
No More Controversial than a Gardening Display? Provision of LGBT-Related Fiction to Children and Young People in U.K. Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings of a study on the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in U.K. public libraries and on library staff attitudes to this material. The term “LGBT” stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans, with “trans” being an umbrella term used to encompass transgender and transsexual people, cross-dressers, and other gender-variant people. The research used a mixed-methods approach, comprising a checklist study, in which a list of books was checked against the catalogs of two participating library authorities; staff focus groups in these authorities; and a questionnaire distributed nationwide via professional listservs. Opinions were also gathered from young LGBT people and LGBT parents through focus groups and interviews. The research showed clear room for improvement in provision in the two authorities studied, particularly as regard to picture books, books with trans content, books in different formats, and books from less mainstream authors and publishers. Library staff members showed generally positive attitudes toward this material, but there were some areas of concern, notably relating to the quality of materials, provision of materials to younger children, and the possibility of parental complaint. The study provides a much-needed preliminary insight into the subject and highlights areas for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in public libraries has received relatively little attention in the librarianship research literature, particularly in the United Kingdom. However, LGBT young people and parents, and their families and friends, constitute a significant population who are potentially being underserved by public

libraries. Previous research, discussed further in the literature review, suggests that fiction that includes LGBT characters is of value to LGBT young people in identity formation, as well as for encouraging understanding among other young people.

The term “LGBT” stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans, with “trans” being an umbrella term used to encompass transgender and transsexual people, cross-dressers, and other gender-variant people. For the purposes of this article, “LGBT-related fiction for children and young people” primarily refers to picture books and young adult (YA) fiction, although a small number of books for junior school children are also in existence.

Reliable figures on the number of LGBT people in the United Kingdom are not currently available, as the most recent census did not include questions on sexual orientation or gender identity.¹ Currently, the U.K. government estimates that 5 to 7 percent of the population is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, a figure supported by the LGB rights organization Stonewall (2010). The trans activism organization GIRES estimates that around 1 percent of the U.K. population experiences some degree of gender variance, further noting that “most gender dysphoric adults report experiencing gender variance from a very early age” (GIRES, 2011, p. 1).

Statistics on the number of young people who live in LGBT-headed families are even harder to locate than are data on the populations just discussed; to date, the researcher has been unable to find even an estimate of the number of children in such families. However, the numbers of lesbians and gay men adopting and fostering children has risen since the Adoption and Children Act 2002 came into force on December 30, 2005, allowing same-sex couples to jointly adopt children (BAAF, 2012; Stonewall, 2012).

Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, library authorities in the United Kingdom are obliged to “meet the general requirements and any special requirements of both adults and children,” and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender reassignment is prohibited under the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, the Sex Discrimination (Amendment of Legislation) Regulations 2008, and the Equality Act 2010. The previous Labour government produced guidance recommending that libraries should provide materials that reflect our diverse society, including materials aimed at LGB people (DCMS, 2001; IDeA, 2007). The current Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government has not, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, issued any comment on the subject.

The legislative environment has not always supported the provision of materials and services to LGBT people: the infamous “Section 28” legislation was passed into law on May 24, 1988, as part of the Local Government Act 1988 and remained in force until November 18, 2003 (Local Government Act 2003). The legislation stated that local authorities must not “in-

tentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” (Local Government Act 1988). While no prosecutions were ever brought under the Section 28 legislation (Greenland & Nunney, 2008), it does appear to have had an effect on library services for LGBT people (see, for example, Curry, 1997; Vincent, 2000).

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) has produced its own guidance on sexual orientation and libraries; as regards stock, it states that “written library stock policies should include the need for material relevant to the needs of LGBT people across all formats (for example, adult and children’s books)” (2004/2009).² Children and young people have intellectual freedom rights, including the right to access information and the right to privacy, under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989), and CILIP’s intellectual freedom statement notes that access to materials “should not be restricted on any grounds except that of the law” (CILIP, 2005). Similarly, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) upholds the principles of intellectual freedom and uninhibited access to information, asserting that libraries should “acquire, preserve and make available the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and diversity of society” and should not discriminate on the grounds of age or for any other reason (IFLA, 1999).

To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, the Society of Chief Librarians has not issued any comment or guidance on the subject, while the Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians has run at least one training day on the subject but has not made any information publicly available online. This may reflect a lack of engagement with the subject by these bodies and reinforces the need for research that informs practice.

The aim of the study reported here was to investigate the quality of public library provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people (under-eighteens) in the United Kingdom and to provide recommendations for improvement if appropriate. As so little research has been carried out on provision of LGBT-related fiction to under-eighteens, the present study should be viewed as a preliminary investigation forming the basis for future research.

The specific objectives of the research were as follows:

- To gain an overview of provision of LGBT-related fiction to under-eighteens in library authorities across the United Kingdom, and staff attitudes to this provision
- To assess holdings of LGBT-related fiction for under-eighteens in two library authorities
- To evaluate library staff opinions in these authorities regarding LGBT-related fiction aimed at under-eighteens

- To evaluate the opinions of young LGBT people and LGBT parents regarding LGBT-related fiction aimed at under-eighteens
- To make recommendations regarding the provision of LGBT-related fiction to under-eighteens in U.K. public libraries.

The study was carried out as a master's in librarianship dissertation at the University of Sheffield in 2007; readers are referred to the full dissertation for further details of the study and copies of the research instruments used (Chapman, E. L., 2007a). The research was informed and partially impelled by the researcher's own identity as a bisexual woman. Many social science researchers hold that it is important for researchers to declare their positionality so that readers of their work are better able to assess how their values and experience may have contributed to the construction of knowledge in their work (see, for example, England, 1994), and this is particularly true where research on "minority" communities is concerned (Birdi, Wilson, & Tso, 2009; Herdt & Boxer, 1996). However, the researcher is also aware that her identity as a bisexual, cisgender³ woman does not enable her to speak for all LGBT individuals.

The following section reviews the extant literature on public library provision to LGBT people in general and to children and young people specifically. Subsequent sections describe the methodology used, present the key findings, and consider their implications for policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why provide LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in public libraries?

The librarianship literature is filled with pressing reasons for providing LGBT-related fiction to under-eighteens, although it should be noted that many of the articles do not provide research evidence for their claims. However, the benefits of reading for pleasure are increasingly recognized by librarians and researchers (Brewster, 2011; Elkin, Train, & Denham, 2003; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002). In the case of LGBT teenagers, the literature argues that fiction can contribute to the formation of a stable sense of personal identity by reassuring young people that they are not alone, promoting a positive self-image, and allowing them to explore what it means to be gay (see, for example, Cart, 1997; Martin & Murdock, 2007; Mulholland, 2003; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006).

A number of the calls for provision come from adults who are themselves LGBT and who found books useful in their own identity formation and/or would have valued a wider range of positive materials. Gough and Greenblatt note that "gay and lesbian literature abounds with such anecdotes" (1992, p. 59). Moreover, YA authors who write LGBT fiction report that they receive hundreds of letters from LGBT teenagers who have been helped by their books (Levithan, 2004; McCafferty, 2006). This evidence

can be supplemented by the findings of two recent studies on the role of fiction reading in the lives of adult lesbians and bisexual women, which found that participants read books with LGBT protagonists to become more comfortable with their identities (Pecoskie, 2005) and to find “lived information” (Rothbauer, 2004, p. 183) on sexual identity. Finally, the only study located on the library needs of LGBT teenagers found that 80 percent of respondents read fiction with gay characters (Linville, 2004).

It has been argued that fiction is also useful for expanding the horizons of young people who are not LGBT (Clyde & Lobban, 2001; Cockett, 1995). YA authors who write LGBT books report having received letters from “straight” teenagers who say the books changed their views (Martin & Murdock, 2007; Pavao, 2003). Elkin and Triggs (1985), writing on “multi-cultural” books, suggest that fiction in particular provides a powerful route into empathy.

There is also increasing awareness of the need for materials for younger children that reflect a variety of family situations. It is argued that picture books serve to validate the lives and experiences of children in LGBT-headed families (Chapman, S. K., 1999; Chick, 2008; Mulholland, 2003) while also teaching other children about families different from their own and thus promoting understanding (Bowen & Schutt, 2007; Wolf, 1989). Homophobic and transphobic bullying can start at an early age, and age-appropriate materials can help to challenge this (Guasp, 2010; No Outsiders Project Team, 2010).

Library Use and Satisfaction Levels among LGBT Young People and Adults

Only one study was located that surveyed LGBT young people regarding their library use (Linville, 2004). Eighty-two percent of respondents were public library users, with just over half saying they had gone to the library to find answers to questions about themselves or someone they knew being gay. However, one third of respondents could not find what they wanted in the library.

A number of studies have surveyed LGBT adults about their library needs and usage, primarily in the United States and Canada. Creelman and Harris (1990), Whitt (1993), Joyce and Schrader (1997), and, to a lesser extent, Stenback and Schrader (1999) found that libraries were frequently used by LGBT participants in their efforts to locate information, while other studies show low levels of library use among LGBT respondents (Beiriger & Jackson, 2007; Garnar, 2001; Goldthorp, 2007; Mehra & Braquet, 2007). Even where libraries were used, satisfaction levels were low, with respondents criticizing both the collections and the attitudes of the staff (Creelman & Harris, 1990; Goldthorp, 2006, 2007; Joyce & Schrader, 1997; Stenback & Schrader, 1999; Whitt, 1993). Norman’s (1999) research on the Brighton and Hove LGB collection was the exception here, with most respondents rating the collection as “good” or “satisfactory.”

Library Holdings of LGBT Fiction for Children and Young People

There is a small but significant body of Canadian literature focusing on public library holdings of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people. Boon and Howard (2004), Rothbauer and McKechnie (1999), and Spence (1999) compared holdings of LGBT-related YA fiction in different libraries, while subsequent studies by Howard (2005) and Spence (2000) looked at provision of picture books. The findings showed wide variation between library systems, with some performing much better than others. Rothbauer and McKechnie concluded that holdings were “somewhat limited and certainly inconsistent”; furthermore, “earlier published books, which more often portray negative stereotypes, were just as likely to be held as more recent titles” (1999, pp. 36–37). Boon and Howard (2004) and Howard (2005) found that LGBT-themed YA fiction and picture books were much less likely to be selected for libraries than were non-LGBT titles from a control group.

Little research in this area has been carried out in the United Kingdom. Brett (1992) noted in the context of a larger study that holdings of LGBT-related materials for children and young people were extremely poor in the three London boroughs that he studied. Spence’s (2000) study of picture book holdings included five British library systems and found that their holdings of the checklist titles were very low, although this could have been due to the U.S./Canadian bias of the checklist. In 2007, Wright carried out research into provision of LGBT materials in U.K. secondary school libraries concurrently with the research reported here. A questionnaire distributed via a national mailing list asked respondents to estimate the number of LGBT books in their collections: on average, LGBT books made up 0.24 percent of library holdings (Chapman & Wright, 2008; Wright, 2007).

There has been significant debate as to whether LGBT materials should be kept in separate collections or interfiled with general stock; Chapman’s literature review concludes that there is as yet no consensus among either librarians or LGBT communities. A separate collection facilitates use and sends a positive message about diversity but carries a risk of ghettoization and risks “outing” users. On the other hand, an integrated collection facilitates serendipitous discoveries, but materials may be more difficult to find. Bibliographies, user-friendly cataloging, virtual collections, and spine labeling can all be used to increase findability, and popular titles could be interfiled as well as locating a copy in a separate collection (Chapman, E. L., 2007b). Other than the research reported in this article, only one study has been found that tackled the issue of where to locate LGBT materials for children and young people. Linville asked focus groups of LGBTQ teenagers about their preferences: some favored separate collections or labeling, whereas others felt this would “stick the label on their foreheads” (2004, p. 186).

Public Library Staff Attitudes to LGBT Materials

A small number of studies have been carried out that have addressed attitudes to LGBT issues and materials in general, and materials for children and young people in particular, among librarians and other public library staff. The extant studies suggest that attitudes to LGBT issues and materials are generally positive (Brett, 1992; Carmichael & Shontz, 1996; Currant, 2002; Readman, 1987); however, it should be borne in mind that staff members with homophobic or transphobic attitudes may have avoided taking part in such research, or respondents may have given the answers they felt were politically correct, leading to a bias in the results. Moreover, all these studies reported evidence of a minority of respondents with less-than-positive attitudes and/or who were lacking in awareness of the need for provision. Comments from respondents in some studies revealed concerns about what participants perceived as “excessive” promotion (Armstrong, 2006; Currant, 2002; O’Leary, 2005; Readman, 1987). This may be related to the Section 28 legislation (see Introduction), although only Currant’s (2002) study was carried out while the law was actually in force.

With regard to materials and services for children and young people, 81 percent of Brett’s respondents were “in favor of lesbian/gay material being located in the children’s library if the presentation was appropriate” (1992, p. 206). Similarly, participants in McNicol’s (2005a) research on censorship and intellectual freedom felt that homosexuality was not too controversial for a school/children’s library, and Wright’s research with secondary school librarians found that attitudes were “overwhelmingly positive” (2007, p. 46). However, a small number of Wright’s respondents felt that LGBT materials were not suitable for younger secondary school pupils, while some of the public librarians interviewed in a broader study by O’Leary (2005) were cautious about allowing young people to check out LGBT materials and concerned about parental disapproval. Last, an unobtrusive observation survey carried out by Curry (2005) assessed the quality of reference service provided to a young person asking a gay/lesbian-related question. The customer proxy criticized the attitudes of librarians in seven of the twenty libraries and would have felt comfortable returning to only eight of them.

Public Library Stock Policies and Procurement

Brett (1992) observes that the lack of a written stock policy mentioning LGBT materials may lead to provision by demand, which may not be articulated and thus not be provided for. At that time, none of the three London boroughs studied by Brett had a written policy on stock procurement, and more recent studies have continued to show room for improvement in this area. Ritchie’s (2001) study of LGB nonfiction provision in Illinois public libraries found that 71.4 percent of respondents did not mention sexual orientation in their collection development policies, while

Goldthorp (2007) found that of nine Scottish public library services that responded to her questionnaire, only two had a policy or criteria for purchasing fiction, neither of which mentioned sexual orientation. Furthermore, a number of writers cite instances of librarians waiting for library users to request LGBT materials rather than proactively purchasing them (Currant, 2002; *Branching Out*, 2005, cited in O'Leary, 2005; Schrader, 1995). Downey (2005) argues that young people, who may not yet be comfortable with their sexuality and are thus less likely to make specific requests, are particularly likely to be inadvertently passed over.

Research also suggests that librarians have tended to rely on mainstream suppliers, which has an impact on the breadth of the collection (Brett, 1992; Curry, 1997; Glover, 1987; Goldthorp, 2007; Migneault, 2003). The need to look beyond mainstream sources is reflected in CILIP's best-practice advice on provision of LGBT materials, which states that "mainstream suppliers may hold only limited relevant titles, and therefore care should be taken to make use of wider resources available via specialist bookshops/suppliers" (CILIP, 2004/2009).

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on two library authorities, here referred to as "authority A" and "authority B." These authorities constituted a convenience sample, as the researcher already had contacts within the authorities. Authority A was a large northern city and authority B was a large, mostly rural county containing a small city; both authorities had similar numbers of library branches and population figures of between 500,000 and 600,000 residents (ONS, 2012).

The study used a mixed-methods approach based on a pragmatic philosophy (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A checklist study, online questionnaire, and face-to-face focus groups and interviews were used to address the research objectives. These methods are discussed in further detail here.

Checklist Study

Checklist studies—in which booklists are checked against the catalogs of participating libraries—have frequently been used in previous studies in order to collect data on holdings of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people (e.g., Boon & Howard, 2004; Howard, 2005; Rothbauer & McKechnie, 1999; Spence, 1999, 2000). The checklist used in this study did not claim to be exhaustive, but by drawing on a large number of existing checklists,⁴ the researcher hoped to have included the majority of books on which information was readily available. Where plot summaries were provided, fiction that did not depict LGBT characters but merely had a general "diversity" theme was excluded. Several of the source lists were of U.S. provenance, and it was thus necessary to determine whether the

books were readily available in the United Kingdom. The Amazon.co.uk website was used to check UK availability, and books that were not available were excluded from the list.

Once the checklist was complete,⁵ the catalogs for authorities A and B were checked for the total number of titles held as well as the number of copies of each title. Details were also noted of the location of copies within the library, where relevant. In order to provide a point of comparison, a similar catalog check was carried out for Brighton and Hove Library Service, which has a reputation for providing a high-quality LGBT service (Norman, 1999). This gives some idea of what can be realistically achieved; as Schneider (1998) has commented, many checklist studies fail to give any indication of how many items the libraries ought to hold.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to gather data beyond authorities A and B, owing to its ease of distribution and cost-effectiveness. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions and had an estimated completion time of ten to fifteen minutes. Questions were primarily closed-ended, with optional text boxes for additional detail. Respondents' opinions on LGBT-related fiction for under-eighteens were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale. In addition, respondents with responsibility for children's and young people's stock procurement were asked a series of questions relating to this area. The questionnaire was pilot-tested on eight librarianship students, and slight changes were made in response to their comments.

The questionnaire was distributed electronically using SurveyMonkey. The link to the survey was emailed to the researcher's contacts in authorities A and B, together with a request for it to be distributed through internal channels; and also sent to lis-pub-libs@jiscmail.ac.uk (1073 subscribers) and ylg-list@jiscmail.ac.uk (165 subscribers), with a request for responses from public library employees. It is not known how many mailing list subscribers actually work in public libraries or how many employees at authorities A and B received the URL, and hence it was impossible to calculate a percentage response rate. However, the final figure of eighty-eight respondents was deemed to be adequate in comparison with other research projects of this type (although not all respondents answered every question).

The demographic profile of respondents was felt to be typical of the public library service, with 49 percent of respondents giving their age as forty-six or above, and a female-to-male ratio of 71:13. Respondents' positions within their organization are shown in table 1.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Semistructured focus groups were held with library staff members from authorities A and B in order to gather more in-depth data. Existing contacts at these authorities were asked to disseminate a request for participants

Table 1. Respondents' position within their organization

Position within organization	No. of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Frontline staff	12	14
Frontline staff in a dedicated children's library	4	5
Librarian WITH responsibility for services to children and young people	44	50
Librarian WITHOUT responsibility for services to children and young people	14	16
Senior management	9	10
Other / Rather not say	2	2
Did not answer question	3	3
Total	88	100

throughout their organizations. In total, twelve library staff members took part in this stage of the research: one group comprising four frontline staff members from authority A, a second group comprising four stock-selection team members from authority A, and a final group combining two stock-selection librarians and two frontline staff members from authority B.

A semistructured focus group was also held with young LGBT people. Due to ethical constraints and the timescale of the research, it was unfortunately not possible to involve under-eighteens, and young LGBT adults were contacted instead. Following an attempt to contact members of the Sheffield University LGBT Society, which was unsuccessful as the research took place during the summer vacation, the researcher made use of existing contacts to invite young LGBT adults to participate. A focus group of four participants was held, all of whom were female, including two bisexual women, one lesbian, and one woman who self-defined as "somewhere within the LGBT spectrum."

LGBT parents were contacted through existing acquaintances, the Out For Our Children web site (<http://www.outforourchildren.org.uk>), and the Gingerbeer lesbian messageboard (<http://www.gingerbeer.co.uk>). The participants comprised a lesbian mother, a gay father, and a lesbian couple who were planning a family; they were not related to the young LGBT participants. For logistical reasons, it was not possible to organize a focus group, so these participants were interviewed.

The focus groups and interviews were based around a sample selection of picture books and YA novels from the checklist. Participants were asked about their opinions of the books, whether they thought they were suitable for libraries, and whether they felt they would be valuable for children and young people who were LGBT or in LGBT-headed families and for promoting understanding among others. As novel-length fiction is difficult to assess in a short time, each novel was provided alongside a plot summary and an extract selected by the researcher. The library-based participants

were additionally asked questions relating to age restrictions, and location and whether they felt the books would attract complaints. On average, the focus groups and interviews lasted around one and one-half hours.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were compiled from the checklist data and from the responses to closed-ended questions on the questionnaire, using SPSS (v.14.0). Focus group and interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses were assigned to categories using open coding, followed by axial coding to collate these categories into themes (Flick, 2006), which broadly correspond to the subsections presented in the Findings section. This process was carried out manually using colored pens.

FINDINGS

Stock Holdings

Table 2 shows the stock holdings of LGBT-related picture books in authorities A and B and in Brighton and Hove. It seems clear that neither authority A nor authority B had addressed this area at the time the study was carried out.

Most of the Brighton and Hove copies were held in the LGBT collection; since the library had an active LGBT user group at the time, it seems likely that this was the wish of the local community. In authority B, one title was located in "Parenting" and one in "New Experiences." The third was located with general picture books, as was authority A's single title.

Table 2. Stock holdings of LGBT-related picture books

	Authority A	Authority B	Brighton and Hove	Total No. of titles on checklist
Number of titles held	1	3	16	26
Percentage of total titles held	4	12	62	100
Number of copies held	3	8	31	Not applicable

Table 3. Stock holdings of LGBT-related young adult (YA) fiction

	Authority A	Authority B	Brighton and Hove	Total No. of titles on checklist
Number of titles held	32	28	58	140
Percentage of total titles held	23	20	41	100
Number of copies held	141	113	140	Not applicable

Authorities A and B both performed better regarding YA fiction (see table 3); however, the raw figures conceal some salient points. Authorities A and B both held a large number of copies of titles by relatively “mainstream” authors, such as Julie Burchill, Aidan Chambers, Morris Gleitzman, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Linda Newbery, Alice Walker, and Jeanette Winter-son. These authors accounted for eighty-four copies (60 percent of all copies) in authority A and sixty-one copies (54 percent) in authority B, compared with fifty copies (36 percent) in Brighton and Hove. It is evident that Brighton and Hove not only hold a greater number of titles but that holdings comprise a greater variety of authors. However, the fact that LGBT-related YA fiction is stocked in authorities A and B suggests there is no institutional objection to this material.

Very few books were available in alternative formats: two titles had large-print copies available. Moreover, of the four titles with trans content identified, none were available in authorities A or B in any format and only one title was stocked in Brighton and Hove.

The questionnaire asked respondents to estimate how many items of children’s fiction with LGBT content were purchased each year and what proportion of the budget was spent on them. It was hoped that this would go some way toward providing a snapshot of national provision; however, most respondents were unable to provide answers to these questions. Only eight respondents estimated the number of items purchased; in all cases, the figure was very low, ranging from “Two max” to “Twenty to thirty approx.” Six respondents estimated a percentage of the budget spent on such items, which was less than 1 percent in all cases.

Stock Policies and Procurement

As noted in the literature review, the lack of a stock-purchasing policy that refers explicitly to LGBT materials may lead to inadequate provision. Neither authority A nor authority B had an official stock policy at the time the study was carried out, in contrast to best-practice guidelines on collection development and management (CILIP, 2009; MLA, 2009). Moreover, the questionnaire results showed that few stock-purchasing policies mention LGBT materials: only six authorities (of thirty-two different authorities) gave positive answers to this question, with thirteen negative responses and thirteen “Don’t know” responses. Even fewer mentioned LGBT materials for under-eighteens, with only two positive responses, twenty-four negative responses, and six “Don’t know” responses.

Focus group participants from both authorities volunteered that their suppliers—both of which were among the well-known names responsible for most public library stock provision—failed to provide an adequate range of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people. Participants identified certain types of material, such as American publications and material from small publishers, which were unlikely to appear on suppliers’

lists; unfortunately, much LGBT material falls into these categories. This was supported to an extent by the questionnaire results. Of a total of forty-one individuals from thirty-three authorities who responded to this section, ten expressed dissatisfaction with their supplier's provision of this material. Two noted that picture book provision was particularly poor. However, a limited supplier selection is not necessarily a problem as long as librarians use other methods of procuring stock and maintaining their awareness. Unfortunately, it appears that this is not always the case: only four of thirty-three authorities purchased from specialist bookshops, while eight of forty-one respondents said they used specialist information sources to find out about LGBT fiction for children and young people.

It may be that librarians do not see the need to look elsewhere as they are satisfied with supplier provision: twenty-two questionnaire respondents said their supplier provided an adequate range of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people. In some cases, this may be because the supplier is genuinely doing a very good job, but in other cases, it sounds a warning note, particularly where a supplier is involved that was criticized by other questionnaire respondents or the focus groups. A number of questionnaire respondents also made comments that suggested they were not aware of the full range of materials available, such as: "I am only aware of one 'children's' author who explores LGBT issues," and "After investigation, it was found that there is not a great deal of LGBT material available which is for children and young people." This raises the possibility that librarians are satisfied with supplier provision because they are not aware of other items; certainly, staff in all the focus groups stated that the research had introduced them to new materials and highlighted an area where provision needed to be improved.

The Value and Quality of LGBT-Related Fiction for Children and Young People

As detailed in the Methodology section, questionnaire respondents were asked to select responses to a series of opinion statements pertaining to LGBT-related fiction for children and young people. Table 4 shows widespread acceptance of the idea that LGBT-related fiction is valuable for children and young people who are themselves LGBT or in LGBT-headed families, as well as for helping those who are not LGBT or in LGBT-headed families to understand others. A slightly smaller majority of respondents agreed that a wide range of LGBT-related picture books and YA novels should be provided in public libraries.

The statistical findings on the value of such fiction and the concomitant need to provide it in libraries were supported by responses to the open-ended questions and by the focus group discussions. One librarian observed, "Young people are very vulnerable to feeling insecure about themselves, so we have a duty to make sure that they can access information and fiction that will support them, and encourage them to value themselves, and their feelings, (and those of others)."

Table 4. Responses to statements on the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in public libraries (in descending order of percentage agreement)

Likert scale statement	Agree or strongly agree	No. of respondents to this question
Picture books depicting LGBT families are valuable for children with LGBT parents	80, 96%	83
Young Adult novels with LGBT content can help young people who are LGBT or questioning their sexuality to feel more comfortable about themselves	79, 94%	84
Picture books depicting LGBT families can help children with non-LGBT parents to understand others	74, 88%	84
Young Adult novels with LGBT content can help non-LGBT young people to understand others	72, 87%	83
The public library should provide a wide range of Young Adult novels with LGBT content	67, 82%	82
The public library should provide a wide range of picture books depicting LGBT families	57, 69%	83

It is, however, interesting to note the slightly lower levels of agreement with the statements relating to the provision of LGBT-related fiction in public libraries (see table 4). Comments in the open-ended text boxes suggested that some respondents were uncomfortable with the idea of providing a *wide* range. The comments also supported the statistical evidence that some participants were less comfortable with the notion of providing materials to younger children, with one frontline staff member commenting, “I would, however, take issue with the ‘widely’ available comment with regard to picture books . . . As a parent of a young child, I would not wish to find picture books with LGBT in amongst all library books as I feel it might lead to conversations with a young child that they are too immature to deal with.”

Questionnaire respondents and focus group participants also expressed concern about the quality of the books available. There was a high degree of consensus on what constitutes a “high quality” LGBT book; however, this falls outside the scope of this article, and has been discussed elsewhere by the present author (Chapman, E. L., 2011) and by other writers (for example, Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Martin & Murdock, 2007; Naidoo, 2012). Opinions were divided on whether libraries should provide lower-quality materials if these were all that were available. Library focus group participants and several questionnaire respondents noted that their authorities would not purchase a book simply because it was LGBT if it failed to meet existing quality standards; one librarian commented, “We wouldn’t just buy it because it happened to be an LGTB [*sic*] book if it didn’t meet the criteria that we have for the artwork and the production and so on.”

The main concern among library employees seemed to be that poor-quality stock would not get used, even by the target market, and could even

be counterproductive. A stock-selection librarian observed, "I remember a lot of the things that the multicultural team bought . . . when you go round and look at the stock in the community libraries, it sits there year after year looking more and more sad and stale and tired, and very unappealing. And that's what we want to avoid really, isn't it?" This concern was echoed by a frontline staff member: "Teenagers are very much into fashion, aren't they, and what looks good, and . . . if they're homophobic for example, and they pick up a really unfashionable book off the shelves, it's just going to reinforce that, they're going to think, 'Oh well, they're unfashionable, they're not cool,' and it just reinforces that."

LGBT participants also acknowledged the potential drawbacks of a poor-quality book. However, the majority consensus among these participants was that although quality standards should not be dropped altogether, it might be necessary to *relax* them in order to provide a good range of books, until such time as LGBT publishing catches up with the mainstream market. One young lesbian said, "I think they should buy what's available, and if the quality is slightly lower then it's better than nothing."

Sex, Censorship, and Complaints

Authorities A and B have slightly different arrangements regarding age-related classification of materials. Authority B has a "YA+" section in addition to the normal "YA" books; this section is targeted at the fourteen-plus age group and was introduced after a "furor" over a novel that was "quite explicit about teenage sex" in the 1980s. Novels containing sex, drugs, or violence will usually be located here. Authority A does not have such a section but does have "one or two" books that are restricted to age twelve-plus.

Library focus group participants from authorities A and B reported few complaints regarding LGBT materials for children and young people, although it should be borne in mind that lack of complaints to date could be due to the relatively low levels of provision in these authorities. Participants felt that the selection of LGBT books discussed in the focus groups would be unlikely to provoke complaint, although staff from both authorities raised the possibility of a councilor complaint. There was a general sentiment at both authorities that the potential for complaint should not be allowed to dictate purchasing decisions in any case and that the books discussed in the focus groups should not be subject to age restrictions. Furthermore, library focus group participants seemed to be happy for novels with LGBT-related sexual content to be provided in the YA section of a children's library, noting that one of the purposes of the YA section was to provide a suitable location for books with more mature content, whether LGBT or heterosexual. One librarian felt that, if anything, "novels about gangs and violence and the drug culture" were a greater concern; this tallies with the findings of McNicol's research on censorship (2005b).

However, it was clear that some participants struggled between a theoretical dislike of censorship and uncertainty about the practical implications of not imposing restrictions. One frontline staff member expressed some concerns: "I think you'd have to be very careful to which age group you let them go out to . . . I think for probably fifteen, sixteen-year-olds but any younger, probably, I'd see if there was a parent with them maybe . . . I don't like the idea of censoring books . . . but you do have to be careful, you'd have to use your judgment I suppose." The library-based focus group participants frequently referred back to the notion of quality: it was felt that if the book had a good storyline, this would give library employees "a good argument" in the event of a complaint.

A broader range of opinions was evident in the questionnaire responses. In contrast to the focus groups, some respondents felt that parental opinion and the possibility of complaint did impose restrictions on what could be purchased, while a few were of the opinion that age restrictions might be necessary. A frontline staff member commented, "I . . . hope that you appreciate the limits that are imposed on librarians with regard to purchasing material for children, and how much we must consider the wishes of parents," while a librarian opined, "Some material should be marked on the computer as only available for loan over a certain age group or with parental permission."

In contrast, other questionnaire respondents felt that the possibility of complaint should not hamper the drive for equality. One librarian observed, "How do we ever expect to achieve equality if library services treat LGBT issues as something to be handled with gloves? LGBT displays and promotions are not, and should not be treated as, any more controversial than a gardening display. Set policy, set standards, and enforce them despite potential criticism." Some respondents felt that librarians should oppose censorship on principle—in line with the CILIP and IFLA guidelines on intellectual freedom (CILIP, 2005; IFLA, 1999)—while others pointed out that parents had responsibility for what children read, rather than librarians.

LGBT focus group participants felt that borrowing should not be restricted and that it was important for LGBT materials to be available to young people. Like the library focus group participants, LGBT participants were happy for novels with LGBT-related sexual content to be provided in the YA section of a children's library, and the focus group of young women felt that books about sex were particularly important for teenagers:

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

Young bisexual woman: It's a good thing for them to read about it.

Young lesbian woman: Exactly, and it's natural.

Location and Cataloguing

The issue of location has already been touched on in the previous section, as the concepts of age restrictions and location by age are closely interlinked. The literature review demonstrated that the issue of location is a vexed one, and the present research also revealed divergent opinions. YA novels and picture books raised different issues and are discussed separately here.

There is a debate in the literature as to whether adult LGBT books should be shelved in a separate collection or integrated with the rest of the stock (Chapman, E. L., 2007b). Authority A has separate LGBT collections in the central library and one branch library, while authority B did not have such a collection at the time when the research was carried out. However, with regard to young-adult books, there was a consensus among focus group participants from both authorities that integration would be preferable. The participants from authority A pointed out that adults had shown reluctance to use the LGBT collections and felt that teenagers would be even more sensitive. A frontline staff member observed, "Teenagers are really self-conscious, aren't they, so they're not going to want to be seen looking in that section." For this reason, it was felt that it was not sufficient to provide an adult LGBT collection and expect teenagers to look there; as one librarian commented, "To actually go and use that collection is quite an out thing to do anyway." This participant then went on to suggest that many people find relevant and valuable books serendipitously (see Ross, 1999, for a discussion of this) and that material needs to be available in the general collection for straight or questioning teenagers to find "by happy accident."

There was much less of a consensus as regards the location of picture books, reflecting concerns about the provision of materials to younger children as discussed earlier. The primary issue related to the possibility of parental complaint, with one librarian observing, "I think there is a feeling among some parents that if they just picked a book out of a kinderbox or train and they thought it was just a normal sort of bedtime story, and half-way through they suddenly realized that this was actually very different, they may be a little bit miffed that they were having to explain complicated issues to young children." The librarians from authority B felt that it was important to show sensitivity toward parents' wishes; however, this provoked debate in the focus group, as one frontline employee thought the books should not be "stuck in a box," especially for LGBT issues. She went on to say, "I think some of them ought to be amongst the general fiction as well . . . just as a story for children, just to find, and have introduced in a normal sort of way."

The stock team from authority A felt it would be useful to differentiate between picture books with a good storyline that met mainstream quality standards and could be included with mainstream materials and books

that seemingly existed in order to “educate” children about LGBT issues. A librarian commented, “The picture books . . . some of them I would probably put in the parents’ collection simply because I think they don’t work as picture books, they are more for . . . if a parent wants to introduce the subject with a younger child.” This potential solution was put to the authority B focus group, who all agreed that it would be a good plan. One LGBT participant, a gay father, suggested that they should be located among picture books about other types of families, which is another possible solution.

Some questionnaire respondents also mentioned the issue of location; however, here again there was a lack of consensus. Three respondents felt that picture books should be shelved separately for fear of parental complaint, while two felt that creating a special section would itself be likely to provoke objections. In contrast, two felt that it was important to integrate this material in order to promote equality and understanding of diversity. Some LGBT participants were similarly sensitive to the implications of having the books in a separate section, feeling that a mixed collection would better reflect our diverse society. They felt the books should be accessible to all, whether or not they were part of an LGBT family. One young bisexual woman stated, “They shouldn’t be somewhere like an ‘issues’ section where people don’t look unless they have an issue.”

The need for staff awareness, bibliographic aids, and a user-friendly cataloging system was mentioned by several participants, both LGBT people and library staff members. Participants from both authorities felt that the staff would not be able to answer a patron query easily, with one librarian admitting, “I think if we were asked over the counter to produce something, I think we would struggle, standing there, we would have to go away and think about it.” This is a situation that would not automatically resolve itself if stock holdings were improved, so the staff would need to be made aware of the material in order that best use could be made of it. However, both LGBT respondents and library staff were conscious that it would also be useful if library users could find this material themselves, as “not all children are going to feel comfortable going up to a librarian and saying, ‘Have you got any books about kids with gay dads?’” Booklists of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people would help both staff and library users to find the materials and would help to circumvent the problem of interfiled material becoming “lost” among the rest of the stock.

The focus group in authority B noted that it would also be helpful for library patrons to be able to find LGBT-related fiction for children and young people via keyword searches on the catalog. The researcher checked the authority A and authority B catalogs to find out whether this was possible and discovered that subject keywords such as “gay fiction” produced a number of results in the authority B catalog but not for authority A.

This is supported by research by Goldthorp (2006), who found that keyword access for LGBT fiction tends to be poor.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This was a preliminary, small-scale study, and the results cannot be generalized beyond the participating library authorities. Both questionnaire respondents and focus group participants were self-selecting, which carries a risk of response bias: homophobic and transphobic library staff may simply not have participated, and the strongly positive opinions on the provision of LGBT fiction may thus not be representative of all library workers. Moreover, the data are also subject to social-desirability bias, in that respondents may have given the answers they felt to be politically correct. Despite these limitations, it has been possible to tentatively identify some trends and themes that merit further investigation.

LGBT focus group participants were also self-selecting. Participant numbers for this group were low, and the opinions expressed are not necessarily representative of the broad spectrum of people who make up LGBT communities. In particular, no trans people participated. Moreover, due to ethical constraints, it was sadly not possible to involve under-eighteens in the focus groups, and young LGBT adults were contacted instead. It should be noted that memories are not always reliable, and the context has also altered significantly in recent years, notably in terms of changing literary fashions and widespread Internet access.

While every effort was made to ensure that the checklist was as comprehensive as possible within the time available, subsequent research has revealed that many titles were inadvertently omitted. Percentage holdings of LGBT titles may thus be higher than they would have been for a more comprehensive list, as libraries may be less likely to stock titles if information on them is difficult to find.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The original dissertation (Chapman, E. L., 2007a) drew on the research findings and the extant literature to make a number of recommendations for individual library authorities and for CILIP and the library community as a whole. Key recommendations were published in a professional journal article (Chapman & Birdi, 2008) and are summarized next.

Recommendations for Individual Library Authorities

- Libraries should improve their holdings of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people. Particular effort should be made to seek picture books, books with trans content, books in different formats (e.g., large print), and books from less mainstream authors and publishers; it may be necessary to use specialist suppliers, such as Gay's the Word bookshop (<http://www.gaystheword.co.uk>), to procure these materials. It may also

be necessary to relax quality criteria in order to provide a diverse range of materials.

- The library should have a written stock policy that includes LGBT-related materials for children and young people, available on the library web site if possible to ensure transparency. Where supplier selection is used, the specifications should also include LGBT-related materials for children and young people.
- The possibility of complaint should not dictate stock-purchasing decisions, and LGBT-related materials should not carry age restrictions.
- YA materials with LGBT content should be integrated with the rest of the stock, whereas for picture books it may depend on the quality of the story (see “Location and Cataloging” section). To improve findability, booklists should be provided online and/or in hard copy, and materials should be keyworded to facilitate catalog use (e.g. “LGBT”).
- Staff members should be made aware of the materials and how to find them, and all staff members should receive diversity training covering LGBT issues and the need to provide materials and to show sensitivity toward people of any age who wish to use them.

Recommendations for CILIP and the Library Community as a Whole

- As already suggested by McNicol (2005b), CILIP should expand its statement on intellectual freedom to explicitly address age-related issues.
- Details of successful and unsuccessful initiatives should be shared to develop best practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The research sought to investigate the quality of public library provision of LGBT-related fiction in the United Kingdom, focusing on holdings of this material in two library authorities and library staff attitudes to it within and beyond these authorities. Opinions were also gathered from young LGBT people and LGBT parents.

The study showed clear room for improvement in provision in authorities A and B; they held markedly lower numbers of titles than Brighton and Hove, which was used as a point of comparison. It was not possible to assess provision throughout the United Kingdom; however, the data suggest that provision may be limited in other authorities. In this respect, the findings mirror those of previous studies that have identified poor levels of provision of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people in public libraries (e.g., Boon & Howard, 2004; Howard, 2005; Rothbauer & McKechnie, 1999; Spence, 2000). However, the present study was the first of its kind in the United Kingdom, so there is little scope for direct comparison. The research found that provision of certain types of stock was particularly poor: namely, picture books, books with trans content, books in different formats (e.g., large print), and books from less mainstream authors and publishers.

The vast majority of respondents said that their authorities did not mention LGBT-related materials for children and young people in their stock-purchasing policies or purchase from specialist bookshops, and few respondents used specialist information sources to find out about LGBT fiction for children and young people. The researcher hypothesizes that suppliers are not providing a full range of this material and that librarians are failing to look beyond mainstream suppliers, despite CILIP's guidelines (CILIP, 2004/2009). Preliminary findings from ongoing doctoral research by the author at the University of Sheffield appear to support this hypothesis.

Library staff members who participated in the research showed generally positive attitudes regarding the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in public libraries, suggesting that the lack of provision is not simply due to homophobic or transphobic prejudice. However, there were some areas of concern, notably relating to the quality of materials, provision of materials to younger children, and the possibility of parental complaint. Library focus group participants felt that LGBT-related fiction for children and young people should meet the same quality standards as other materials, while questionnaire respondents were split between a desire to maintain quality and recognition of the need for stock to reflect our diverse society. LGBT participants also recognized the potential drawbacks of poor-quality books, and opinions were again divided, but many of these participants felt that quality standards should be relaxed somewhat in order to provide a broader range of materials.

There were also concerns about the provision of materials to younger children and the possibility of parental (or councilor) complaint. Concerns frequently manifested themselves in the form of opinions on location, with some library staff members feeling that picture books should be located in a separate section to avoid the possibility of complaint, while others felt that a separate section would itself draw negative attention. In contrast, there was a consensus that YA novels should be interfiled, as many teenagers would not be comfortable looking at a separate LGBT section.

Focus group participants from authorities A and B felt that complaints were relatively unlikely, and both LGBT and library focus group participants felt strongly that the possibility of complaint should not be allowed to dictate purchasing decisions in any case. These participants were comfortable with the idea of providing LGBT-related YA novels, including those with sexual content, in the library's young-adult section; the general consensus was that these materials should not carry age restrictions. However, the data suggested that fears of complaint may be more of a constraining factor in some other library authorities, and a few questionnaire respondents felt that age restrictions or parental permission requirements might be necessary. Such restrictions contravene national and international guidelines on intellectual freedom (CILIP, 2005; IFLA, 1999; OHCHR, 1989) and are particularly problematic where LGBT materials are con-

cerned as they could prevent young people from accessing valuable information, while the possibility of being challenged at the counter could pose a significant psychological barrier. These young people may not be in a position to ask their parents for permission but may be all the more in need of information.

Although the research was small scale, it has provided a much-needed preliminary insight into the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in the United Kingdom. The study highlighted areas which were clearly in need of improvement within and potentially beyond authorities A and B, and the research generated a list of practical recommendations for U.K. public libraries. It has, unfortunately, not been possible to assess whether the recommendations have resulted in measurable improvements in the provision of LGBT-related fiction for children and young people in U.K. public libraries; however, a number of librarians and other interested parties have contacted the researcher for a copy of the booklist, and an updated version of this, together with a list of recommended titles, is now available online to facilitate access (see n. 5). In addition, the focus groups had some immediate value in raising awareness of the need for provision and of some of the titles available.

However, much work remains to be done in the field. The original dissertation (Chapman, E. L., 2007a) recommended a large-scale study of provision, factors affecting provision, and library staff attitudes across the United Kingdom, coupled with investigation of provision via mainstream suppliers. This is ongoing in the form of doctoral research; however, given the current dearth of research, there is scope (and indeed, a pressing need) for significantly more research on the subject. For example, future research could profitably address the attitudes of frontline staff members to LGBT-related materials for children and young people; catalog access to LGBT-related materials for children and young people, particularly fiction; and, perhaps most urgently, the library and information needs of young LGBT people and LGBT parents, and their attitudes toward fiction in particular.

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NOTES

1. Although the 2009–2010 and 2010–2011 Integrated Household Surveys did include a question on sexual orientation, the findings are considered to be “experimental statistics” rather than official figures (ONS, 2011b). Approximately 1.5 percent of respondents declared themselves to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (ONS, 2011a), but LGB rights organization Stonewall has suggested that this figure may significantly underreport the numbers of LGB people in the United Kingdom, due to methodological issues with the survey and respondents’ unwillingness to openly identify their sexual orientation (BBC, 2010).
2. The present version of the guidance was published in 2009, subsequent to the research study reported here. However, a version of the guidance has been available on the CILIP web site since at least 2004, including the sections cited in this article.
3. The term “cisgender” refers to individuals whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth (i.e., individuals who are not trans).
4. See Appendix II of the full dissertation for a complete listing of all the source lists used (Chapman, E. L., 2007a).
5. An updated list is available to download from <http://www.shef.ac.uk/is/research/groups/lib/chapman> or on request from the researcher. The original list used for the research can be found in Appendix III of the full dissertation (Chapman, E. L., 2007a).

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