

## **Homosexuality In Literature For Young People: The Story And Access To The Story**

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*This paper reports on an ongoing project, Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom: Homosexuality in Literature for Young People, which commenced in 1989. The project is to record the books that are available for young people in which there are gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters, or in which issues related to homosexuality are discussed. A secondary aim is to investigate the access that young people actually have to these books through their school or public libraries. The majority of the books are novels for teens or sub-teens, but there are also picture books for young children, the latter aimed particularly (though not exclusively) at children growing up in gay or lesbian families. In general it seems that, for a variety of reasons, young people may not have ready access to many of these books.*

### **Introduction**

Most of us, when confronted with the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, would say that it is a document with which we agree. It has been signed by more countries than any other United Nations Convention, so it has widespread international support. Similarly, most school librarians, when confronted with professional statements like the Australian Library and Information Association's *Statement on Freedom to Read* or the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*, would agree with those documents. However, when confronted with the reality of young people's rights of access to material that is in any way controversial, it is clear from postings to professional listservs like LM\_NET and SLN that some people change their minds. In particular, access to material about sexuality can cause librarians, teachers, parents, and legislators to ignore the rights of the young as outlined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and in our professional documents, or to argue that there are situations in which those rights can and should be curtailed (though the documents themselves do not make provision for such situations). It is not just that young people are denied easy access to material that is available to others in the community; sometimes, for various reasons, material may not be available at an appropriate level or in a format that young people could use. This paper first looks at the availability of literature for young people that deals with issues related to homosexuality or in which homosexual characters are presented, and then discusses the access that young people actually have to these books. The study is grounded in a human rights perspective. The paper reports on work in progress, updating a paper presented at the IFLA conference in Berlin in 2003; further information about the project will be available during the IASL 2004 conference presentation in Dublin.

## Background documents

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 Convention on the Rights of the Child supports the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 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 recognised officially by a number of other organisations, 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.

Professional statements and other documents at the national level, support these international documents. 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. Although there is evidence within the library profession in the United States that the ideals expressed in the *Library Bill of Rights* have caused some tensions since the passage of the U.S.A. PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act of October 2001, (Estabrook, 2003), the ALA continues to endorse it. 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.

The near-global trend, that Arvind Narrain (2001) noted, of increasing articulation of lesbian, gay and bisexual rights, is beginning to be felt in relation to libraries. The American Library Association has a position statement on *Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sexual Orientation* (1993-2000), which indicates that "libraries and librarians have an obligation to resist efforts that systematically exclude materials dealing with any subject matter, including ... sexual orientation". Further, regardless of the type of library, all members of the library's community have a right to appropriate library materials and services, including materials that reflect their own sexual orientation and that present a realistic and accepting view of homosexuals in our society. 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 and recreational reading needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people to be ignored. Not only that, but heterosexual students may be denied the opportunity to learn more about a group that is a significant minority group in their school as well as in society in general. Further, young people who live in gay or lesbian households have a right to expect library collections that recognise the many different kinds of family settings in which people may live.

## **The study**

This section of the paper will focus on the ongoing study of homosexuality in literature for young people, and the access that young people are likely to have to these books. The analyses presented of homosexuality in the literature for young people were current as of April 2003. However, the work on the access that young people may have to the books that have been identified through the study, is not as far advanced. Consequently, this second aspect of the work will be discussed mainly through a review of the research literature and an outline of future directions for the project.

### *Purposes of the study*

The study aims to address the following questions through an analysis of the books and a discussion of young people's access to them. To what extent is "story" or literature available that reflects the sexual orientation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people? To

what extent is “story” or literature available that reflects the realities for young people who are growing up as part of a gay or lesbian family? What kinds of images of homosexuality are presented to young people in their books? To what extent do gay, lesbian, or bisexual students in schools have access to literature that reflects their sexual orientation? To what extent do young people, who are growing up as part of a gay or lesbian family, have access to literature that reflects their own family situation? The results will also be discussed in the light of the international and national documents described above.

### *Study methods*

This project is 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 additional information (as of April 2003); further analyses were under way when this paper was being written (March 2004). However, it should be understood that this is very much a “work in progress” until eventual publication. 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. In addition, the literature review has also provided information about the extent to which young people are likely to have access to the books that are listed in *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom*.

Criteria were established for inclusion of books in *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom* (Clyde & Lobban, 1992, Introduction), and these criteria have been revisited from time to time to ensure that they remain appropriate. 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. 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*, *Maggies*, *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:

*[I]n 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 specialise 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).*

All books are read, and a database entry is created that includes bibliographic details, a descriptive and evaluative annotation, basic author information, and information about any gay, lesbian or bisexual characters. 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 for the new edition of the book. This work will continue through 2004.

A number of strategies have been used and will be used to investigate the access that young people have to the books that have been identified for the bibliography *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom*. These strategies include an ongoing review of the literature as mentioned above, qualitative interviews with selected librarians and booksellers, and searches in selected school and public library catalogues. This work is very much in the preliminary stages as this conference paper is being written; as was the case for the analyses of the books, this work will continue through 2004.

### **Preliminary findings: Homosexuality in literature for young people**

Already we know that 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 had more than 350 titles listed (see Table 1), of which some 45 were picture books for young children.

In addition, a further 40 books have been located and annotated, around 15 have arrived and are waiting to be annotated, while around 20 have been identified through the review sources listed above and either placed on order or listed for ordering. Another 24 that we had listed previously 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 of issues related to homosexuality. A decision was made that these books be omitted from the third edition of the bibliography, to allow us to concentrate on the books that feature characters or issues related to homosexuality more prominently.

Table 1 summarises our evidence that the number of books available for children and young people has increased steadily over the last 30 to 40 years, despite the more restrictive selection criteria used for our project after the second edition of *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom* was published in 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 a high point; by 2003 the picture books comprised 12.6 per cent of the total and this did not seem to change into 2004.

Eleven years ago, Christine A. Jenkins wrote 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). We found the same to be true in picture books and other books for the younger reader (Clyde & Lobban, 1992; Lobban & Clyde, 1996). 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 (Clyde and Lobban, 1992). This was still true in

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
<b>Total</b>	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 a paper presented at the 2003 IFLA Conference in Berlin (Clyde, 2003). Note that 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).

1996; again, there were more male than female characters, with the ratio almost unchanged at approximately two to one. Table 2 illustrates this. Analyses in April 2003 (Clyde, 2003) showed 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 had not changed: we had only three examples of lesbian characters created by male authors, while female authors continued to create at least as many male homosexual characters as they did lesbian characters. Further, in 2003 we had only three examples in total of bisexual characters, only one of them a significant character.

What kinds of images of homosexuality are presented to young people in their books? If creative literature suggests “ways of being” to readers, then generally speaking the books in our bibliography present a conservative picture of “being gay or lesbian”, and bisexual people are almost invisible. The gay man or the gay youth is usually a very “straight” gay; just a regular guy who happens to love guys. Among the gay men, there are no “screaming queens”; no-one is effeminate. Even those teenage boys who are labelled “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*) seem to do little to deserve it; in fact,

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
<b>Totals</b>	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.

some, such as Jumbo in Timothy Ireland’s 1984 book *Who Lies Inside*, appear to epitomise the heterosexual jock. A notable exception, standing out because it is the exception, is Troy in Jacqueline Woodson’s teen novel *Autobiography of a Family Photo* (1995); he prances around in high heels 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 butches, no “diesel dykes”. 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.

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

<i>Sex of Author</i>	<i>Male Characters</i>	<i>Female Characters</i>
Male	40	2
Female	57	46
<b>Totals</b>	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.

### Preliminary findings: Young people’s access to the books

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. Are libraries playing any part in making such literature available to young people? 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 lesbian 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 “lesbian collections in small and

medium sized public libraries [in the United States] are under-representative, if 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 than the general situation, 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 titles, including picture books that showed children growing up in gay or lesbian families.

What about school libraries? To what extent are they involved in providing access to literature that reflects different sexual orientations or that shows young people growing up as part of a gay or lesbian family? 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 North American 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 North American school librarians have reportedly given in to the widespread “pressure to censor materials” in school libraries (Schrader, 1996, p.71). 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 United States. 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. Even when school libraries do stock these books, there are indications that failure to assign a relevant subject heading (such as Homosexuality — Fiction) may mean that students do not find the books. 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.

In looking at the access that young people have to books that are listed in our bibliography, the next step will be to compare selected titles from *Out of the Closet and Into*



*the Classroom* with the holdings of selected school libraries as represented in their catalogues. The selected titles will include books that one would expect to find in a school library collection — for example, books that have been well- and widely- reviewed, and books that have won awards. The selected titles will also include some that have been the subject of censorship attempts (using lists such as those compiled by the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, and by researchers such as Schrader). Because the books listed through the *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom* project are published in English, school library catalogues in English-speaking countries will be selected. At this stage, the aim will be simply to test the availability of these books in primary and secondary school libraries. Depending on the initial findings, it may be appropriate later to investigate other factors, such as the influence of the location of the school on the inclusion of these books in the library collection.

### **Preliminary conclusions**

As we have seen, since the late 1960s, an increasing number of books for young people have been published in which homosexuality is the theme or in which gay or lesbian characters appear. However, despite recent increases, 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, and bisexuality is almost ignored. More of the books deal with male homosexuality than with female, even when written by women. 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. 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 such titles 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, though further research will give us a more complete picture of the situation. 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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