

Being for everyone

When thinking about how libraries are changing in the 21st century, most people automatically jump straight to computers, the internet, and e-books. Indeed, the format of our information resources is drastically changing the way we offer our services. This is becoming evident, particularly in public libraries, with tailored services such as youth and children's services, migrant services, drug and alcohol information, for example. However, there is another area of libraries that needs attention, and that is our users. Specifically, our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer users (LGBTQ).

Not long ago, I asked a room full of about 30 LGBTQ youth, most in their early twenties, to raise their hand if they were bullied at school. Almost everyone did. I then asked those who had been bullied if they had taken refuge in their school library. About 75% of the room raised their hand.

If 10% of your library's user demographic were culturally and linguistically diverse, you would tailor your services to that demographic, by having books in other languages, English as a second language resources and classes, and employing multilingual staff. The LGBTQ community is no different. Research shows that approximately 9-11% of people are not exclusively heterosexual (as determined by La Trobe's 3rd National Survey into Secondary Students and Sexual Health, 2002). That is about one in ten people.

Twenty-five years ago, LGBTQ – themed books in libraries were few and far between. If a library did have some in stock, they were often placed under the counter, and removed only for adults. Books that were placed on the shelves were frequently removed by members of the public, and parents would protest their presence in school libraries. You only have to read about the history of the classic young adult novel, *Annie On My Mind* by Nancy Garden, to hear about it regularly being banned, and sometimes even burned.

Times have changed, and a book burning in 21st century Australia is unthinkable. However, that does not mean LGBTQ youth have an easy time of it. Libraries have a duty to their users to provide unrestricted information for those who need it. For young people growing up in country areas, where there are no LGBTQ services for hundreds of kilometres, the library is the one place they can connect to the wider community, either through books and films held by the library, or through uncensored internet access. Libraries may well be the first port-of-call for our youth, or people new to town who're looking for referrals to local LGBTQ services and organisations.

There are a number of ways a school or public library can address this. The first of these is through

collection management practices, ensuring you have titles in your collection that are LGBTQ inclusive. This includes adult, young adult, and junior areas. (The City of Melbourne and the Town of Victoria Park (WA), both publish LGBTQ booklists relevant to their library online – a great way to get started.)

Your library may wish to try including some LGBTQ friendly picture books in your StoryTime offerings every once in a while. Many parents will thank you for explaining to their kids why their Uncle Frank and Uncle Bill live together. Not to mention the fact that LGBTQ parents will be thrilled, and will quite possibly spread the word within your local community that your StoryTime is awesome.

Most public libraries have a rack with local community services information, or a row of stands with free newspapers. Contact your local LGBTQ centre, and they will send you plenty of leaflets to add to it.

Where a library is using relevant colour coding or symbols on the spines of your books to indicate genre, it is useful to consider adding a symbol for LGBTQ literature, such as a small inverted pink triangle or rainbow sticker. Both of these are widely recognised by members of this community and will help everyone easily recognise these books.

And many major cities will set aside three or four weeks of the year for events, lectures, and celebrations around these themes. So why should your library miss out on the fun? Set up a display, host an LGBTQ-themed movie night, or have book talks. Do anything you like to celebrate your LGBTQ community, so long as you have fun!

No matter what you choose to do, by making sure your library is LGBTQ inclusive, you are making a positive difference to your community. If you want to find out more, join the ALIA LGBTQ e-list (alia.org.au/allianet/e-lists/). You do not need to identify as LGBTQ yourself to join.

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