



“In K–12 schools, being LGBTQ can be one of the most difficult things a person experiences.”

# Meeting the Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, or Questioning Students through the School Library Collection

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It is every librarian’s goal to ensure a diverse collection of literature for students and the school community. Critical to collection development is the inclusion of books that serve the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or questioning (LGBTQ) community within the school, as well as students who seek greater understanding of the LGBTQ community.

The Williams Institute (Gates & Newport, 2013) reported that America’s LGBTQ population ranges from 3–10%, and a higher number of young adults (29%) have same-sex thoughts and/or do not consider themselves 100% heterosexual or 100% LGBTQ. Based on these statistics, there is a wide range of possibility for students in K–12 education related to sexual and gender identity within the LGBTQ community.

## GENDER IDENTITY

*Gender identity* is defined as “our inner-most concept of self as male, female, or queer—what we perceive or call ourselves,” while *sexual identity* refers to “how we view ourselves *sexually*, including what we call ourselves (e.g., gay, bi, queer, straight)” (Brady, 2012, p. 3). While it is important to acknowledge the difference between gender identity and sexual identity, this article does not specifically distinguish between these for recommended titles but rather looks at issues of both, focusing on appropriate themes of literature and literary quality for inclusion in the K–12 school library. A person who has same-sex thoughts most often identifies as gay or lesbian, a person who does not identify

with their birth-assigned gender often identifies as transgender, and a person who has both heterosexual and same sex thoughts identifies as bisexual. *Questioning* includes those who question their sexuality. (Many individuals prefer the use of the pronoun *they* rather than *he* or *she*.) Of those who question their sexuality, there is a wide age range in which this begins: 4% are 3–5 years old, 21% are 6–10 years old, 57% are 11–15 years old, and 14% are 16–20 years old (Gates & Newport, 2013). Thus 57% questioning suggests that librarians at the middle school may be particularly sensitive to inclusion of LGBTQ titles.

In K–12 schools, being LGBTQ can be one of the most challenging things a person experiences. Being LGBTQ or being perceived as LGBTQ is one of the main reasons kids are bullied at school. Bullying is dehumanizing, yet, sadly, it is a common occurrence. Educators have an obligation to help these children; as a librarian, one appropriate method is to provide literature to which these students can relate.

## PERCEPTIONS

I'm embarrassed to say that a couple of years ago I signed a petition to support heterosexual marriage; at the time I strongly opposed same-sex marriage. I thought I was doing the right thing. That was until my son came to me and told me he was gay and had known this since fifth grade. In reflecting on his earlier school experience, I wondered how it may have affected him and what I could have done to support my son. Did he feel safe at school? Was he teased? Was there support there for him? Was there a place for him to go to identify with anyone who was like him?

At the time, in some schools and communities, homophobic tendencies were encouraged. I have heard statements made by people (including some colleagues) that same-sex couples in our middle school are going through "a phase," that they are not really gay. It is clear, with these kinds of attitudes, strong statements are made to students and little or no support is offered to those who are LGBTQ.

My son's situation is not unique, because he was not the only gay student in our school. Across the country and in our classrooms, 3–29% of students are LGBTQ. Further, many students have LGBTQ parents. Not doing anything to support these students further promotes the isolation they can feel.

## DIVERSITY IN THE LIBRARY

While many school districts and school library mission statements promote multiculturalism and diversity, both throughout the curriculum and in the library, some may not reflect the diversity specific to LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students make up almost

6% of students, but on average, a library's LGBTQ collection represents only .4% of the books. These data beg the question: Where can young people who identify as LGBTQ turn for support, safe space, confidential access to information, and materials that speak to their lives? I believe the answer is the library. Library resources can provide affirmation and characters with which LGBTQ youth can identify, which can decrease feelings of alienation. Make collections more inclusive by including tales of friendship, companionship, and romance that embrace LGBTQ relationships and identity in order to create a more complete portrait of the life of LGBTQ students.

## LIBRARY SUPPORT

Library support for LGBTQ communities presents in three natural developmental stages for children in elementary, middle, and high school. Each age group offers opportunities for promoting LGBTQ books that can lend support.

### Elementary

Many books for primary-grade students focus on characters who have same-sex parents. High-quality titles with this theme focus on the importance of family and love—and how all families are important, no matter the makeup of the family. To expand the collection, add books that examine "love, relationships, and configurations of different families" (Brady, 2012, p. 4) in order for children to begin to develop an understanding of gender identity. New elementary picture books about inclusive families published in 2015–2016 include *One Family* by George Shannon, a new and revised edition of *Heather Has Two Mommies*

by Heather Newman, and *Stella Brings the Family* by Miriam B. Schiffer. These books offer insight into how families come in different sizes, configurations, and gender roles, emphasizing acceptance and loving one another. It is important to have titles in which underlying themes describe how essential it is for the community to build a culture of support for all students, both those who have same-sex parents and those who may begin questioning or trying to understand their gender identification.

### Middle

The second level of support is for upper elementary and middle school students. Themes of LGBTQ middle-level books often include more vibrant main characters *others* deem as "gay." Characters may or may not admit, deny, or even know that they are gay. Librarians may find that books at this level, which carry themes about gay or questioning students, also address bullying and humiliation. Three award-winning books recently released are *Gracefully Grayson* by Ami Polonsky, *George* by Alex Gino, and *Better Nate Than Ever* by Tim Federle. The main characters are young boys who are questioning or harboring their sexuality identity. Classmates think they are gay, and these main characters must deal with bullying in school. Not only are these books excellently written, they are also books that students will be able to identify with.

### High School Level

At the high school level, the tone of recently published quality LGBTQ literature is acceptance and explicit identity, as well as understandings around the fluidity of sexual identity. Both fiction and nonfiction titles provide insight into what it is like to be

## LGBTQ LITERATURE

Albertalli, Becky. *Simons vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Balzer + Bray, 2015.

Dawson, James. *This Book Is Gay*. Sourcebooks Fire, 2015.

Federle, Tim. *Better Nate Than Ever*. Simon and Schuster, 2015.

Gino, Alex. *George*. Scholastic, 2015.

Newman, Heather. *Heather Has Two Mommies*. Candlewick, 2015.

Polonsky, Ami. *Gracefully Grayson*. Disney-Hyperion, 2014.

Schiffer, Miriam B. *Stella Brings the Family*. Chronicle, 2015.

Shannon, George. *One Family*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Thrash, Maggie. *Honor Girl*. Candlewick, 2015.

Trujillo, E. E. Charlton. *Fat Angie*. Candlewick, 2015.

### Elementary Titles

Baldacchino, Christine. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*. Groundwood, 2014.

Gaiman, Neil. *The Sleeper and the Spindle*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Hertzh, Jessica. *I Am Jazz*. Dial, 2014.

Hoffman, Sarah. *Jacob's New Dress*. Albert Whitman, 2014.

Polacco, Patricia. *In Our Mother's House*. Philomel, 2009.

in a LGBTQ relationship. Many memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, and other nonfiction texts share stories of hope and heartbreak and explain how LGBTQ relationships work and how they don't. Know that these books can be highly controversial—parents have tried to ban them from libraries. Three

## RESOURCES IDEAS

Create a rainbow library (see Pinterest examples at <http://tinyurl.com/zfea38v>)

Use ALA's Rainbow List, published every month at <http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>

Follow LGBTQ Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/GLBTR>

Post ALA's Stonewall (GLBT) award winners from <http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/award/honored>

current titles are *Honor Girl* by Maggie Thrush, *Fat Angie* by E. E. Charlton Trujillo, and *This Book Is Gay* by James Dawson.

## WHAT ELSE LIBRARIANS CAN DO

School librarians need to add LGBTQ-themed titles to the collection and actively promote them by featuring titles on reading lists, including them in displays, sharing them with PTA and concerned parents, and recommending them to teachers for inclusion in the curriculum. Librarians can also include them in library-sponsored book clubs. The most important step is to *acknowledge* that books with LGBTQ characters are not about “other people”—they're about us, all of us. They are about teens walking down the hallways of every high school, the people walking down the streets of every community. These books are about the world of every teen, regardless of his or her sexuality.

## OPPORTUNITY AWAITS

School librarians have a great oppor-

tunity to help normalize LGBTQ lives and experiences and portray sexual and gender diversity as part of the human experience. By creating a more inclusive collection, all students will benefit. LGBTQ students will see themselves reflected in their school library; straight students will see a more accurate representation of the diversity in the world.

I asked my son, who is an avid reader, if having books in the library with LGBTQ references would have helped him in school to feel less isolated and more accepted. He was quick to answer “YES!” Why would we not take the opportunity to help those who are really crying out for support? Librarians can step up as leaders in our schools.

## REFERENCES

Brady, J. (2012). *From the dress-up corner to the senior prom: Navigating gender and sexuality diversity in preK–12 schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Gates, G. J., & Newport, F. (2013, February). Gallup special report: New estimates of the LGBTQ population in the United States. *Williams Institute*. Retrieved from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/gallup-lgbt-pop-feb-2013/#sthash.o1gSYV9L.dpuf>

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