGBTQ topics:

“I don't think there was any information regarding the LGBT community there; we were never told that there was anything available”

In addition, several respondents said that they would have felt uncomfortable asking their librarian for help locating LGBTQ information because the lack of visible resources led them either to assume that no help would be available, or to feel that LGBTQ topics were not allowed to be discussed:

“I couldn't see any books on it then I didn't think the librarian would be able to show me any as I didn't think we had any at all”

“If material on LGBT topics are not openly apparent then you feel as if it is not a topic to be talked about”

Since these students never looked for resources, it is unclear whether their assumptions were correct (i.e. whether in reality there was a lack of LGBTQ material). However, the invisibility of LGBTQ support was also problematic for the few pupils who *did* look for LGBTQ resources in their school library; over half of those that did look said they were unable to find what they were looking for.

In a similar study, Bridge (2010) also notes a school-wide silence around LGBTQ issues, and LGBTQ materials being limited or restricted within “the majority” of school libraries in Northern Ireland. Further, Bridge (2010) and Wright (2007) both discovered that internet filters frequently block access to LGBTQ websites in UK school libraries. Poor promotion of LGBTQ services is also highlighted as an issue (Bridge, 2010; Chapman, 2013; Clyde, 2003; Linville, 2004; Mehra and Braquet, 2006; Wright, 2007).

Predictably, since invisibility appears to be a key issue, the need to increase the visibility and availability of LGBTQ resources and services was the most frequently made suggestion for improving school library provision by LGBTQ respondents. Fifty-two respondents put forward several proposals. Twenty-nine emphasised the need to provide a range of LGBTQ-themed resources and services:

“Have some LGBT-related resources and books on sexuality!”

“Provided basic LGBT information resources”

Along with stocking more resources, twenty-seven respondents argued that LGBTQ services and resources should be better advertised. Displays were particularly favoured by fourteen participants:

“There would have had to be a lot of awareness raising that the library was a possible source around this sort of info”

“...having a display for LGBT history months [...] may have gone some way to normalising it”

A further suggestion made by some respondents was for library staff to refrain from restricting access to LGBTQ information. Three people mentioned this improvement with regard to internet filters and another mentioned it in relation to age-banding books:

“Not have blocked websites”

“...not labelling books with ANY queer content as '14 and up”

Finally, the need for a school-wide effort to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues and to be open about LGBTQ topics was iterated:

“Made a move as a school to be known to be approachable about lgbt topics”

#### *Fear amongst LGBTQ pupils*

Fear relates to pupils’ fear of discovery, either because of embarrassment or confusion about being LGBTQ, or because of negative responses such as stigmatisation, bullying and rejection. Fear of discovery had a clear impact on pupils’ use of their school library. After the assumption there would be no support, fear was the second most cited reason given by respondents who had never looked in their school library for LGBTQ-related information with over one third of those who answered the question referring to it:

“Too public - wouldn't want to be 'caught' by homophobic students”

“Couldn’t access online information resources through fear of monitoring of online content”

Of the students who did not use their school library, most cited using the internet instead because it offered more privacy:

“Any LGBT-related information I wanted I found the internet to be sufficiently informative. I also found that more discreet”

Interestingly, though many respondents thought the school library was too public, three said that they used their school library to look up LGBTQ-related information because it offered them privacy from their parents:

“...couldn't access information in private at home, because my family only had one computer with access to the internet (dial-up) which was in the office. The risk of getting caught looking up lgbt topics put me off”

Fear of discovery not only affected whether or not LGBTQ pupils used their school library to look for LGBTQ resources, it also had a major impact on the way pupils searched for information. Among the few respondents who did use their school library, browsing was the most popular way of looking, and using the internet and online catalogue were also mentioned. Privacy was the predominant reason given for searching in these ways:

“It was a private way of looking”

“I would just pretend I was looking for something else if anyone asked”

Fear also had a significant impact on pupils’ feelings about making LGBTQ-related enquiries. The vast majority said they would have felt uncomfortable asking their librarian for help locating LGBTQ information; however, the reasons why pupils were afraid varied. For many respondents fear had little to do with the library staff. For some, it was related to their own feelings of anxiety or embarrassment about being LGBTQ:

“I would not of felt comfortable at the time in asking any sort of question on LGBT topics. The discovery and realization of being 'gay' was difficult enough as a problem for myself”



For others, it was related to their fear of other students finding out and bullying them as a consequence:

“Other students might have overheard and it would have fuelled rumours, bullying etc”

However, for many respondents, the potential or actual behaviour of the school librarian was a considerable problem. For example, worry about the reaction of the librarian put eleven respondents off asking for help:

“I didn't know whether my librarian would be really intolerant”

“I am afraid the librarian will laugh at me”

Further, particulars such as the age, gender or general appearance of library staff influenced the way some pupils perceived them:

“No, she was an older religious woman”

“I might have felt comfortable if it was a librarian who looked slightly 'alternative' and who was a woman - probably not an older man”

Along with fear of their reaction, seven respondents also said that they were put off asking their librarian about LGBTQ information because they were afraid the librarian would tell other people:

“No, we had two female librarians and they were often heard gossiping about things they'd come across in the school and I didn't want to be the topic of one of their conversations”

Pupils' personal relationships with library staff also affected how they felt about making LGBTQ-related enquiries. A small number of respondents who had good relationships with their librarian were more likely to feel comfortable asking about LGBTQ-related information, while those that did not have such relationships were less comfortable:

“I would have felt comfortable because she was a nice person who I spoke to often”

“No [...] the librarian there was completely off-putting and unfriendly”

This pattern was not universal however; one pupil, for instance, feared talking to their librarian precisely because they had a good relationship with them:

“We were on good terms, and I didn't want to spoil that, because I didn't have many friends and spent most of my time in the library - I didn't want to turn the library into an uncomfortable space”

As with invisibility, it was also apparent that pupils' fear was often connected to the wider negative treatment of LGBTQ issues in the school generally:

“Being LGBT was very much a taboo at my school [...] The attitude to LGBT pupils was that it was something that must be hidden or brushed under the carpet so to speak”

“When I asked my science teacher what caused homosexuality, he became very awkward/uncomfortable, so I got the impression it wasn't OK in school”

In line with these findings, Linville (2004) and Bridge (2010) note that many LGBTQ young people are worried about accessing LGBTQ resources publicly, and the internet has become a favoured resource for finding LGBTQ information. Further, Bridge (2010) and Curry (2005) observe LGBTQ young people's fear of talking to librarians, and the discouraging reactions of library staff with regard to LGBTQ topics. The general problem of homophobic/transphobic school climates for LGBTQ young people has also been noted (Black et al., 2012; Bridge, 2010). Yet, whilst most LGBTQ pupils do not use their school library to access LGBTQ resources, Holt (2006) argues that some might prefer to, because of the possibility for increased privacy from parents that the library offers.

When respondents were asked about ways their school library could have better supported them, a need for assurance was strongly expressed. Having approachable library staff that are respectful of the need for privacy and who are both positive and knowledgeable about supporting LGBTQ needs was iterated by many:

“Respected confidentiality”

“Librarians who would respond positively to students asking about these topics”

“Staff with knowledge of LGBT issues would be helpful”

The need for libraries to provide ways for LGBTQ pupils to access information independently and discreetly was also suggested. Displays and more online resources were particularly favoured in this regard:

“Displays engaging with history etc months/weeks making it ok to browse information without identifying you as seeking that information maybe”

“More online reading and resources to be looked at via library or from home”

The best location and means of identification of LGBTQ materials, however, was disputed by LGBTQ respondents. Five respondents recommended that libraries integrate LGBTQ resources with other resources, so that pupils would not have to ‘out’ themselves when accessing LGBTQ information:

“Leaflets etc about figuring stuff out/resources, mixed in with other leaflets to help with self-consciousness about looking at them”

On the other hand, four respondents suggested that libraries should have a specific LGBTQ section:

“Had a clear lgbt section so that no one has to out themselves to know where to look”

This debate over separate versus integrated collections is echoed in similar studies (Chapman, 2007; O’Leary, 2005). For example, in Linville’s (2004: 186) study some of the teen respondents said that it would be easier to find LGBTQ books if they were in their own separate section, while others felt that a separate collection would “stick the label on their foreheads, pointing out to other teens that they are gay” if they accessed it.

Along with specific improvements in school library provision, the need for a school-wide approach to encourage acceptance was also widely referred to in respondents’ suggestions for improvement,

with respondents pointing out that any effort the library made would only be helpful if the school atmosphere improved too:

“There would have had to be [...] a general change in attitude across the whole anti-queer/homophobic school culture”

“...would only have been helpful had the whole school worked to create a more LGBT-friendly environment”

### *The value of school libraries for LGBTQ pupils*

Value relates to pupils’ perceptions of the usefulness of school libraries as a source for LGBTQ information and support. A small number of respondents said that they never desired support for LGBTQ related information needs from their school library. For five of these individuals, this was because, at the time, they were not aware of their LGBTQ identity:

“During my years at secondary school I did not consider myself to be bisexual, in fact sexuality was not an issue that played on my mind until I started university”

“Pre-16 I wasn’t really aware of my orientation”

In addition, one respondent said that they have simply never been interested in researching the subject:

“I’ve never felt the need to look up information on LGBT topics”

Three respondents stated that they did not feel school libraries were an appropriate place for LGBTQ provision. Whilst two of these did not explain why, the third saw the school library as an academic facility rather than a resource for personal information:

“As I have mentioned, it is an academic facility to aid study, not a self-help facility for gay people (or indeed any minorities)”

However, it should be noted here that school libraries not only have a responsibility to provide educational materials for pupils; they also have a wider duty to ensure all pupils have access to resources that support their “emotional, cultural, leisure and wider needs” (CILIP, 2011).

Although a small minority of LGBTQ respondents believed they did not need or want school library LGBTQ provision, for a large majority (87% of responses) it was clear that school library provision of LGBTQ services was, or would have been, highly valued. One respondent, for example, commented that:

“Having a school library that acknowledged LGBT would have been so precious to me as a kid”

While another reported the significance of finding an LGBTQ book in their library, describing it as their salvation:

“I have INCREDIBLY clear memories of coming across Paula Boock's novel Dare, Truth or Promise and finding it an absolute lifeline”

It is also apparent that school libraries are an important source of LGBTQ information for teens because of the convenience of their location:

“I was often in the school library anyway, so it was convenient”

“I had easy access to it”

As already noted, school libraries were also used by a few students because they offered some privacy from parental oversight. In addition, it was clear from several questionnaire responses that library support for LGBTQ young people in schools is essential since it is at school that LGBTQ teens most experience bullying, and it is often in the library that they take refuge:

“...experienced a lot of homophobic bullying at school so I tended to look for support on the spur of the moment when I couldn't cope anymore”

“School libraries are a vital place for LGBT representation in school. Because [...] it's where the bullied kids who don't fit in hang out”

In accordance with the views expressed by LGBTQ pupils in this study, Bridge (2010: 67-68) also found that LGBTQ students generally view their school library as a safe space, and concluded that since LGBTQ pupils often hung out in their school library anyway, they are “a readily accessible user group” for which librarians should extend support. Further, and as discussed in the literature review, provision of LGBTQ materials has been shown to have positive impacts on the mental and physical well-being and esteem of LGBTQ teens and it is important to give all people, regardless of their sexuality and/or gender identity, a broad and accepting view of the diverse society in which they live.

#### *The attitudes and knowledge of school librarians towards supporting LGBTQ young people*

Overall, as in other studies (Chapman, 2007; Wright, 2007), the school librarians were generally in favour of LGBTQ provision. However, there were clear variations in their responses, notably in the way they recognised and responded to the different needs of their pupils, and in their demonstrated level of knowledge and competence with regard to LGBTQ provision. Additionally, some librarians referred to broader social issues which affected their attitude towards LGBTQ provision.

#### *Responding to difference*

Seven librarians responded rather neutrally to the idea of supporting LGBTQ students; they emphasised the similarities between all pupils in their responses and cited equality as the motivating factor behind their provision:

“Access to relevant information should be equally available to all”

“I know I should provide suitable resources for all pupils whatever their needs”

One librarian further stated that they were encouraged to support LGBTQ students only as much as they were other students:

“No more than for other students”

Additionally, several respondents seemed rather ambivalent about LGBTQ provision. For example, one used the word “perhaps” when saying that LGBTQ materials should be provided, while another said they were “not sure” whether LGBTQ resources should be a concern of school libraries. Two others also emphasised their impartiality:

“Think they should be provided, don't really have any views positive or negative”

“My view is not relevant in the provision of services and resources for the school community”

Interestingly, a similar tendency of librarians towards neutrality was revealed in Wright’s (2007) interview study, although Wright does not pick this out as a key theme. The tendency of librarians towards neutrality is also reflected in wider professional literature (see Bridge, 2010; Graham, 2003; Jensen, 2006; Lewis, 2008; Smith, 2010), and has been strongly critiqued by Good (2006/7, p. 26) as a “negation of moral responsibility” and the renunciation of the “social responsibilities of a librarian”.

In contrast to this neutral stance, however, eight respondents took a more active and targeted approach, which manifested itself in several ways. First, rather than focusing on the similarities between pupils, these respondents pointed out the need to support diverse pupil needs differently to ensure equality:

“All students should be catered for. Some groups, being more vulnerable to active or careless abuse should have resources more explicitly available where possible”

A desire to specifically meet the needs of the LGBTQ community was also a motivating factor behind these respondents’ views, as was a desire to challenge homophobia and encourage acceptance:

“Students who are LGBT may well have difficulty initially discussing the matter at home [...] I would hope providing the material here helps them when they want to start their discussions at home and give them some confidence in where to start”

“If I provide it and it is read, it helps increase people's understanding, their empathy and that all contributes to decreasing prejudice”

Unlike those who were ambivalent about LGBTQ provision, these school librarians also declared the importance of providing LGBTQ resources:

“It is vital that libraries provide LGBT services and resources similar to that they provide for other minority groups/communities”

Not all of the librarians’ views fitted neatly into either a ‘neutral’ or an ‘active/targeted’ stance; some expressed views which appeared passive in one instance and active in another. One librarian, for example, appeared neutral when they emphasised the need to support all pupils the same:

“School libraries should be providing services and resources to support ALL of the pupils”

However, they later went on to say that they “actively seek out material which will support LGBTQ students” because,

“Most teenage fiction and information books are heteronormative<sup>vii</sup> and LBGT teens do not see themselves reflected much in these or the wider media”

The tendency towards neutrality amongst some librarians can therefore have negative impacts on LGBTQ pupils. As both the review of the literature and the findings of the LGBTQ questionnaire suggest, LGBTQ young people have specific requirements, such as the need for LGBTQ resources to be made extra visible, whilst at the same time providing a discreet means of accessing LGBTQ information, and sensitive and private reference services. In general, it has been found that these needs are not currently being met, and arguably they will continue to be unmet if the needs of LGBTQ teens with regard to school library provision are seen as the same as for all other teenagers. Claims on behalf of library neutrality can, as Good (2006/07) articulates, mean that librarians are not meeting their social responsibility towards LGBTQ pupils as they should. The need for an active and targeted approach is also expressed in the wider literature (see Bridge, 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Ellis & High, 2004; Lewis, 2008). Furthermore, in the UK there is now a legal obligation on librarians to move beyond neutrality. The Equalities Act (2010) states that schools must not discriminate against pupils from minority groups either in the way they provide services and facilities, or by not providing services and facilities for them.

### *Knowledge and competence*

School librarians' knowledge about the provision of LGBTQ services varied between respondents. Seven librarians revealed a fairly good understanding of some of the needs of LGBTQ young people:

“Representation in fiction is crucial, and good quality information must be available to students on as broad a range of LGBT topics as possible”

“The general information needs of LGBT pupils [...] will obviously be similar to the needs of their peers. However, if we are specifically considering information related to their sexuality then their needs would be: Information that is as current as possible, Information aimed at their specific age group, Supportive information, Collaborative information (i.e. online forums, groups etc), Local information (i.e. clubs, support groups in their area)”

Additionally, some of these librarians acknowledged the fact that LGBTQ teens may feel embarrassed, or be sensitive about looking for information:

“Pupils want the information but don't want to be seen borrowing it or would be embarrassed taking sex education information home”

Even though some librarians showed fairly good knowledge of LGBTQ needs, when discussing their knowledge none mentioned the promotion of LGBTQ services and resources that was called for by LGBTQ respondents. Although no question was directly asked about promotion, the fact that advertisement was such a strong demand of LGBTQ pupils, yet was totally overlooked by the librarians, is significant. The observation that librarians overlook the importance of promotion is confirmed in other studies on the topic, as referred to earlier (Bridge, 2010; Chapman 2007; Clyde, 2003; Linville, 2004; Mehra and Braquet, 2006; Wright, 2007).

Despite some good understanding of LGBTQ pupils' needs being demonstrated, not all librarians revealed an understanding of how best to support LGBTQ young people. Five librarians suggested that the needs of LGBTQ pupils were no different from the needs of any other teenager:

“Each young person is an individual labels help no one”

“They are as individual and varied a bunch of people as the rest of their cohort”

Additionally, the types of school library provision described by some librarians demonstrated a mismatch between their perception of LGBTQ needs, and the actual needs of LGBTQ young people. Several librarians equated effective support simply with providing a good enquiry service, for example:

“As a librarian, I am able to meet the information needs of any user by asking questions to ascertain what they are looking for”

“I would like to think I could answer any pupils' query effectively - however, I deal with each pupil's needs specifically and try and find out exactly what they want to know - then I can do further research if necessary to help fulfil their information need”

Three librarians also said that they were discouraged from providing LGBTQ support due to a lack of demand for it:

“If students ever asked for them I would prioritise providing the resources but as there is little demand I direct my funds elsewhere”

Although providing a good enquiry service is positive, the equating of good LGBTQ support with provision of a good enquiry service and the perception that a lack of LGBTQ enquiries signals a lack of demand, suggests these librarians are not taking into account the low likelihood of LGBTQ pupils asking for assistance with LGBTQ information needs as clearly exhibited in the findings of the LGBTQ questionnaire.

Along with this mismatch between some librarians' provision and LGBTQ students' needs and experiences, a further five librarians reported having very little, or no, knowledge of supporting LGBTQ young people. These respondents stated that they knew “very little”, “next to nothing”, “nothing in detail”, or “only what they [pupils] ask for” with regard to LGBTQ provision. Two also acknowledged that it was not something they had previously thought much about:

“It's not really something I've thought about extensively”

“I have not thought much about this issue”

Other research studies into library provision for LGBTQ young people similarly show that librarians generally have poor knowledge of LGBTQ needs. In Wright's (2007) study for example, the majority of librarians said that they knew little about the needs of LGBTQ teens, and Bridge (2010) found a similar pattern in her research (see also Wilson and Birdi, 2008).

Encouragingly, and again, as in studies by Bridge (2010) and Wright (2007), seven librarian respondents did say that they would like to have training on LGBTQ provision. In particular, they were interested in what types of information LGBTQ young people want and where to source LGBTQ materials:

“What specific resources are available and where from”

“I would like to know what information the pupils themselves would most like to have, if there are any gaps in the service I provide to them”

Along with what they know, the school librarians were also asked to detail how they acquired their understanding. From their responses it is clear that some librarians have actively engaged in developing their knowledge through conducting research, collaborating with other youth professionals, and making an effort to work with LGBTQ pupils themselves.

However, whilst five librarians said they had knowledge of supporting the information needs of LGBTQ young people, they appear to have made little conscious effort to acquire or develop their understanding:

“I have a degree in Psychology and a large circle of friends with all sorts of lifestyles”

“From experience of customer service and reference interviews - this is transferable to the information needs of any group”

A similarly ad hoc and serendipitous approach by librarians to understanding the needs of LGBTQ young people was noted by Wright (2007), and, as with this study, she also found that some librarians consciously sought out knowledge about LGBTQ provision.

Despite the variation in librarian knowledge and knowledge-seeking methods, when asked how confident they felt in supporting LGBTQ students, only three librarians said that they did not feel confident. Most librarians (just over half) said they were “unsure” how effective their provision was, and eight said that they felt their knowledge was sufficient.

Interestingly, confidence had little to do with the level of knowledge demonstrated by the librarian. For instance, one librarian who acknowledged they knew nothing about the information needs of LGBTQ teens, and that they had never really thought about the issue before, declared themselves confident in their ability to provide effective support.

Neither Bridge (2010) nor Wright (2007) appears to have directly asked librarians how confident they felt about LGBTQ provision. Despite this lack of direct questioning, levels of librarians’ confidence in LGBTQ provision can be gleaned in Bridge’s (2010) study and they confirm findings here: many librarians felt that “common sense” and general librarian experience was enough to enable them to effectively support the needs of LGBTQ teens. As Bridge (2010: 70) concludes, “looking at the absence of provision in the libraries and reading comments from librarians who feel that they have no LGBTQ students, it is clear that this approach [common sense] is not working”.

To understand better this seeming disparity between confidence and knowledge, the conscious-competence learning model, can be used (UCLAN, n.d.). The model works on the theory that learning is a staged process and that, to become competent, learners must pass through four phases from unconsciously incompetent to unconsciously competent. By analysing the confidence and knowledge of librarians articulated in their questionnaire responses, and undertaking a loose mapping of these to the model (see fig. 1), it is clear that most librarians are either in or between the stages of ‘unconscious-incompetence’ and ‘conscious-incompetence’. A few are between ‘conscious-incompetence’ and ‘conscious-competence’, and only two appear to be firmly in the competence stages of LGBTQ school library provision. We were unable to place nine respondents because, either



the answers they gave were too vague, or they did not answer enough questions to gain a picture of their awareness and/or confidence. Using the conscious-competence model to map knowledge may help librarians to understand their learning, and to see how to act to best develop their awareness.

[Insert Figure 1]

### *Broader social constraints*

Other than their knowledge and desire to support LGBTQ young people, nine librarians referred to a number of additional factors which affected their views about LGBTQ provision: a lack of available LGBTQ resources, a lack of finances, the ethos of the school for which they work, and parental approval. Many of the broader social constraints outlined by librarians in this study have been acknowledged in other research (Bridge, 2010; Chapman 2007a; Wright, 2007). Yet, whilst acknowledged elsewhere, none of the constraints outlined above are an excuse for failing to provide LGBTQ support in school libraries. Suggestions for how librarians might overcome these difficulties are provided in the literature (Bridge, 2010; Chapman 2007a; Wright, 2007), and in the conclusions of this article.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that high quality LGBTQ provision within school libraries has the potential to make a significant and positive impact on the lives of the majority of LGBTQ young people. The current use of school libraries in the UK for accessing LGBTQ related resources is low because many pupils are not aware that their library is a potential resource for LGBTQ support. The problem is compounded by the fact that LGBTQ pupils are frequently embarrassed or afraid to look for LGBTQ resources or to ask for help locating them. Often, transphobic/homophobic school environments exacerbate these issues.

There is a clear need for positive, knowledgeable library staff, and more visible LGBTQ services and resources, so that young people know support is available and that they can access LGBTQ material without having to ask for help. However, there are mixed views amongst LGBTQ individuals about how this material should be identified and located, which suggests that a diversity of approaches within a single library might be the most appropriate method. A school-wide approach to raising awareness about, and to tackling discrimination against, the LGBTQ community is also essential.

Despite the expressed needs of the LGBTQ community regarding school library provision, school librarians' knowledge of the information needs of LGBTQ young people varies. Some librarians demonstrated some level of understanding and empathy towards LGBTQ students' needs, and a number of librarians appear to make a concerted effort to actively develop their knowledge. However, other librarians show a fundamental misunderstanding of LGBTQ pupils' needs and appear to be making no effort to improve their knowledge.

A mismatch between some school librarians' confidence in their ability to support LGBTQ young people, and their actual understanding of LGBTQ teens' needs was also observed. The conscious-competence model shows that most librarians are still in the incompetence stages of LGBTQ provision. The model explains the mismatch between librarian confidence and knowledge and can provide a framework for future learning.

In the ten years since the abolition of Section 28, a law which effectively limited school librarians' engagement with LGBTQ provision, it is clear that only small, localised improvements have been made to the services offered to young LGBTQ people by their school libraries in the UK. A number of recommendations are therefore made:

- Providing more LGBTQ-related resources: LGBTQ young people require quality resources in print, online and in a variety of alternative formats wherever possible. These resources should cover a range of topics including positive representations in fiction, autobiographical works, specific advice on issues such as dealing with homophobia/transphobia and 'coming out', sexual health information, and information about how to meet other LGBTQ people including information on local support groups. It is also critical that resources are provided pertaining specifically to different identities within the LGBTQ community, in particular bisexual, trans, asexual and intersex identities are often overlooked.

Although LGBTQ-related resources often do not appear on major publishers' lists, they can be sourced from specialist sources such as Gays the Word bookshop. Further, Chapman (2012a; 2012b) has published a list of LGBTQ teen fiction available in the UK. Limited budgets for school librarians are appreciated; however these should not prevent the sourcing of LGBTQ-related information. Online access to free LGBTQ websites and cultural resources can be provided, and local LGBTQ charities can be approached for supplies of posters, flyers and leaflets about their services.

- Promoting LGBTQ-related services and resources: Displays of resources, booklists and lists of websites can all be used to promote LGBTQ materials and open up discussion around the topics of sexuality and gender identity. Creating displays celebrating famous LGBTQ people and holding activities or events to celebrate diversity would also help create a LGBTQ positive environment for young people. These activities could be tied to events such as LGBT History Month or International Day Against Homophobia/Transphobia (IDAHT) for which a range of free resources could be sourced.
- Ensuring LGBTQ resources are accessible: Ensuring accessibility also means ensuring that internet filters do not block LGBTQ-related websites, that library catalogues identify LGBTQ-related materials with user-friendly terminology, and that LGBTQ materials are not age-banded. Further, it means ensuring that pupils can access LGBTQ-themed resources independently and discreetly. A range of means for accessing materials should be provided to suit LGBTQ young people's diverse needs. These could include displays, reading lists, online resources, and an honour-loan system, all of which can provide discreet access.
- Initiating or becoming involved in school-wide efforts to raise awareness of LGBTQ issues and to combat prejudice: Ofsted (2012a; 2012b) has outlined good examples of how homophobia/transphobia can be tackled using a school-wide approach. A number of LGBTQ charities also provide resources and assistance. For example the Lesbian and Gay Foundation provide a Safer Schools Pack (<http://www.lgf.org.uk/Take-Action/Action-Centre/make-schools-safer/>), and Stonewall and Schools Out offer a wide range of resources ([http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at\\_school](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at_school) and <http://www.schools-out.org.uk/>). GIRES and Gendered Intelligence also offer information and training for educators, specifically related to trans issues (see <http://www.gires.org.uk/schools.php> and

<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/professionals/schools-and-youth-services>). Awareness must also be raised among managers that, whatever the ethos of the school, it is a legal obligation to support the needs of all pupils and that it is a school librarian's professional duty to provide materials not only for pupils' academic leaning but also for their emotional development and leisure needs (CILIP, 2011). Creating collection development policies and complaints procedures which specifically address LGBTQ provision will also help assuage fear of complaints from parents and other members of the community, and should provide support if challenges are met.

- Taking active steps to understand the needs of LGBTQ pupils: It is vital librarians develop knowledge of the needs of their LGBTQ pupils, not only with regard to the types of information pupils want, but also the issues they face as they are exploring and coming to terms with their LGBTQ identity. Since existing opportunities for training are limited, librarians must raise the need for training with their employers and professional bodies. They must also take responsibility for their own learning; actively researching the topic and joining professional groups dedicated to inclusion and diversity are two ways knowledge can be gained.
- Championing equality across the librarianship profession: Along with what school librarians can do specifically, it is clear that LGBTQ-related library provision is generally poor across all library sectors. Consequently, there is a pressing need for the library and information profession as a whole to take more active steps to implement initiatives for, and to stringently defend, equality. The neutral stance of librarians must be challenged and CILIP's policies related to LGBTQ provision need to be strengthened. The CILIP School Libraries Group, The School Libraries Association and the CILIP Youth Libraries Group could also do more to promote equality and encourage school librarians, as well as librarians in other sectors, to be more proactive in their provision for LGBTQ teenagers. This could include developing visible policies and offering training specifically related to LGBTQ provision, as well as addressing LGBTQ needs in their publications.
- Finally, since the topic of LGBTQ provision is so little explored, there is also an urgent need for more research on the subject. Specific areas for research development include:
  - Undertaking in depth research into the views of LGBTQ pupils who are still at school;
  - Large-scale research both into librarian attitudes, knowledge and provision, and into the needs and experiences of LGBTQ pupils;
  - Exploration of the relationship between the social inclusion efforts of school libraries and the ethos/general climate of the wider school environment;
  - Exploration of the needs of young people identifying separately as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Questioning, Asexual and Intersex.

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<sup>i</sup> See Vincent (2014) for an in-depth overview of the political context of Section 28.

<sup>ii</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, Questioning (There are many similar acronyms used to identify the LGBTQ community. In the UK, as demonstrated in the quotes of respondents, LGBT is the most commonly used. However, the authors decided to use the LGBTQ acronym as it incorporates individuals who are in the process of questioning their sexual or gender orientation, and is therefore more inclusive when considering the needs of young people. Trans is an umbrella term that refers to individuals whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender identity is independent of sexual orientation.

<sup>iii</sup> 'Queer' is an umbrella term, referring to the LGBTQ community at large. The term is accepted by some people within the community, but not by all.

<sup>iv</sup> 'Pansexual' or 'Pan' refers to people who are attracted to people of any sex or gender identity (not just to those that fit into the traditional gender binary of 'male' or 'female').

<sup>v</sup> 'Genderqueer' refers to people who identify in a way which fits neither into a solely 'male' or solely 'female' gender identity. Genderqueer people may, for instance, be gender-fluid (where they move between genders), they may identify as having no gender at all, or they may not name their gender).

<sup>vi</sup> 'Asexual' refers to someone who does not feel any sexual desire. Asexual people are not sexually attracted to any group of people.

<sup>vii</sup> 'Heteronormativity' refers to the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.