Chapter 20

LBGTQ+ Books Within Middle School Libraries and How Librarians Promote These LGBTQ+ Books to Students

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ABSTRACT

This mixed methods study allowed the researchers to explore the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ+) materials available in public middle school libraries and to interview six middle school librarians about their perceptions on "caring about and caring for" in order to provide middle school students with LGBTQ+ books. The study took place in one Texas school district. The quantitative data came from the middle school libraries' online database to determine how many LGBTQ+-themed young-adult books were found in each of the 12 school libraries. The findings revealed that the middle-school libraries offered very few LGBTQ+-themed books for students to checkout. The qualitative data came from interviewing six middle school librarians. Their stories revealed two critical themes toward LGBTQ+ books within their school library: (1) librarians' perceptions and reactions to students' needs and (2) librarians' perceptions and reactions regarding silence within the district.

INTRODUCTION

Nine million Americans, approximately 3.5% of the population, have identified themselves as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Gates, 2011). Additionally, three million gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are coming out as early as middle school, and 20% of all adolescents have some degree of same-sex orientation (Whelan, 2006). However, according to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's

(GLSEN) executive director, Eliza Byard, LGBTQ+ adolescents have continued to experience on-going homophobic and transphobic harassment in schools.

Additionally, the most recent data from GLSEN's 2017 climate survey indicated that schools across the U.S. are still hostile environments for LGBTQ+ students, causing many students to avoid or miss school entirely (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ adolescents experience a higher rate of rejection, depression, and prejudice in schools (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2018). All students, including LGBTQ+ students, deserve equal access to education, yet LGBTQ+ students face unique obstacles to their academic success (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). Thus, it is important to advocate for safe, caring, and healthy learning environments for all students in order to promote equity and respect for all students in our schools.

Two important factors that can increase success for LGBTQ+ students are supportive school staff and access to resources that can support them, including resources with LGBTQ+-related topics (Kosciw et al., 2018). Thus, one purpose of this study was to look at the access to LGBTQ+-themed books to see if middle school libraries provide LGBTQ+ young adult books in their libraries for students to check out. This is an important issue because as school librarians improve book selections of LGBTQ+ literature, tolerance and acceptance of LGBTQ+ students could increase, which would help LGBTQ+ students to thrive and excel in safe, caring, nurturing environments (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Kosciw et al., 2016; Rauch, 2011).

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Framework

Several theories serve as the basis for the study described in this chapter. First, critical theory seeks to give voice to marginalized groups in order to empower them and to expose biases (Alexander, 2009). Critical theory has "prompted a radical reassessment of notions of meaning, history, identity, power, cultural production, and cultural consumption" (Cavallaro, 2001, p. x). Critical theory researchers have encouraged people to become activists and help individuals examine the conditions of their existence (Madison, 2012; Thomas, 1993). This research study was conducted using a critical theory lens to examine the existence of LGBTQ+-themed books found in middle school libraries in one school district. It also examined who holds the power when it comes to recommending and ordering LGBTQ+-themed books in public school libraries – the students, the librarians, the parents and/or the district.

Second, Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs seeks to explain human needs. Lower-order needs like food, air, water, and safety must be adequately satisfied before higher-order needs like belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization can be fulfilled. For all adolescents, especially LGBTQ adolescents, feeling safe is the first step needed for social interaction with peers to occur. This social interaction allows adolescents to feel they are "fitting in" with a group of peers. This feeling of fitting in leads adolescents to feel they belong, which in turn builds their self-esteem (Crosnoe, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Schall, Wallace, & Chhuon, 2014). Moreover, it is this belief in self that makes a difference in how competent adolescents feel about themselves (Sturtevant, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moore, & Alvermann, 2006). One way educators can help students to fit in is by providing a safe caring environment. Another way to help middle school students build self-esteem is by providing them with various types of books that are

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