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School libraries and social responsibility: support for special groups and issues - the case of homosexuality

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The Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "every individual and every organ of society … shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance…". Article 19 of the Declaration specifies that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". Further, as Article 26 says, "everyone has the right to education… Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." The emphasis throughout is on "everyone".

The Convention on the Rights of the Child supports the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Convention was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 and entered into force on 2 September 1990. After just five years, it had been ratified by 176 of the world's (then) 191 countries, making it the most widely ratified of the United Nations conventions (UNICEF, 1995). Article 13 of the Convention guarantees each child "the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice". Article 17 indicates that the governments that sign the Convention "shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources…". Further, the government shall, among other things, encourage the mass media "to disseminate

information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child", and "encourage the production and dissemination of children's books".

The IFLA/UNESCO *School Library Manifesto* (2000) states that access to school library "services and collections should be based on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Freedoms, and should not be subject to any form of ideological, political or religious censorship, or to commercial pressures". In addition, "school library services must be provided equally to all members of the school community, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, professional or social status." The *Manifesto* has been recognized officially by a number of other organizations, including the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL), whose 2002 Annual General Meeting endorsed it. The *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Guidelines* (2002) support the *Manifesto.* The *Guidelines* recommend that the "school library should be managed within a clearly structured policy framework" (p.3) that includes, among other things, a collection management policy that reflects "the diversity of society outside the school" (p.9) and carries statements about intellectual freedom and freedom of information.

The statements in these international documents are supported by documents at the national level (and in some countries at the state/provincial level as well). The American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights* says that "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues", regardless of the age of the users, though there is evidence that the events of 11 September 2001, and the passage of the USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act of October 2001, have created tensions among the library profession in the United States over the ideals expressed in the *Library Bill of Rights* (Estabrook, 2003). The Australian Library and Information Association's *Statement on Freedom to Read* says that material should not be rejected for a library's collection "on the grounds that its content is controversial or likely to offend some sections of the library's community". In addition, "a librarian should uphold the right of all Australians to have access to library services and should not discriminate against users on the grounds of age, sex, race, religion, national origin, disability, economic condition, individual lifestyle or political or social views". In the Australian School Library Association's *School Library Bill of Rights,* school librarians are required to "place principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice" in order to "provide materials on opposing sides of controversial issues so that young citizens may develop under guidance the practice of critical reading and thinking". The Western Australian Department of Education's curriculum materials *CMIS Selection Policy* statement specifies that information resources should be "selected according to the principles of intellectual freedom and provide students with access to information that represents diverse points of view". Thus school librarians are challenged to support the rights of the school community, including students of all ages, to have access to materials representing different viewpoints, including minority viewpoints, on social and other issues.

On an international basis, the record of school libraries today in responding to the needs of teachers and students for information about social issues, and providing collections that reflect a wide range of viewpoints and the varied needs of the school community, is not as good as we might like, given the statements in our professional documents. The case of homosexuality will be used to illustrate this, but it is far from being the only such case. For example, Margaret Baffour-Awuah (2000), in a study of the information about HIV/AIDS that is available in school libraries in Botswana, found that though the infection rates for the

15 to 49 age group in the country were as high as 55 per cent in some areas, school libraries generally had very few resources related to HIV/AIDS, and those that they did have, were shelved in different parts of the library because of the way in which they had been classified. Other problems that have been identified by researchers in relation to particular groups or particular resources include "closing the disparity gap" between the level of access to reading materials enjoyed by children in middle- and high-income neighborhoods in countries like the United States and the influence of this on school achievement (Duke, 2000; Neuman & Celano, 2001), and equity of access to resources available via the Internet (Farmer, 2002).

The rest of this conference paper will be devoted to discussion of the case of school library provision of support for a special group — gay, lesbian and bisexual youth — and resources related to homosexuality as a topic or issue, including resources that present a realistic and accepting view of homosexuals in our society. The American Library Association has a position statement on *Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sexual Orientation* (1993-2000), which states that "libraries and librarians have an obligation to resist efforts that systematically exclude materials dealing with any subject matter, including … sexual orientation". Further, all members of the library's community have a right to appropriate library materials and services, regardless of their own sexual orientation. This "includes providing youth with comprehensive sex education literature". However, while human rights issues related to race, culture, religion, and gender are often written into the documents of education authorities, the issue of sexual orientation of students is not (Murphy, 2000). A consequence is that there is the potential for the information needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual young people to be ignored.

This discussion of the case of homosexuality in relation to school library support for special groups and issues, will be based on work in which Marjorie Lobban and I have been involved since 1989. This has resulted in two editions of our book, *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom: Homosexuality in Books for Young People* (1992, 1996). Work currently being undertaken for a third edition of the book will provide some up-to-date information (as of April 2003), though it should be understood that this is very much a "work in progress" until eventual publication. Discussion will cover the nature and amount of fiction books for young people that include gay, lesbian or bisexual characters or discuss issues associated with homosexuality. It will cover books for children who are growing up in gay or lesbian families, as well as books that will be of interest to gay, lesbian or bisexual young people. In both cases, the books would also help to inform other readers about different lifestyles and about issues associated with homosexuality.

First, some background information about the "Out of the Closet and into the Classroom" project and associated research to set the scene. A comprehensive literature review helped to provide the initial focus for the project, and ongoing monitoring of the professional and research literature keeps us in touch with current trends and developments. Criteria were established for inclusion of books in the bibliography on which the project is based (see the "Introduction" in Clyde & Lobban, 1992), and these criteria have been revisited from time to time to ensure that they remain appropriate. A number of strategies have been used to identify potential books for inclusion. Among those strategies are the use of print bibliographies (for example, Grier, 1981; Jenkins & Morris, 1983; Maggiore, 1992); scanning reviews in print journals such as *Reading Time, Magpies, The Horn Book, Scan, The School Librarian,* and *VOYA;* and searching online databases related to children's literature, such as The Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, NoveList, and the Australian-based SCIS service. In addition, publishers and specialist bookstores have been useful sources

of current information and books. It has to be said that the process of locating books for inclusion in the project has not always been easy; as we have said in the past: "in many cases, the older books, and some newer ones, have proved difficult to purchase or to locate through inter-library loan. Some were not even listed in the standard national and trade bibliographies, or in the catalogues of libraries that specialize in the collection of children's literature. It was almost as if a conspiracy existed to keep the books from readers…" (Clyde & Lobban, 2001, p.19). The basic research methodology used in the project is content analysis, with each book being treated as a document for purposes of analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses have been carried out for the books included in the 1992 and 1996 editions of *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom,* and these analyses are being updated now for the new edition of the book.

We have investigated fiction books for young people that have been published in English (or in English translation). The aim has been to include all books in which there is a homosexual character, or in which issues associated with homosexuality have been discussed. The majority of the books are novels for teens or sub-teens (with some collections of short stories), but there are also picture books for young children. While many of the teen novels discuss the problems of gay or lesbian young people, the picture books appear to be aimed particularly (though not exclusively) at children growing up as part of gay or lesbian families. With a few notable exceptions, the books published for teens and pre-teens date from the 1970s; the picture books for young children, on the other hand, did not begin to appear until the 1980s. As of April 2003, we have more than 350 titles listed, of which some 45 are picture books for young children. In addition, a further 20 books are still being investigated. Another 24 have been set aside because they use homosexual terms or contain minor references to homosexuality but do not have a homosexual character or any discussion of homosexuality or any discussion of issues related to homosexuality.

Table 1: Books Included in the Project to April 2003

Type of Book	1992*	1996**	1999***	2003****
Picture Books for Young Children	8	27	32	45
Fiction Books for Young People	112	166		312
Total	120	193		357

* Books included in the first edition of *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom* (Clyde & Lobban, 1992).
** Books included in the second edition of *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom* (Lobban & Clyde, 1996); note that a small number of books added for the 1996 edition were, in fact, published before 1992.
*** Analysis carried out for an article for *School Libraries Worldwide* (Clyde & Lobban, 2001)
**** Counts made in April 2003 for this conference paper. Note than some of the new books added to the bibliography were published before 1996. In addition, a change in the selection criteria for the third edition of *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom* resulted in the removal of 24 books from the bibliography (see above).

Our evidence (see Table 1) indicates that the number of books available for children and young people, with homosexual character/s or themes or in which there is discussion of homosexual issues, has increased steadily, despite the more restrictive selection criteria used for our project since 1996. In addition, there have been changes in the books as a whole over the period since the early 1970s. One of the most obvious has been the increasing number of picture books for young children, from only eight recorded in 1992 to 45 recorded in 2003. Picture books represented only 6.66 per cent of the total in 1992 but by 1996 this had more than doubled to 13.9 per cent. However, 1996 appears to have been (for a number of reasons) a high point; by 2003 the picture books comprised 12.6 per cent of the total.

Christine A. Jenkins (1993) has commented that "one of the most noticeable patterns in the young adult novelistic portrayal of gay/lesbian people is the predominance of males,

both as teens and as adults" (Jenkins, 1993, p.46). The same is true in picture books and other books for the younger reader. In the Introduction to the first edition of *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom,* we noted that, in terms of homosexual main and supporting characters, there were more males than females portrayed in the books listed. The same was true in 1996; again, there were more male than female characters, with the ratio almost unchanged at approximately two to one. Table 2 illustrates this. Preliminary analyses (in April 2003) show that little has changed since 1996. It is also clear (see Table 3) that female authors are prepared to write about homosexual men and boys, though male authors seldom write about lesbians. In the books listed in the 1996 edition, significant male homosexual characters had been created by 21 female writers, but just one novel written by a male writer had a significant lesbian character. Female writers together had created more male homosexual characters than they had lesbian characters. As of 2003 the situation has not changed: we have only three examples of lesbian characters created by male authors, while female authors continue to create at least as many male homosexual characters as they do female homosexual characters. Further, we have only three examples (in total) of bisexual characters, only one of them a significant character.

Table 2: Proportion of Male to Female Homosexual Characters:
1992 and 1996 Editions, *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom*

Type of Character	Male	Female
Main character	32	18
Supporting character	38	14
Background character	21	11
Totals	**91**	**43**

Note 1: Picture books are not included in this analysis.
Note 2: Short stories in collections are not included.
Note 3: It was not until after 1996 that bisexual characters appeared in the books; even then, only three books with bisexual characters have so far been identified.

Table 3: Characters by Sex of Author:
1992 and 1996 Editions, *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom*

Sex of Author	Male Characters	Female Characters
Male	40	2
Female	57	46
Totals	**97**	**47**

Note 1: Only books for which the sex of the author is known are included in the analysis.
Note 2: Short stories in collections are not included.
Note 3: In two picture books, *Who's in a Family* and *The Daddy Machine,* both lesbian and gay families are mentioned. Both these titles have male authors.

If novels, short stories and picture books suggest "ways of being" to readers, then generally speaking the books in our bibliography present a conservative picture of "being gay or lesbian" (bisexual people are almost invisible). In the books for children and young adults, the gay man or youth is usually a very "straight" gay, not effeminate, just a "regular guy" who happens to love guys. Even those teenage boys who are labeled "fag" or "poofter" by schoolmates (for example in Frank Willmott's 1985 book *Suffer Dogs,* or in Anne Snyder and Louis Pelletier's 1987 book *The Truth About Alex)* are far from being outrageous in their behavior, and some (such as Jumbo in Timothy Ireland's 1984 book *Who Lies Inside)* appear to be the complete jock. Gay men are not presented as "screaming queens" or even as "obviously gay". A notable exception is Troy in Jacqueline Woodson's teen novel

Autobiography of a Family Photo (1995); he prances around in high heels that he has sneaked from his mother's closet and promises himself that as soon as he can, he will outfit himself in "fly clothes" and generally make a colourful impact. Among the lesbians, there are no "diesel dykes" or super-butches. Evie in M.E. Kerr's *Deliver us from Evie* (1994) is almost alone in wearing "masculine" clothes, although these are consistent with the hard outdoor work that she does on the family farm.

It is one thing to know that an increasing number of books exist in which there are gay or lesbian characters or themes, even though those books provide an incomplete picture of "being gay or lesbian", and even though males will find more support than females. Whether or not young people actually have access to these books is another matter. Writing about collection development in libraries of all kinds, Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt (1998) have noted that:

> The abundance and variety of books written by, for, and about lesbians and gay men has increased enormously within the past 30 years. Neither this abundance nor this variety is reflected in most library collections, however. Recent studies show this to be the case regardless of the type of library collection examined or the availability of reviews for the materials. (Gough & Greenblatt, 1998, p.151)

They further suggest that a "persistent and widespread resistance to routinely collecting materials of interest or usefulness to lesbian and gay library users" (pp.151-152) disadvantages those users. It also means that heterosexual library users are less likely to come into contact with books that provide insights into the lives of homosexuals and/or their families.

In relation to libraries in general, it has been shown (Sweetland & Christensen, 1995) that titles reviewed in *Lambda Book Report* (dedicated to the recognition and promotion of gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual writing) are held in significantly fewer OCLC libraries than a control group of titles. In a study of 250 public and college libraries in the United States, Eric Bryant (1995) found that most had fewer than 30 books with lesbigay characters or themes, regardless of how well and how widely the books had been reviewed. In a 1998 IFLA paper, James V. Carmichael Jr. confirmed that "lesbigay collections in small and medium sized public libraries [in the United States] are under-representative, it they exist at all" (p.142). Studies in Canada (Joyce & Schrader, 1997; Creelman & Harris, 1990) and in the United Kingdom (Curry, 2000; Norman, 1999) present a general picture of library collections and services that overall is a little better but still considered inadequate for the needs of gay and lesbian users.

The situation in relation to library collections and services for young people appears to be no better, and perhaps worse, even though there has been an overall increase in the number of books available for young people. In 1999, Alex Spence reported on a study of "Gay young adult fiction in the public library", in which he checked titles in Christine Jenkins' (1998) list of 99 teen novels with "gay/lesbian/queer content" against the catalogues of ten United States and nine Canadian urban public library systems. The holdings varied a great deal among the libraries (whether expressed as total holdings or books per capita), with some libraries having "substantial" holdings but with others holding only a few copies of a few titles. Spence's work is supported by that of Pauline M. Rothbauer and Lynne E.F. McKechnie (1999) who studied the juvenile holdings of 40 Canadian public libraries. In a second study, this time in 2000, Spence looked at the holdings of children's picture books with gay or lesbian characters

or gay- or lesbian-related content in public libraries in four countries. Again, the holdings varied a great deal, but even the best of these collections provided a limited range of lesbian- and gay-related picture books, including picture books that showed children growing up in gay or lesbian families.

Unfortunately, there is almost no research available about the relevant holdings of school libraries, or the relevant services offered by school libraries. Although a few professional reports (for example, Bott, 2000; Woog, 2000) suggest that some school librarians have been supportive and even proactive in developing collections that include gay/lesbian-related material and materials that reflect different sexual orientations, other school librarians have reportedly given in to the widespread "pressure to censor materials" in school libraries (Schrader, 1996, p.71). As Alvin M. Schrader has suggested, censorship and challenges to library materials can affect young people's access to books with homosexual content or themes. The American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, which monitors and records attempts to censor library materials, produces an annual list of books that are the "most challenged" in libraries around the country, In 1991, 40 of the challenges were related to books with homosexual characters or content; by 1993 the number had risen to 111, and it continued to remain high into the 21ˢᵗ century. The list of *100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of the Decade* (released by the American Library Association in September 2000) included two children's picture books on the top eleven, *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1990) and *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa Newman (1989). In addition, novels for older readers, such as Nancy Garden's *Annie on my Mind* (1982), featured on this and other lists of banned books through the past decade.

The library catalogue can be a powerful tool in bringing together readers and books. But nevertheless, the failure to assign a relevant subject heading (such as Homosexuality — Fiction) may mean that a potential reader never finds a relevant book. We are not aware of any study that investigates the subject headings assigned to books with lesbian/gay/bisexual themes and characters and the influence of these subject headings on the accessibility of the books to potential readers. The Internet bookstore Amazon.com does assign relevant subject headings to fiction titles for young people with gay/lesbian content and/or characters, but whether or not young people use these to locate relevant reading material is not known.

As we have seen, since the late 1960s, a relatively large number of books for young people has been published, in which homosexuality is the theme or in which gay or lesbian characters appear. However, these books often prove difficult to identify through bookshops, library catalogues, and other standard sources of information, and this situation does not seem to be changing. Despite recent increases in numbers, there are comparatively few picture books or other books for young children and no books targeted at slow or reluctant readers. The images of gays and lesbians that are presented in the books are generally conservative. More of the books deal with male homosexuality than with female, even when written by women. Regardless of their literary value or the images of gays and lesbians that they present, young people may not have easy access to these books, even if they *are* available in their local public or school libraries. School library catalogues may not identify the books with appropriate fiction subject headings, and there seem to be few libraries that are providing any special services based on the books. Censorship attempts and challenges have resulted in further restrictions on access. Yet the school library's collection and services should support gay, lesbian and bisexual students; it should also support the children of gay or lesbian parents or children with other gay/lesbian relatives. In addition, the provision of titles with gay, lesbian or bisexual content and/or characters is important in helping straight students to

develop a view of the world that includes families and lifestyles that are different from their own.

In relation to meeting the needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual users of school libraries, or in relation to meeting the needs of school library users for realistic representations of homosexuality in our society, it is clear that school libraries generally have a long way to go, despite some outstanding examples of good service. Freedom of access to information and literature for young people, freedom of expression, access to information and books reflecting a diversity of views and lifestyles, freedom from the restraints of censorship — these rights, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in important professional documents, are beyond the experience of many (perhaps most) users of school libraries.

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