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PUBLIC LIBRARIES' COMMITMENT TO GAY YOUTH

by
Kimberle Madden

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
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Approved by _____
Advisor

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ABSTRACT

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PUBLIC LIBRARIES' COMMITMENT TO GAY YOUTH
2007/2008
Dr. Marilyn Shontz
Master of Arts in School and Public Librarianship

The purpose of this study was to determine if selected New Jersey public libraries in Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties were committed to the GLBTQ youth in their communities by providing free and equal access to lesbigay literature and/or offering programs and outreach to this group of young adults. Most previous research looked at school libraries in the United States and libraries in Canada. This study investigated selected public libraries in southern New Jersey to determine if they were striving towards that commitment.

Using the State of New Jersey's District Factor Group (DFG) students were selected based on similar socioeconomic status. A survey was administered to students who were members of their high school's Gay Straight Alliance club. A survey was also administered to public librarians who were responsible for the collection development and youth services for teens in their public libraries. Results showed a general fear towards the GLBTQ teen community and a need for improvement towards commitment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Research Questions for Librarians	4
Research Questions for Teens	4
Definitions of Terms	5
Assumptions and Limitations	7
References	8
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	9
History	9
Early Canadian Studies, 1999-2000	10
Efforts in the United States	13
Public Legislation in the United States	15
Professionals Speak Out	17
Summary	21
References	23
III. METHODOLOGY	25
Research Method	25
Research Questions for Librarians	26
Research Questions for Teens	27
Selection of Sample	27

Instrument Design	28
Method of Data Collection	28
Reliability and Validity	29
References	30
IV. ANALYSIS OF DATA	31
Survey Procedure and Response Rate	31
Advisor Contacts	32
Librarian Responses	32
Student Responses	34
V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	35
Summary	35
Conclusions	35
Recommendations	36
REFERENCES	38
APPENDIX A Librarian Request Form	40
APPENDIX B Principal Request Form	42
APPENDIX C Parent Permission Form	44
APPENDIX D Questionnaire for Teens	46
APPENDIX E Questionnaire for Librarians	48

CHAPTER I
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC

“I would also have in every library a friend of the young, whom they can consult freely when in want of assistance, and who, in addition to the power of gaining their confidence, has knowledge and tact enough to render them real aid in making selections” (Green, 1879, p. 352). Samuel S. Green, a founding figure in America’s public library movement, spoke those words in 1879 and they still hold true today as one of the tenets of librarianship.

Over the years the definition of “the young” has expanded in libraries to define children from birth to 12, and “young adults” ages 12 to 18. Young adult service has grown from its beginnings at the Bingham Library for Youth in Salisbury, Connecticut in 1803. This was the first library to offer literature to anyone under 18. In 1879 the American Library Association Annual Conference emphasized fiction and reading for the young. However, it would be fifty years before the formation of Young Peoples Reading Roundtable in 1930 as part of the American Library Association Children’s Library Association, referring to “young people” later as “young adult.”

Finally in 1957, young adult services blossomed with the formation of Young Adult Services Division established as a separate division within the American Library Association, splitting from Children’s Library Association with the name changing to YALSA Young Adult Library Services Association in 1992.

Young adults are a diverse group of people and it is important that the public library reflects that diversity. As more and more young people are becoming comfortable with their various sexual identities, they are beginning to have expectations that their communities will support them in their decision making process. One part of that community is the public library. One group of the young adult library community that expects to have their needs more readily addressed is the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning teens, also referred to as GLBTQ.

If libraries want their GLBTQ young adult readership to continue to patronize them into adulthood, it is imperative that librarians embrace them in their formative years.

Since the 1970s, lesbigay themed books have crept slowly onto the shelves of public libraries across the United States. In the last decade that has increased tremendously.

“Right now we are at the pivotal point for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender literature for teens.... publishers are putting them into print in unprecedented numbers” (Levithan, 2004, p. 44). However, research shows the commitment of librarians to offer access to lesbigay literature still lags behind demand. Most research has only been conducted with school libraries in the United States or libraries in Canada; with very little looking at public libraries in the United States.

It is important to look at some of the ways libraries are striving or not striving towards that commitment. Are they offering lesbigay themed lists on their Web sites? Do they display books openly? How much of their budget is geared towards purchasing lesbigay literature? Do they label the books? Are there book clubs, programs or outreach to local GSA groups?

By not offering much research on the commitment of librarians to the GLBTQ teens, how are libraries to know if their collections are meeting the demands of their patrons? To be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning is not “an issue, it is an identity” (Levithan, 2004, p. 44). The American Library Association has a position statement on Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sexual Orientation which states “library services, materials, and programs representing diverse points of view on sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation should be considered for purchase and inclusion in library collections and programs.” (American Library Association, 2004, p. 2). It is the duty of librarians to uphold that position and advocate for youth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if selected New Jersey public libraries in Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties were committed to the GLBTQ youth in their communities by providing free and equal access to lesbigay literature and/or offering programs and outreach to this group of young adults. Most previous research looked at school libraries in the United States and libraries in Canada. This study investigated libraries in southern New Jersey to determine if they were striving towards that commitment.

Research Questions for Librarians

How does your library take into consideration the GLBTQ youth in your community when making purchases or setting up programs?

What professional staff is hired specifically to work with young adults? If none, who is responsible for those patrons?

What evidence is there that the GLBTQ youth in your community utilize the collection and/or services available?

What types of resources do you use to ascertain the utilization of the collections and/or services available?

Do you feel the library is committed to the GLBTQ teens in your community in meeting their needs of equal access to lesbian literature and programs?

What are some of the ways you would like to see your library improve in meeting those needs?

Do you feel the library makes an acceptable attempt of outreach to the GLBTQ teens in your community? If so, what are some of the ways your library reaches this group? If not, what would you like to see change?

Research Questions for Teens

As a teen do you use your public library for recreational or educational purposes?

If not at all, would you consider using the public library if it offered resources to the GLBTQ youth?

Do you feel welcomed in your local library?

Do you feel comfortable checking out books with lesbigay themed material? Why or why not?

Do you know how to use the online catalog system to search for books?

Would you feel comfortable approaching a staff member with questions about an author or book with a lesbigay theme?

Definitions of Terms

GLBTQ: this acronym refers to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and/or questioning youth for this paper.

GLBTRT: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table, founded in 1970 as the task force on gay liberation of the American Library Association, GLBTRT is a permanent round table that serves as an advocate for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals employed in libraries and for the inclusion of materials on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues in library collections.

GLSEN: Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, formed in 1995 by Kevin Jennings as a national organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students.

GSA: Gay Straight Alliance is an organization on high school campuses.

Lesbigay: in this paper lesbigay refers to literature with gay, lesbian and/or bisexual themes.

Librarian: a professional trained person responsible for the care of a public library and its contents, including the selection, processing, and organization of materials and the delivery of information, instruction, and loan services to meet the needs of its users.

Listserv: mailing list management software that runs on a variety of platforms, designed to scan incoming email messages for the words “subscribe,” “unsubscribe,” and other housekeeping commands and update the subscriber list automatically.

Outreach: library programs and services designed to meet the information needs of users who are underserved...or marginalized in some other way.

Patron: any person who uses the resources and services of a library, not necessarily a registered borrower.

Public library: a publicly funded library that provides library services to all the people in a community or city.

Queer: any individual who does not see themselves as straight or heterosexual, this word will be used interchangeably with GLBTQ to also mean gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and/or questioning.

Student:

Teen: please see entry for YA

VOYA: *Voice of Youth Advocates*, a library magazine serving those who serve young adults.

YA: an abbreviation of young adult, an adolescent aged twelve to eighteen, usually in the ninth to twelfth grade. Used interchangeably with young adult and teen.

YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association that promotes library services for young adults, ages twelve to eighteen.

Young adult: please see entry for YA

Young adult literature: literature that appeals primarily to individuals between childhood and adulthood who are approximately between thirteen and eighteen years of age.

Assumptions and Limitations

This research was limited to nine public libraries and the high schools their patrons attended. The survey to young adults only applied to students who were involved with their local Gay Straight Alliance. The survey to librarians was intended to be answered by a YA staff member however it was addressed to a librarian within the Children's Department of the library. It was assumed the views and the attitudes of the librarian and students were as honest and open to the best of their ability. The library collections varied widely from 22,000 items to 80,000 so the amount of budget addressed just to GLBTQ themed literature and/or programs was difficult to determine. All students surveyed were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds so there was an assumption of similar educational and recreational experiences when answering the survey.

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CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The public library stands as one of the few respites of free and equal access to information in today's society. As an institution it strives to provide materials to all segments of the population including the GLBTQ youth. As stated in the American Library Association (A.L.A.) Library Bill of Rights the Association opposes libraries restricting access to library materials and services for minors (Rubin, 2004).

The A.L.A. statement on access to library resources and services regardless of gender or sexual orientation explicitly rejects the nonselection of materials because of the sexual orientation of the creator (Rubin, 2004). But just how well are libraries meeting this goal of access to library resources and services goal when it comes to the GLBTQ teens in their communities?

History

In 1970 the Social Responsibility Round Table founded the first gay professional organization with the formation of the Task Force on Gay Liberation. The Task Force created an antidiscrimination policy that same year (Bryant, 1995). This policy has been around since 1970 yet no surveys were created or research conducted to see just how well libraries were keeping up with mainstream society moving forward on its views of homosexuality until the 1990s.

In 1995 *Library Journal* conducted a first of its kind national poll of 250 public and college libraries centering on collection and public service efforts of gay and lesbian materials (Bryant, 1995). Surprising was the emotional responses the survey elicited, many of the librarians questioned the appropriateness of *Library Journal* conducting the poll and others were very concerned about negative publicity (Bryant, 1995). Overall the findings were disappointing; fifty percent had no more than 30 titles, this number referring to all titles in the libraries' collections.

This was at a time when publishers were putting out close to 1,000 lesbigay themed titles annually (Bryant, 1995).

A firm belief in outreach to all community members whether they are Korean, Christian, homeschooler, or homosexual, made an impact on the number of titles available to the lesbigay community. Libraries having a strong belief in access to library resources regardless of gender or sexual orientation had the highest number of titles, regardless of the size of the library (Bryant, 1995).

Early Canadian Studies, 1999-2000

It would be four years and in a different country before public libraries would look at their relationship with young adult GLBTQ teens and accessibility to lesbigay literature. In 1999 a Canadian survey was conducted of 40 large and medium sized public libraries to determine specifically if young adults could gain access through public libraries to titles with homosexual content (McKechnie & Rothbauer, 1999).

“Overall two thirds of the libraries held fewer than half of the sample titles” (McKechnie & Rothbauer, 1999, p. 34). Also of interest was the fact that the libraries

seemed to have holdings of books that portrayed negative stereotypes rather than newer published books with more positive portrayals.

However, this survey did not interview librarians or the teens that patronized the library. Data were collected by searching the public libraries catalogs. Whether teens identifying themselves as GLBTQ, were checking out the books was unknown. Also how often the books were circulated was also not researched. Whether the librarians placed the books openly or offered some way of promoting the books was not investigated. At this point in time it was indicated that public libraries in Canada offered somewhat limited materials on lesbigay literature. If GLBTQ teens were accessing the materials it was not researched. “To date the information-seeking behavior of adolescent gays and lesbians has not been systematically investigated” (McKenchnie & Rothbauer, 2000, p. 5).

There have been previous investigations of how the public library played a role in the information-seeking behavior of adult lesbians and gays. Results have indicated that even though libraries might be the first place a gay or lesbian young adult reaches out to, information provided by the libraries tended to be “irrelevant, outdated or inappropriate” (McKenchnie & Rothbauer, 2000, p. 5).

When looking at a library’s holdings it is important to remember that the librarian relies heavily on reviews of materials for collection development. A number of times it is another librarian who wrote the review. A year after the study was done on public libraries in Canada and their holdings of lesbigay literature, those same authors used content analysis of five prominent reviewing journals to determine how young adult lesbigay literature was treated (McKenchnie & Rothbauer, 2000).

A sample of 32 books, half with gay content and half with lesbian content, were selected from Christine Jenkins', "From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1967-1997".

The five reviewing journals were *Booklist*, *Horn Book Magazine*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *School Library Journal* and (VOYA) *Voice of Youth Advocates*. The findings were positive. The journals seemed to be providing reasonable coverage, almost 75 percent, of gay and lesbian fiction for young adults was reviewed. *School Library Journal* was the only one, at 53.1 percent, to review more lesbian than gay themed books (McKenchnie & Rothbauer, 2000).

The reviews were also positive, almost 85 percent, when it came to favorable reviews. It is important to mention the objectivity of the reviews. It appears that "actual critical analysis...was linked to literary elements such as character, style and plot rather than to the homosexual content of the novel" (McKenchnie & Rothbauer, 2000, p.7).

It is also interesting to note that it was difficult to decide which journal provided the best reviewing services. *VOYA* had the most detailed reviews on literary quality and possible popularity with the intended audience. "*School Library Journal* had the highest percentage of reviews that clearly identified the homosexual content" (McKenchnie & Rothbauer, 2000, p. 8). This study showed that librarians did have access to tools, which could provide them with the opportunity to meet the lesbigay literature demands of the gay youth in their communities.

Efforts in the United States

Not until 2004 did a library system in the United States look at its holdings of young adult lesbian literature. In Indiana, 42 county public library online catalogs were compared with 24 titles of lesbian literature compiled from the children's and young adult novels listed in F. A. Days' "Lesbian and Gay Voices" annotated bibliography (Cook, 2004).

The results were disappointing; half of the systems held fewer than five of the 24 titles and 15 of the selected novels were placed in the adult section of at least one of the sample public libraries. Also disconcerting was the fact that incomplete cataloging added to the library's barrier of access, five of the selected titles did not have any lesbian language as a subject heading (Cook, 2004).

This same year somebody finally asked GLBTQ teens if they felt their libraries were meeting the commitment to access to lesbian literature and materials. Darla Linville, Acting Assistant Coordinator of Young Adult Services at the New York Public Library, targeted self-identified GLBTQ teens at youth centers, GSAs in the New York City area and a youth organized conference held at a local GLBTQ community center. She sent out an online and paper survey asking them about their perceptions of their local library and its commitment or lack of commitment to their needs (Linville, 2004).

The findings were interesting, 82 percent of those that responded were public library users and 45 percent felt comfortable asking the librarian questions (Linville, 2004). Unfortunately, the author never identified the total number of respondents in the survey.

Overwhelmingly, when asked what information they were looking for, teens responded that they sought stories about real gay people, with “coming out stories” and “stories of fictional characters” coming in second and fourth, respectively (Linville, 2004, p. 184).

“However, one third of the teens responding to the online survey claimed that they could not find what they want in the library, and almost a quarter of all the respondents feel that people judge them in the library” (Linville, 2004, p 184). It seems public libraries still have a way to go in meeting the needs of its GLBTQ young adults.

A year later Canada would again be in the forefront on GLBTQ youth and public libraries. In 2005, a study was conducted in the Vancouver area investigating the level of reference service provided to GLBTQ youth. The interesting point in the study was the fact that a graduate student portrayed herself as a high school student seeking information on how to go about starting a GSA in her local high school. There were twenty libraries selected and the student was “to approach a library staff member at the desk that served young adults” (Curry, 2005, p. 68). Usually this was the reference desk but at times the children’s desk.

About 50 percent of the libraries received very positive comment from the student in how they responded to her and her questions. Even though it was 80 percent of librarians that conducted a reference interview that helped the student find a fiction book for the GSA meeting, they were perceived as adequate rather than exemplary (Curry, 2004). From this study, it appears that there were improvements made in the way Canada’s public libraries offer access to lesbigay literature and materials to the GLBTQ youth,

since the 1999 McKechnie and Rothbauer study of Canadian public library holdings of lesbian literature.

In comparison to the study by Linville in 2004 of queer youth in the New York City area, in 2006, Jeff Whittingham, Assistant Professor of Education and Instructional Technology and Wendy Rickman, Director of Technology, both of the University of Central Arkansas, conducted research of lesbian-themed books in public, school and academic Arkansas libraries. They sent out a survey to 499 school library media specialists, of which only 37 responded, and the researchers checked the online catalogs of public and academic libraries for 21 of the most popular lesbian-themed titles published between 1999 and 2005 (Whelan, 2007). Unfortunately, they never specified how many public and academic libraries they researched but it is assumed numerous since so many surveys were sent out to the school librarians.

Their findings were very disappointing. Only “about 21 percent of public libraries, nearly five percent of university libraries, and a shocking less than one percent of school libraries” offered books containing lesbian themes (Whelan, 2007, p. 18). It was surmised by these researchers that a fear of book challenges, negative comments from colleagues and possible loss of employment might have contributed to the avoidance of libraries from considering purchasing these titles perceived as controversial (Whelan, 2007).

Public Legislation in the United States

Unfortunately as public libraries in areas such as New York City were able to critique their commitment or lack of, to the GLBTQ teens in their communities, places such as

Oklahoma were moving backwards. On March 15 the Oklahoma House passed by a 60-33 vote a bill that prohibited local funding authorities and library boards from funding their public libraries unless the libraries “place all children and young adult materials that contain homosexual or sexually explicit subject matter in a special area and limit distribution...to adults only” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 13).

The bill was sponsored by Representative Sally Kern, who felt libraries were “usurping the role of parents” and “the American Library Association is out sexualizing our children” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 13). The governor of Oklahoma expressed concern the government might be intruding on the rights of parents by passing the bill. The Oklahoma Library Association was strongly opposed; President Jeanie Johnson stated the bill “flies in the face of the idea of the public library” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 13).

The Oklahoma City Commissioners identified 12 social issues that could be “deemed sufficiently sensitive” when deciding which youth book warranted removal to a special section (Goldberg, 2006, p. 13). These categories included “alcoholism, child abuse, child abuse prevention, child sexual abuse, child sexual abuse prevention, domestic/family violence, drug abuse, extramarital sex, homosexuality, medication abuse, premarital sex, and substance abuse” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 13).

A very disconcerting observation was the fact that of the 12 categories, nine had language that described violence. It is very disturbing to see the sexual identity of a person be included in a list that refers to “abuse” seven times.

Hopefully as more and more public libraries consider reviewing their commitment to access to lesbian literature and materials to the GLBTQ youth in their communities, they

can put in place safeguards that can respond to attacks on children's and young adult rights to access of information.

Professionals Speak Out

As professionals in the field of librarianship were beginning to critique public library holdings of lesbian and gay literature and materials, others in the field were beginning to speak out in support of queer youth's demands for better access. Sandra Hughes-Hassell an Assistant Professor in the College of Information and Technology at Drexel University and Alissa Hinckley a Young Adult and Children's Librarian at the Free Public Library of Philadelphia, wrote about the need to offer queer youth Web sites designed specifically for them and to have these sites available on library Web pages. Teens could access the sites from the privacy and comfort of their own homes, at their own leisure. These authors stated research that suggested "increased access to information, and the wider availability of support groups, reduce the risks LGBT youth face and empower them to live more fully integrated lives" (Hughes-Hassell & Hinckley, 2001, p. 39).

The authors listed eight resources that were specifically created for youth, contained accurate and reliable information on queer issues, enabled queer youth to interact with each other in a safe environment, offered support groups and allowed the user anonymity. The authors stressed the importance of Internet resources to a digital age youth that might be more likely to access queer issues via a computer rather than asking a librarian or using an online catalog (Hughes-Hassell & Hinckley, 2001).

In an article in *School Library Journal* (2004) author David Levithan, who has written numerous lesbian and gay themed books, talked about the hundreds of emails he and other

authors of lesbigay themed books receive each year via their Web sites (Levithan, 2004). People ages 13 to 70, queer and straight, expressing their thoughts, reaching out, feeling a sense of belonging because of reading one of their books and being able to access one of their Web sites.

Levithan makes a call to all librarians about their “obligation” to make the collection “as welcoming and as accurate as possible” (Levithan, 2004, p. 44). He sees librarians as gatekeepers, helping patrons through the gate of equal access to information. He strongly advocates for courage to openly display lesbigay materials, allow teen patrons to check out books, with magnetic strips on the honor system and to offer safe zones where young adults can peruse literature unobtrusively (Levithan, 2004).

Teens want to read books that they can relate to in their personal lives. The collection or as Levithan calls it the “representation” of the community must reflect that of all members in a library’s community.

Another reason it is so imperative for public libraries to commit to the GLBTQ teens in their communities is that school libraries lag behind public libraries in the United States in offering access to lesbigay literature and materials (Clyde & Lobban, 2005). Even though “the IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto states that school library services must be provided equally to all members of the school community, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, professional or social status,” GLBTQ teens tend to be forgotten or ignored (Clyde & Lobban, 2005 p. 5).

Research from the organization Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network revealed that four out of five GLBTQ “students say they’ve been physically, verbally, or sexually harassed in school because of their sexual orientation” (Stainburn, 2005, p. 36).

“According to the National Mental Health Association, 28 percent of gay students, almost three times the national average, end up dropping out of school” (Stainburn, 2005, p. 38). GLBTQ students may be hesitant to openly come out and would not consider utilizing their school library for lesbigay literature or materials.

Even if they did, according to the biannual study, National School Climate Survey, by GLSEN in 2003 only 50 percent of students said they had access to lesbigay Web sites in the school libraries (Whelan, 2006). Time and time again queer students speak of books helping them through the phases of coming out. If school and public libraries are not keeping up with demands for these teens, where might they go to access information, especially if they do not have their own computers at home?

School librarians are pressured to keep away from controversy, no school wants to be perceived negatively in the news when that perception can affect funding from taxpayers and the government. With the political shift to the right starting in the 1980s, school librarians have been more apt to self-censor (Whelan, 2006).

The public library has more freedom with collection development without the constraints of school administrators. When GLBTQ students who report frequent harassment, have a grade point average that is 10 percent lower than students who report less, again these students are less likely to find refuge in their school libraries for fear of retribution by other students and/or faculty (Whelan, 2006). It is important that the public library make every effort to offer accessible lesbigay literature and materials.

Some suggestions were found for public libraries to continue their commitment: openly display lesbigay literature during LGBT History Month, subscribe to the *Advocate*, a national gay and lesbian news magazine, offer a young adult lesbigay

bibliography in the library and on the Web site, offer book talks, make sure the Internet software does not filter out Web sites for GLBTQ teens, include more historical gay figures in the collection, and reach out to local GLBTQ youth groups, such as a GSAs, to create and/or cosponsor programs for queer teens (Jennings, 2006 ;Whelan, 2006; Linville, 2004; Farrelly, 2006).

Public libraries are at a pivotal moment in time where queer youth are feeling more accepted by society as a whole than any other time in recent history. Authors and publishers are putting out more lesbian literature for young adults than ever before. It is up to public librarians to have the commitment to meet the courage it takes for a queer youth to self identify and for authors to put books out there of lesbian literature with their names on it.

In 2003, *Publishers Weekly* spoke with authors and editors that dealt with lesbian themed books, to find out some of the changes that were taking place in that genre. One positive change was the fact that queer characters are falling in love and having fun along the way (Pavao, 2003). Lesbian literature is widening its spectrum of experiences of queer characters, and many of those experiences are much more positive.

Another important change this researcher noted was that more and more queer characters are being written into novels that are not lesbian themed. It doesn't have to be lesbian themed to have a queer character anymore. "Kids have gay friends and relatives...it's good that their worlds are reflected in their literature," says David Gale, editorial director at Simon & Schuster Children's Books" (Pavao, 2003, p. 25).

But the authors were aware that the genre continues to face opposition. "Between 1990 and 2000 the American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom reported

515 challenges” to lesbigay literature that included children’s, YA and adult books (Pavao, 2003, p. 24).

Author James Howe pointed out the lack of lesbigay themed books written for a middle school audience. This age group is still very impressionable and developing their personal views of the world around them (Pavao, 2003). “Howe says, whether or not a child is gay, all children live in a world among gay people and they need to overcome their discomfort and the bigotry they’ve been taught in order to be accepting of themselves and others” (Pavao, 2003, p. 25).

Moving forward authors are exploring various sexual identities and not writing just about gay, lesbian or bisexual characters, but transgendered as well. Julie Anne Peters writes about a transgendered teen soon to transition in her book ‘*Luna*’ (Pavao, 2003).

Summary

It is important that lesbigay literature more and more reflects the lives of queer teens who are coming out and living happy lives within their communities.

In recent years there has been a concerted effort by professionals in the library community to bring to the forefront a dialogue about public libraries and the lack of access to lesbigay literature to queer teens. Research shows that the available number of titles and information is lagging behind the demand of queer teens. Ample suggestions have been made to rectify this problem but how well has the call been heard? How many information avenues have been utilized, by advocates of better collection development of lesbigay materials, to get the word out?

As stated in Linville's research (2004), some GLBTQ youth have articulated a need for better services and availability of lesbian literature and materials. It is a professional obligation for librarians to uphold the Library Bill of Rights and meet those needs with the commitment that those rights intended. More GLBTQ youth and librarians need to be questioned so a better understanding of the needs can be met with better collection development.

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CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine if selected public libraries in Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties were committed to the GLBTQ youth in their communities by providing free and equal access to lesbigay literature and/or offering programs and outreach to this group of young adults. Most previous research looked at school libraries in the United States and libraries in Canada. The objective of this study was to research public libraries in southern New Jersey to determine if they were striving towards that commitment.

Research Method

The research method used for this thesis was applied. The instrument design was a survey using two researcher developed questionnaires.

Review of the literature showed a lack of information regarding the attitudes of GLBTQ youth towards the access of lesbigay literature in public libraries. Also studies indicated that collections in public libraries tended to be lacking when it came to lesbigay literature at a time when the GLBTQ youth in the United States continued to increase the number of Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) in high schools across the country and more and more young people were self-identifying as other than heterosexual at an earlier age.

As one of the few public institutions offering equal access to information, public libraries have a responsibility to support queer youth along the path to adulthood in their information and learning needs.

Research Questions for Librarians

How does your library take into consideration the GLBTQ youth in your community when making purchases or setting up programs?

What professional staff is hired specifically to work with young adults? If none, who is responsible for those patrons?

What evidence is there that the GLBTQ youth in your community utilize the collection and/or services available?

What types of resources do you use to ascertain the utilization of the collections and/or services available?

Do you feel the library is committed to the GLBTQ teens in your community in meeting their needs of equal access to lesbian literature and programs?

What are some of the ways you would like to see your library improve in meeting those needs?

Do you feel the library makes an acceptable attempt of outreach to the GLBTQ teens in your community? If so, what are some of the ways your library outreaches to this group? If not, what would you like to see change?

Research Questions for Teens

As a teen do you use your public library for recreational or educational purposes?

If not at all, would you consider using the public library if it offered resources to the GLBTQ youth?

Do you feel welcomed in your local library?

Do you feel comfortable checking out books with lesbigay themed material?

Why or why not?

Do you know how to use the online catalog system to search for books?

Would you feel comfortable approaching a staff member with questions about an author or book with a lesbigay theme?

Selection of Sample

The sample populations selected were from Gloucester, Camden and Burlington counties. The populations were public librarians from three libraries from each county and selected high school students who were members of their local GSA from one high school in Burlington County and one in Camden County. It was assumed that students who joined a GSA were more attuned to the needs of queer youth in their communities.

Instrument Design

To better understand the attitudes of GLBTQ youth toward the public library in their community a questionnaire was administered. Also a survey was administered to the public librarians who were responsible for the collection development and youth services for teens in their libraries.

Method of Data Collection

Using the State of New Jersey's District Factor Group (DFG) schools were selected based on similar socioeconomic status. The district DFG utilizes information from parents/guardian that includes: educational level, occupational status, population density, income, unemployment, and poverty level to determine to which group a school district belongs.

The researcher chose school districts from Burlington, Gloucester and Camden County that were classified as the middle socioeconomic status. From that list, the schools that offered a GSA club were selected. Originally there were a total of eleven schools who were contacted by phone. Usually this researcher was able to speak to the advisor of the GSA group who gave permission if the principal said yes. Initially a phone call was made to the principal with a follow-up letter to those principals who said yes. However, once the letter was received all of the principals except one declined participation. One high school, from Camden County, consented to the researcher coming onto campus to administer the questionnaire with the students.

Initially this researcher contacted the nine librarians either by phone or email. After speaking with the librarians, this researcher requested a visit to the library. Four of the librarians requested that the questionnaire be sent via email since they were very busy and they would be happy to respond. Five of the librarians were pleased to have a visit. Of those five only three responded to the questionnaire. Two of the four questionnaires were completed via email.

Reliability and Validity

The survey was pre-tested by two thesis classmates working in public libraries and one public librarian who worked with teens. The questionnaire was pre-tested by a self-identified gay student who did not attend the public school where the questionnaire was administered.

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CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Survey Procedure and Response Rate

Once the librarians and Gay Straight Alliance students were identified the researcher began administering the questionnaires. As previously stated within this research a total of nine public libraries from Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties were contacted requesting they participate in the survey. Most librarians were contacted either in person or by phone. After numerous requests via phone and/or email a total of five responses were received.

Responses to requests to respond to the questionnaire were extremely varied. Three librarians were very excited about the fact that the subject of gay teens and lesbian literature was being researched. Their response time was very prompt. Two had not really thought about it and took a few weeks for a response and four, while very polite and agreed to participate, never responded.

Initially high schools whose students would use the nine public libraries were contacted to see if they offered a Gay Straight Alliance club for students. Of the eleven contacted seven did offer GSA clubs. However, of those seven only one agreed to this researcher coming to campus. Most principals were very uncomfortable with the idea of students having to expose themselves even to their own parent/guardian with a permission form to participate in the study. The concern was

that some of the parents were not aware of their child's attendance at a Gay Straight Alliance meeting.

In the end, only three students from one high school responded to the questionnaire. Getting parental permission was a deterrent, one student specifically stated, "My mother is homophobic and doesn't even know what GSA stands for!" she obviously was not comfortable bringing the permission slip form home and others were not also.

The GSA high school group that did participate consisted only of six white females, when the total school population was 50-50 white to minority and 50-50 male to female.

Advisor Contacts

Three advisors from other high schools were very excited about the prospect of a discussion of lesbian literature and gay youth on their campuses only to have their principals say no.

One of the positive outcomes of this endeavor was the fact that two advisors intended to seek out lesbian literature and information from their school and public libraries where the students of GSA groups attend.

Librarian Responses

All five of the libraries contacted offered a section dedicated to young adult literature even if they did not participate in the questionnaire. Of the five respondents only two stated that there was a librarian specifically for the young adult department.

Responses were very general when answering the question “Who decides the purchasing of your YA literature?” from staff to specifically the YA librarian. The percentage of the budget allocated to the children’s department was no more than 30%. Of that 30%, no more than 1% was used towards lesbigay themed books or it was not a separate line item.

Three out of the five respondents said ‘yes’ in response to the library offering a bibliography of lesbigay themed titles via a Web site. It should be noted that the respondents who said yes, were from public libraries that served larger communities.

None of the libraries offered lesbigay themed titles from a summer reading list. This may be due to the fact that the lists were received from their corresponding school districts.

Librarians’ responses to book accessibility were as varied as a hand-out to face-outs to “per request.” None of the libraries stated offering a specific GLBTQ program or outreach, however one of the librarians responded that there was a teen advisory board and “there are several GLBTQ teens...who actively participate in planning teen programs”

None of the libraries offered a collection policy in reference to lesbigay literature and materials.

One librarian responded with “don’t know” in reference to improving commitment to GLBTQ teens in their community. Another librarian left the answer blank. The

three other responses acknowledged a need for more tolerance in their communities and an acknowledgement that self censorship can come into play. However, suggestions for open display, adding to the collection and teaching access to the catalog were all offered as improvement to commitment. One positive aspect was the dialogue between public librarians and the researcher in response to accessibility of lesbigay literature to the gay youth in their community.

Student Responses

When reviewing the responses of teens to lesbigay literature and accessibility even though all thought the library was a safe place to hang-out and two of the three went to the library sometimes for recreational reading, none of the respondents saw the public library as offering information or literature on lesbigay themed materials. Either it hadn't been considered or they felt the selection was too limited.

All three respondents felt the library could be doing more. Suggestions of a display for gay themed materials and a book club were mentioned. When answering the question about utilizing the library as a resource, respondents were extremely varied from "not a resource I would use" to viewing it as a safe place to ask questions to reluctance since the respondent was not acquainted with the staff. This researcher thinks it is important to mention the importance of presentation of both the library and staff so that a teen patron can feel comfortable seeking out information that can be viewed as controversial.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Lesbigay teens looking for information on sexuality or recreational reading in the three counties researched may be more apt to head to the computer rather than their public library. Only two of the five libraries surveyed responded with proactive activities making library materials available to GLBTQ teens.

There were many barriers to obtaining access to teens who might be interested in participating in a questionnaire that involves lesbigay teens and their public library.

The biggest barrier was the administration in public schools that offered GSA clubs to its students. Principals were not willing to allow this researcher access to campuses for fear of retribution by parents of GSA members.

The next barrier was the students themselves. Concerned that their parents would not approve of their involvement in a GSA club deterred students from even requesting their parent sign the permission form.

Conclusions

This researcher set out to investigate what teens were thinking when it came to public libraries and access to lesbigay literature and information. It was discovered that discussions about homosexuality was still considered a taboo subject in the three

counties of southern New Jersey. It was concluded from the questionnaires that librarians working in the northern part of the counties or in a more highly populated area were more proactive when it came to programs and collections geared towards gay youth.

Even though there was ample information available on the topic of lesbigay literature and teens, there was very little research done when it came to investigating the commitment of librarianship to the GLBTQ teen community. What research was done was mainly in Canada and in school libraries. There has been no research in public libraries in the United States nor has there been any published papers other than Darla Linville's where self-identified teens were questioned on the public libraries accessibility to lesbigay literature (Linville, 2004).

Recommendations

As a model Princeton Library offers numerous examples of a libraries commitment to the GLBTQ teen community. The GSA club meets at the library, the Web site has a bibliography of gay literature and the YA section offers numerous lesbigay book face-outs. There are openly gay teens on the teen advisory board which offers programs to teens throughout the year including ones geared toward the GLBTQ teen community.

One librarian commented that the reason for the lack of commitment of libraries may be because of the lack of tolerance by communities which in turn creates a kind of self censorship.

From principals to librarians to the teens themselves this researcher found it difficult to implement the research needed to answer the question “Do public libraries offer access to lesbian literature and information?”

In the end it was obvious the communities, librarians and teens themselves still struggle with tolerance of sexual identities other than being heterosexual. It is this researcher’s opinion that the communities and public libraries have a responsibility to acknowledge the lack of tolerance and stand up against discrimination.

“Homosexuality is not an issue but an identity” that needs to be acknowledged and supported (Levithan, 2004).

This researcher recommends that libraries be willing to look at Princeton Library as a model to strive towards. Also the public library needs to be in the forefront of advocacy and be willing to stand up for the rights of their patrons regardless of age (ALA, 2004). It is hoped that in the future a study involving more students who participate in their GSA club be researched so it can be determined if the public library is meeting those students needs.

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APPENDIX A

Librarian Request Form

APPENDIX A

Librarian Request Form

Dear Ms. Gruver:

This is a request for your participation in a research project whose purpose is to investigate behaviors of public librarians when providing access to lesbian/bisexual/gay literature and programs to the gay youth in their communities. This study is part of the requirements for my Master of Arts degree in School and Public Librarianship from Rowan University.

For your contribution you will be asked to complete and return the attached questionnaire. Please know that your participation is completely voluntary and participation will result in no risk to yourself or others. While you may choose not to participate, the results will help public libraries determine their level of accessibility of lesbigay literature and programs to GLBTQ youth. All results will be kept confidential and no individual names will be used. The original questionnaires will be destroyed within 30 days after the completion of data collection.

Please feel free to contact me, Ms. Kimberle Madden, (maddpeace@comcast.net) with any questions you may have. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr Marilyn Shontz (856.256.3400 ext.3858). Your participation does not imply an employer-employee relationship exists between you and the state of New Jersey, Rowan University, or myself.

Thank you for your time,

Kimberle Madden

APPENDIX B

Principal Request Form

APPENDIX B

Principal Request Form

Dr. Michael Zank
Cinnaminson High School
1197 Riverton Rd.
Cinnaminson, NJ 08077

Dear Dr. Zank,

My name is Kimberle Madden. I am a graduate student in the School and Public Librarianship program at Rowan University. I will be conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Marilyn Shontz as part of my master's thesis determining the commitment of public libraries to the gay youth in their communities by providing access to gay literature and programs.

I am requesting permission to survey students that are members of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in your high school. It is my intention to survey students most likely to request gay themed materials from their public library. The students will be asked to have a permission form signed by their parents and all information will be kept confidential. I have attached a copy of the permission form and the questionnaire for your convenience. Below I have stated the purpose of the study. If you need any more information or have any concerns please contact me at 856.240.1815 or maddpeace@comcast.net. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kimberle Madden

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine if selected public libraries in Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties are committed to the GLBTQ youth in their communities by providing free and equal access to lesbigay (lesbian/bisexual/gay) literature and/or offering programs and outreach to this group of young adults. Most previous research looks at school libraries in the United States and libraries in Canada, it is my objective to research libraries in these counties of southern New Jersey to determine if they are striving towards that commitment.

APPENDIX C

Parent Permission Form

APPENDIX C

Parent Permission Form

03.03.08

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Kimberle Madden. I am a graduate student in the School and Public Librarianship program at Rowan University. I will be conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Marilyn Shontz as part of my master's thesis determining the commitment of public libraries to the gay youth in their communities by providing access to gay literature and programs.

I am requesting permission for your child to participate in this research. I will be surveying students who are participants of their high school's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). All information I obtain from your child will be kept confidential. No individual names or information will be used in this study. Your child does not have to participate in the survey and your child's class standing will not be affected in any way by participating in the survey.

If you and your child agree that your child may participate in the study, I will ask your child to complete a questionnaire about their attitudes towards the public libraries commitment to access of gay literature.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact me at 856.240.1815 or you may contact Dr. Marilyn Shontz at 856.4500 ext.3858.

Thank you,
Kimberle Madden

Please indicate whether or not you wish your child to participate by checking the appropriate statement below and have your child return it to school within the next three days.

I grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

I do not grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

(Parent/Guardian signature)

(Date)

APPENDIX D

Questionnaire for Teens

APPENDIX D

Questionnaire for Teens

1. How often do you go to your public library?

- Never
- Sometimes
- Often

2. Do you perceive your public library as a source of information that can help in a teenagers search for sexual identity? Why or why not?

3. Do you use your public library for recreational reading?

- No, only for study
- No, not at all
- Yes

4. If yes, do you look for books that are gay themed? Why or why not?

5. Is your library a safe place to ask for help with identity questions? Why or why not?

6. Is your library a safe place to hang out?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- Never

7. What ideas or information about teenage sexuality are more readily available in a book from your public library compared to finding it online?

8. How could your public library better help you in your search for gay themed books or materials?

9. What materials or programs would you like to see at your public library?

10. Please feel free to add comments or information that you felt was not addressed in this questionnaire.

11. Do you identify yourself as gay or straight?

APPENDIX E

Questionnaire for Librarians

APPENDIX E

Questionnaire for Librarians

1. Do you have a dedicated area in your library for young adult literature?
2. Is there a librarian specifically for this department?
3. Who decides the purchasing of your YA literature?
4. About what percentage of the budget is allocated to children's literature?
5. About what percentage of that is dedicated to lesbigay themed literature?
6. Does your library offer a bibliography of lesbigay themed titles via a website or some other format?
7. Are there any lesbigay themed titles available on a summer reading list?
8. How does your public library make lesbigay themed books accessible to the teens in the community? (eg. face-outs, website, book talks, label)
9. Does the library offer programs and/or outreach to GLBTQ teens in the community? If so, please list them.
10. Does the library have a collection policy in place that mentions purchasing of lesbigay literature and materials? If so, would you consider sharing that information?
11. What are some ways the library community could improve its commitment to GLBTQ teens in accessing lesbigay materials?

