

LGBTQ-Inclusive Collections

School Librarian Self-Reflections and Collection Development Guide

Rachel Altobelli

rkaltobelli@gmail.com

Nancy Jo Lambert

nancyjolambert@gmail.com



As we write this and prepare to close out 2021 we can't help but reflect on the year of anti-LGBTQ state legislation and attacks on the Queer community, especially transgender identities (Ronan 2021; ACLU 2021). At a time when much of the country assumes LGBTQ+ people have achieved full equality due to same-sex marriage being legalized (Gallup 2021), many do not realize that discrimination against LGBTQ+ people is still entirely legal in many states. In Texas, where Nancy Jo lives, a landlord could legally decide not to rent to a gay couple. In both South Dakota and Missouri, school districts are prohibited from specifically protecting LGBTQ students. (For a comprehensive overview of anti-LGBTQ state laws, visit the "State Maps" page from the Human Rights Campaign at www.hrc.org/resources/state-maps.)

When the Supreme Court struck down state laws banning same-sex marriage, it created precedence for same-sex marriage to be legal in all fifty states. However, since then there's been a distinct rise in national anti-LGBTQ+ groups coordinating with anti-equality state lawmakers to wage an unprecedented war on the rights of the LGBTQ+ community (Ronan 2021).

Schools and school libraries have become a battleground within this national conflict, often leading to Queer lit for kids and teens being targeted. The American Library Association saw a steep increase in book challenges in 2021. Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, said, "Social media is amplifying local challenges and they're going viral, but we've also been observing a number of organizations activating local members to go to school board meetings and challenge books. We're seeing what appears to be a campaign

to remove books, particularly books dealing with LGBTQ+ themes and books dealing with racism" (Flood 2021).

These attacks on the LGBTQ+ community may make some school librarians hesitant to purchase Queer stories and information. We agreed to write this article because we want school librarians to lean into curiosity instead of judgment and learn about LGBTQ+ identities to help them overcome their own biases and fear. We hope this article will help school librarians move forward confidently in creating an LGBTQ+-inclusive collection and create Queer-inclusive school library programming and spaces. We hope that knowing more about the terms, concepts, and identities used and represented in LGBTQ+ books will help you select, understand, promote, and—if necessary—defend these vitally important resources.

Ideally, we have procedural directives and policies to guide our response to book challenges (and if your school or district does not have such a procedural directive, we highly recommend working to create one!). However, for school librarians and school district library supervisors who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community, book challenges and other attacks on the Queer community can feel unsettling or painful.

Rachel: I am a school district library supervisor who identifies as a lesbian. I am out both personally and professionally, but because I work at the district level, it isn't likely that parents will object to me having my job. This gives me a level of safety and security school-based educators who are members of the LGBTQ+ community often don't have. However, part of my job is responding to book challenges or, more often, the questions that come from parents or administra-

tors that—fortunately—don't become formal challenges. It's hard to listen to some of the questions sometimes, especially when they come from colleagues, but all of us, as school librarians, have to balance bringing our full selves to work with following our procedures and policies and working to create school library collections that are expansive and comprehensive.

Nancy Jo: I am a school librarian who identifies as bisexual. I am out at school, professionally, and in my community with family and friends. I am currently under attack by people in my local community who don't think I should be stating my sexual orientation or working with students. I am also the employee monitor for our campus Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), and I have been questioned about doing that work by people who think that is inappropriate for a myriad of reasons. I came out to help normalize my identity and others like me and because it is more important to me that LGBTQ+ students and educators see that you can not only survive being Queer, but that you can thrive.

Identities

We want our school libraries to celebrate and honor the identities of all our students, but what about the identities we may or may not know about? Depending on your school, your students, and your community, you may have many students already secure in their LGBTQ+ identities, or you may have no students who are openly LGBTQ+ yet. Whichever community you serve, it can be tempting to decide that LGBTQ+ representation isn't needed, especially now, when LGBTQ+ books are frequently in the news.

There are school librarians, particularly elementary school librarians, who say they don't know any LGBTQ+ kids or they don't have

any LGBTQ+ kids at their school. Data—and our life experiences—tell us there are LGBTQ+ kids and families in every school and in every community. “Gallup’s latest update on lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identification finds 5.6% of U.S. adults identifying as LGBT. The current estimate is up from 4.5% in Gallup’s previous update based on 2017 data” (Jones 2021). That same poll estimates that one in six adult members of Generation Z (those aged 18 to 23 in 2020) identify as LGBT. LGBT identification is increasing as younger generations are more likely to consider themselves to be something other than heterosexual or cisgender (Jones 2021).

Before we go further, we’re going to list some terms so readers have a basic understanding of the terms *sex*, *gender identity*, *gender expression*, *attraction*, and *sexual orientation*. It is helpful for school librarians to know these terms when selecting LGBTQ+ materials.

Sex (sometimes called biological sex, anatomical sex, or physical sex): Comprised of things like genitals, chromosomes, hormones, body hair, and more. A person’s sex does not determine their gender.

Gender identity: Your psychological sense of self. Who you, in your head, know yourself to be based on how much you align (or don’t align) with what you understand to be the options for gender.

Gender expression: The ways you present gender through your actions, clothing, demeanor, and more. Your outward-facing self and how that’s interpreted by others based on gender norms.

Sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. The scientifically accurate term for an individual’s enduring physical, romantic, and/

or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual (straight) orientations. Avoid the offensive term “sexual preference,” which is used to suggest that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is voluntary and therefore “curable.” People need not have had specific sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all.

Attraction: Like sex, attraction isn’t really a component of gender. However, we often conflate sexual orientation with gender, or categorize the attraction we experience in gendered ways.

In addition to these terms, you may be wondering what exactly all the letters in LGBTQ stand for and what they mean. As school librarians, we know the power (and when we are not careful, the pain) of words and labels and categories. There are several good online resources for educators, including Welcoming Schools from the Human Rights Campaign, which provides definitions for both adults and older students:

- “Definitions to Help Understand Gender and Sexual Orientation” (Adults and Older Students): <https://welcomingschools.org/resources/definitions-gender-sexual-orientation>
- “Defining LGBTQ+ Words for Elementary School Students”: <https://welcomingschools.org/resources/definitions-lgbtq-elementary-school>

If you’re up for more reading, check out the “GLSEN Safe Space Kit”: www.glsen.org/activity/glsen-safe-space-kit-solidarity-lgbtq-youth. In addition to a glossary of terms at the end, the kit provides good information for educators about bias, allyship,

and concrete ways to support LGBTQ+ students.

If, on the other hand, you were hoping for a quick rundown, LGBTQ+ stands for:

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Transgender
- Queer or Questioning (and be mindful when using Queer. For many members, of the LGBTQ+ community, the term has been reclaimed and we embrace and use the word, but for others the word remains potentially hurtful and harmful)

In addition, sometimes you’ll see LGBTQIA+; the additional letters stand for:

- Intersex
- Asexual/Aromantic (Ace)

In all cases, the + is added to include identities not specifically listed. The way LGBTQ+ identities are labeled and defined is fluid and evolving, and students and other young people often lead the way. As much as your LGBTQ+ colleagues try to keep up with evolving terminology, there will be times when students are ahead of us, because they are sharing ideas rapidly on TikTok, and we are Googling “what is TikTok.”

For an even more complete list of terms and resources visit EduPride-Alliance’s “The ABC’s of LGBTQ+” webpage: www.edupridealliance.org/resources/terminology.

Hypersexualization and Stereotypes

The Queer community has long endured slurs, inaccurate or ill-conceived stereotypes, and hyper-

sexualization that at best comes out through microaggressions or inappropriate questions and at worst leads to accusations of pornography and pedophilia.

For example, young people—and sometimes not so young people—still use “gay” to mean something that is lame, uncool, or somehow bad. LGBTQ+ students might hear this comment dozens of times a day. As adults we both have been asked questions by coworkers that were incredibly inappropriate and which presumed sexual activity on our part that was highly inaccurate. We will not list specific examples here, but students experience the same kind of questions, but often, due to youth and inexperience, with even less sensitivity on the part of the asker.

In education, we say we are here for all students, but LGBTQ+ students often do not feel seen or valued by their teachers. They often do not have the opportunity to see their identity represented in their curriculums, on classroom walls, or in assigned texts. We regularly fail to

acknowledge the implicit biases that we all harbor. These biases negatively influence our LGBTQ colleagues’ and students’ feelings of inclusion and safety. The Trevor Project found that LGBTQ+ youth seriously contemplate suicide at almost three times the rate of heterosexual youth. LGBTQ+ youth are almost five times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to heterosexual youth (2021). Suicide is not caused because of an LGBTQ+ identity, but rather by how the world reacts to that identity.

According to a Human Rights Campaign LGBTQ Teen Survey, only 26 percent of LGBTQ+ respondents age 13 to 18 say they always feel safe in their school classrooms, and just five percent say all of their teachers and school staff are supportive of LGBTQ+ people (2018).

As educators, we work with students and colleagues every day who represent every facet of the human condition, including diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and

gender expressions, and we must ensure their voices are heard in our collections.

Queer Lit in School Libraries

LGBTQ stories are becoming more prevalent in both kid and YA lit. Historically, LGBTQ+ characters and themes have been underrepresented in mainstream publishing due to arguments that LGBTQ+ content is “niche” and not commercially viable or necessary. Censorship of Queer stories has also played a big part in their underrepresentation in kid and YA lit (Hachette Book Group 2021). Children’s books featuring LGBTQ+ characters are often described as being about sex even when they are about cartoon animals who stand several feet away from each other at all times. Because of the way LGBTQ+ characters and stories have been portrayed in our society, we may have inaccurate ideas about LGBTQ+ books and materials. We’re school librarians, though, so we know we can do better than accept the unvetted opinions floating around us.



People need not have had specific sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation; in fact, they need not have had any sexual experience at all.

We want to be clear that books about LGBTQ+ characters and our history can have a profound effect on young readers by increasing LGBTQ+ visibility in school libraries. Not only can Queer stories educate and inform young readers who may not be part of the LGBTQ community, but those stories can help Queer readers envision a path in life that they may not have thought possible (Hachette Book Group 2021). If we had seen ourselves represented in books, as children and teens, we might have saved significantly on therapy bills later in life. More seriously, we might have felt less alone and less like something was wrong with us. (There was nothing wrong with us, but children often come up with such explanations when they feel like they don't fit the world's expectations of humanity.) We want our Queer students to see that they can not only survive growing up Queer, but they can thrive.

Rudine Sims Bishop said it best when she noted:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar, or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books...

When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that

we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us all human. (1990, 3)

We also recognize that human nature creates built-in biases that we all struggle to recognize and overcome. Many people have biases about the LGBTQ+ community that are slowly built over time by society, media, religious beliefs, and a general lack of understanding. We hope that as educators and school librarians you will learn how to recognize your own biases regarding the LGBTQ+ community and then learn how to think differently.

LGBTQ-Inclusive Collection Development Practices

Good collection development is broad, comprehensive, and inclusive, and we have always included stories that are and are not visibly represented in our communities. Schools in landlocked cities still buy books about the ocean, after

We need more stories where Queer characters are simply living Queer and engaging in action, fantastical adventures, mystery and crime, and experiencing authentic romance. When school library collections are inclusive of all identities, we send a powerful message to our school communities.

all. In our fight for equality, the Queer community has been fighting to be seen and valued for our full and authentic selves. Everyone's identity is multifaceted and complex. As school librarians, we try to reflect that complexity in our school libraries through books and information that offer many perspectives. Those stories represent the complexity of the human experience, and there is no end to that tale.

When we look at the AASL Standards Framework for Learners, the assumption of inclusive collection development is woven throughout. "Learners gather information appropriate to the task by: Collecting information representing diverse perspectives" (IV.C.2), to "Learners demonstrate empathy and equity in knowledge building within the global learning community by: Demonstrating interest in other perspectives during learning activities" (II.D.2) (AASL 2018). Without a robust, interesting, and authentic collection, how will learners have

access to sufficient information to allow them to gather information or demonstrate interest? LGBTQ+ perspectives have not always been represented in school libraries, classrooms, or curriculums, but LGBTQ+ *people* have always existed. We have always been there, in classrooms and libraries and communities, living lives, having stories, and participating in history.

Inclusive collection development belongs at all levels. There are excellent books at every level, fiction and nonfiction, that offer authentic representation of LGBTQ+ identities.

For book suggestions, check out resources like ALA's Rainbow Book List: <https://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbow-books/>. Make a point of adding the Stonewall Award and Honor winners each year that are appropriate for your grade or age level: www.ala.org/rt/rrt/award/stonewall/honored.

School librarians need to guard against the practice of soft-censorship or self-censorship. This is

where we opt to, either consciously or unconsciously, not purchase a book or resource because of our own biased thinking or views or because we fear a challenge or controversy around us having that book in our school library. All students are afforded the right to access to information by the First Amendment. In addition, there is legal precedent that prohibits school boards and administrators from pulling a book or resource from a library simply because they disagree with the content, perspectives, or topics covered in it (Island Trees 1982).

Of course, as we add titles, we also weed, and LGBTQ+ books are no exception. Great strides have been made in recent years, so you may want to consider weeding:

- Older fiction titles that focus on the straight, cisgender friends, and family members of LGBTQ+ characters, where LGBTQ+ identities are presented as problems or issues to overcome... by those straight, cisgender friends, and family members;



- Nonfiction titles written before recent legal advances (for example, if books talk about gay marriage not being legal in the United States, they no longer contain current information!);
- Outdated books on AIDS, HIV, or other STIs (your school or district may have policies about how often these books need to be updated).

All of these areas are still necessary—we need fiction and nonfiction and books about sexual health—but the more recent titles are a vast improvement, and students benefit when current titles are added and outdated titles are removed. Increasingly, we *can* find titles where LGBTQ+ identities are not only represented but celebrated, although intersectional representation remains harder to find.

Beyond simple representation, we need to collect a wide variety of stories. Many LGBTQ+ stories center around coming out or the Queer character learning to accept their identity. Be careful the coming out story doesn't become the single story given to LGBTQ+ characters in your collection as that isn't the only story we want our students to read. We need more stories where Queer characters are simply living Queer and engaging in action, fantastical adventures, mystery and crime, and experiencing authentic romance.

When school library collections are inclusive of all identities, we send a powerful message to our school communities. Your school library almost certainly serves LGBTQ+ students, parents, and teachers, and the representation on your shelves and your displays and digital collections sends a powerful message.

Depending on your collection development, your school library may say, with every book on its shelves, that all are welcome. Alternatively, your school library may say that LGBTQ+ identities—and therefore students, teachers, and parents—don't really have a place in your community.

Students are paying attention, and they notice, and it matters. According to the 2019 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, “just under half of students (48.9%) reported that they could find information about LGBTQ-related issues in their school library.” GLSEN lists this as one of their key findings because school libraries have the potential to give LGBTQ+ youth an incredible lifeline. Just one book—one story, one moment of recognition, one indication that maybe it's going to be okay—can change, or save, a life.

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Especially in our current times, when school libraries and our collections seem to be in the news frequently, fundamentally inclusive collection development is essential. When we internalize the idea of inclusive collection development being simply a part of collection development, adding, promoting, and—if necessary—defending LGBTQ+ books becomes a given, rather than an extra.

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Nancy Jo Lambert
is a teacher librarian
at Reedy High School
in Frisco, Texas. She's
also a Google Certified

Trainer. She is a presenter advocating for libraries by telling the story of the learning happening in her library. She holds positions in TLA, TCEA, ALA, AASL, and TASL. She was named TCEA Library Media Specialist of the Year and AASL Social Media Superstar Curriculum Champion in 2019. She co-founded #TeachPride, EduPrideAlliance. She is also a #FReadom organizer. She is known for sharing her professional work on Twitter @NancyJoLambert and <www.nancyjolambert.com> and her library website <www.reedylibrary.com>.

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Rachel Altobelli
(she/her) is the director
of library services and
instructional materials
for Albuquerque Public

Schools in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She received the 2020 Excellence in Student Achievement Award from the New Mexico School Boards Association. Rachel was the member guide for the 2017–2018 ALA Emerging Leaders cohort that created the toolkit "Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ Materials in School Libraries." She was a panelist for the Junior Library Guild for the July 16, 2020, webinar "Innovation in Uncertainty: Back to School" and the May 20, 2020, "Innovation in Uncertainty: How Librarians Step Up, Support Students, and Find Solutions." She was also a co-presenter for the June 20, 2020, online presentation "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: The School Library and Me in the Global Learning Community" to the AASL Affiliate Assembly. She was the guest editor for the January/February 2020 issue of Knowledge Quest. She is a member of AASL and is a member of the Knowledge Quest Editorial Board.

Additional Resources

- AASL's "Defending Intellectual Freedom" webpage: <<https://standards.aasl.org/project/lgbtq>>
- ALA's "Fight Censorship" webpage: <www.ala.org/advocacy/fight-censorship>
- "Project READY: Reimagining Equity & Access for Diverse Youth – A Free Online Professional Development Curriculum": <<https://ready.web.unc.edu/>>

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