

FEATURE



Rachel Altobelli
rachelkaltobelli@gmail.com

CREATING SPACE FOR AGENCY

Representing LGBTQ Perspectives
in the Library Helps Future-Ready
Students Chart Their Own Paths

Future-ready students must be creative, self-directed critical thinkers, conversant with both technology and collaboration (Alliance for Excellent Education 2015). For students to achieve these desirable heights, they need to feel a sense of agency. The importance of student agency has been discussed in this publication, with Philip Williams's telling us that "embracing the value of individual uniqueness inevitably requires an appreciation for diversity in individuality within a classroom and is of central significance in every learning context" (2017, 10).

Sometimes, though, the diversity we should honor and support is hard to see—especially for elementary school librarians. It's easy to imagine no gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) students are at a given school, and, therefore, no need exists to court controversy and potential challenges by providing LGBTQ materials. LGBTQ students are everywhere, though, and they are at increased risk for a host of

issues, including bullying, assault, and suicide. According to the CDC, while most LGBTQ students lead happy lives, and supportive schools are an important factor for their success, "some LGBTQ youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience difficulties in their lives and school environments, such as violence" (2017).

I never experienced violence, but I did spend many years feeling like there was something wrong with me. I didn't know it was possible to be a happy, successful lesbian, and so I refused to admit, even to myself, that I was gay. I had difficult times, but it should be noted: I am a white middle-class woman with a Master's degree. My parents have graduate degrees. I am cisgender and have the kind of haircut and wardrobe that reads as straight to most people. I benefit from these characteristics every day. I grew up reading books with characters who looked like me, and watching TV shows and movies and commercials with actors who looked like me. I

am very privileged, even if I did not grow up seeing people of my gender occupying half of all positions of power and authority, or see gay or lesbian characters on TV, or find books in my school libraries that had characters who were gay or lesbian. I wish I had, because, despite all the sheltering societal privilege I grew up with, I still went through some unhappy years. I loved to read, but I never felt safe or at home in any of my school libraries. When I looked inside the books on the shelves, I wasn't really there.

Visibility and Student Agency

Agency is a key ingredient in helping students navigate an increasingly digitized world, but agency does not spring from a vacuum. It grows from a solid sense that you are real and present and valued. Only then are students prepared to create their own futures, ready to shift and change as traditional labor markets morph into as yet unimagined employment opportunities. Our students will be the multifaceted innovators and

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creators of the future; the role of the library is to help them realize this potential, which means all students need to see themselves in the school library.

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Supporting students in their journey to reach their full potential in the digital arena does not consist solely of providing digital resources and instruction. The analog world informs the digital, and vice versa, and no one is better placed than the school librarian to help students find their balance between the two. When students look around their schools and libraries, they need to see their

diversity, their intersectionality, and the richness of their personal stories—in print and online.

Supporting All Students through Collection Development

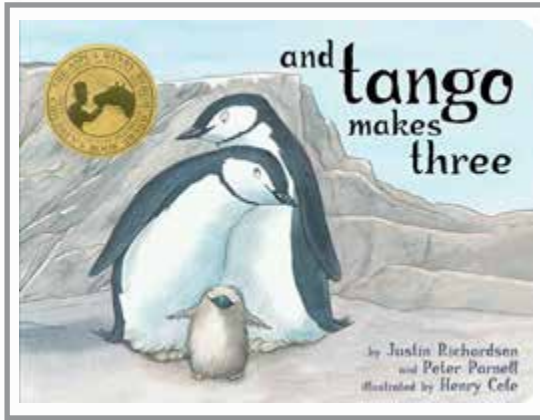
School librarians are well placed to support and advocate for all students; our profession calls for us to collect and curate materials in the most wide-ranging fashion possible and to fight for access to information for all. We buy materials that resonate with our personal experiences and beliefs and those that do not. We buy science fiction even if we don't read it, and crocheting books even if we only knit. Our Code of Ethics calls us to "uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources" (ALA 2008).

When you consider the fact that many LGBTQ students may not be out to their parents or other adults in their lives, the need for school support—for all students—becomes even more

important. The 2015 GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network) report points out that fewer than half of all students surveyed could "find books or information on LGBT-related topics, such as LGBT history, in their school library" or could access LGBT-related information on school computers (Kosciw et al. 2016). All students need libraries with books, resources, and stories that mirror who students are and who they might become. They need stories that reflect their passions, interests, and struggles, and those of their classmates, and those of people they have never met.

Technology can help us achieve these lofty collection-development goals and expand our students' horizons in new and exciting ways, but technology can also overwhelm and confuse. The Internet can have a dark side for anyone, but some students may be more vulnerable, especially when navigating our complex technological world. The same 2015 GLSEN report found in their most recent National





School Climate Survey that while 27 percent of LGBTQ students were harassed in the physical world because of their sexual orientation and 20.3 percent because of their gender expression, 48.6 percent of LGBTQ students experienced harassment in the digital world (Kosciw et al. 2016).

In our large urban school district with a diverse student population, my department has always encouraged school librarians to build diverse, current, and high-quality collections, taking advantage of both new and traditional technologies, formats, and approaches. Building a high-quality library collection is an intensely personal endeavor, requiring librarians to think deeply about themselves and their library communities. My work as a school district library supervisor involves a great deal of encouraging diversity of all types, but two years ago it took a more-personal turn. At our annual August in-service day, I was presenting a session on diversity in collection development, talking about the many resources available to help diversify our collections. It was easy to talk about resources such as the many lists and resources consolidated on the We Need Diverse Books website <<http://weneeddiversebooks.org/where-to-find-diverse-books>>.

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It was much harder to talk to librarians I've known for years about my experience as a (profoundly!) closeted student, and what it would have meant to me to see a book in any of my school libraries that reflected my most-hidden hopes and fears. As I prepared my presentation, I worried about the limits of my perspective—after all, not only can I obviously not speak for all LGBTQ students and former students, but I'm also privileged and monolingual, so I couldn't speak from personal experience about any other kind of diversity—but there were still things I wanted to share, including the need for LGBTQ materials at all levels, including elementary. Barbara Fiehn and Tadayuki Suzuki's *School Library Journal* article on this topic revealed the sad fact that in 2013 the authors could find "few books containing LGBTQ characters for students in grades 3–5." This dearth may be because of a fear of challenges, or, more benignly, from the belief that elementary school students are too young to have any kind of sexual orientation. This belief never seems to prevent the many versions of *Goldilocks*, featuring a heterosexual family of bears, from finding a place on elementary school library shelves but has caused many problems for *And Tango Makes Three* (Simon & Schuster 2005), a book about gay penguins who adopt a chick. It also isn't true; I know from personal experience that many LGBTQ people are fully aware of their identities as children (my wife and about half of our non-straight friends), and many others, while not consciously aware, do know that *something* is different (myself and the other half).

Moving beyond Representation

Representation is important, and Safe Zones signs matter, but there is much to be done beyond buying books and placing them on the shelves—or behind the circulation desk, available only with parent permission, which

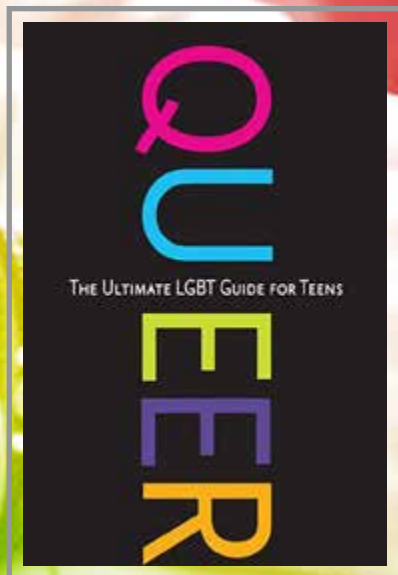
Beyond acquiring a wonderful rainbow of diverse LGBTQ materials, how we present information and resources also matters.

a frightened questioning child is unlikely to ask for, especially in conservative environments. While it's important to have coming out stories, it's equally important (if not more so) to have books with LGBTQ characters doing other things. Lauren Barack, writing in *School Library Journal*, stated that teens and tweens "want to see more genres featuring LGBTQ students as characters, even if gender orientation isn't the main plot point" (2014). After all, coming out is—we hope—not the main or only event in an LGBTQ person's life. Personally, I have spent more time playing soccer, pulling weeds, and reading books about teenage vampires than coming out.

Beyond acquiring a wonderful rainbow of diverse LGBTQ materials, how we present information and resources also matters. If I had walked into my middle school or high school library and seen all the LGBTQ-themed books shelved together, perhaps with a helpful rainbow sign, I would have walked right out of that library and never returned. My wife, on the other

hand, would have felt supported and validated, and believes she might have made an exception to her personal policy (since rescinded) of never visiting the library or reading any of the books contained therein. I'm sure there were books she would have enjoyed, but she didn't see the library as a place that welcomed her.

All librarians build collections beyond the confines of their personal experiences and up to the limits of what publishers make available. Sometimes no perfect resource is available, which is why we have to keep searching and continue to ask publishers for the materials we and our students deserve. We need to find the best books available and pressure publishers to make diverse stories available to us. However, while we wait, technology and the Internet can aid in the curation of a diverse and wide-ranging library collection and program. If a book or an article that covers what a student is looking for isn't available, there might be a community member willing to speak to students. Guest speakers unable to make a trip to your school may be willing to Skype in for a question-and-answer session.



Using Technology with Care

Technology can also help us answer our own questions. If you or your teachers are unsure about pronoun usage with transgender students, useful resources abound on the Web. A quick online search of “transgender etiquette” produces a list of websites answering pronoun and name questions. Two places to start might be GSLEN’s guide for trans allies, downloadable at www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/be%20an%20ally_o.pdf, and GLAAD’s Tips for Allies of Transgender People, viewable at www.glaad.org/transgender/allies. Of course, this profusion of information, especially when surrounding potentially sensitive topics, must be rigorously evaluated. Who else—if not the school librarian—will teach students (and fellow educators) how to make such evaluations?

Digital tools and spaces give our students access to worlds of information but also create the potential for great harm. A questioning student may be more comfortable checking out *Queer: The Ultimate LGBT Guide for Teens* (Zest 2011) as an e-book instead of marching up to the circulation desk in front of classmates with the book (complete with rainbow letters) in hand. On the other hand, the technologies theoretically used to keep students safe may cause them emotional harm. Even after the ACLU’s 2011 “Don’t Filter Me” campaign, which resulted in many filtering companies changing their parameters (ACLU n.d.), the filters in many districts, including mine, are still far from perfect.

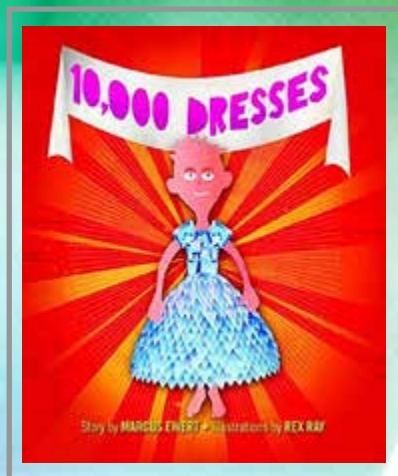
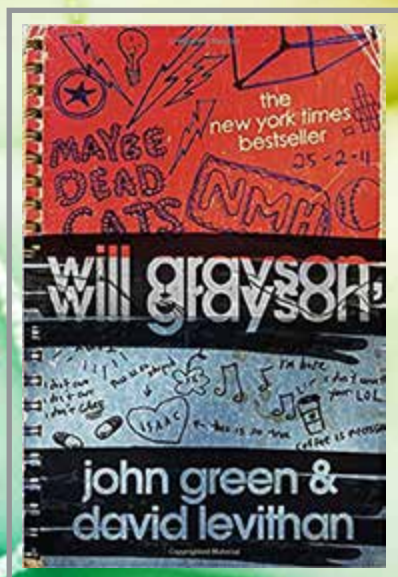
For example, in my school district rainbowweddingnetwork.com is blocked—as “adult/pornography” no less—but theknot.com is not. This filtering could lead LGBTQ students imagining their future wedding to feel that their love is dirty, shameful, and forbidden,

while straight students see their future weddings as beautiful and loving occasions on which to spend a great deal of money, as long as they are thin, white, and fond of engagement photo shoots. Filtering can be a fraught and difficult subject, but it’s likely that no one except you, the librarian, has the skills, experience, and professional judgment to speak up in cases when filters are creating a biased information environment for students.

Standing up against filters can be hard, especially in conservative environments, but it is also likely that students in schools and districts with the most resistance to unblocking LGBTQ sites—or to buying *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (Dutton 2009) or *10,000 Dresses* (Seven Stories Press 2008)—are the students who most desperately need support. The temptation to avoid controversy can be strong, especially when budgets are limited and job security feels shaky at best. In 2009 Deborah Lau Whelan argued against “soft” self-censorship, noting that gay-themed books, including picture books and other books with no sexual content whatsoever, were an area of potential censorship. These students may be and remain invisible to you, but they are there, and a book on the shelf or an unblocked website has the potential to make all the difference in the world.

Library as Safe Space

School libraries have a hallowed role as safe spaces, especially for potentially marginalized student populations. Students who don’t feel like they fit—for whatever reason—can find a place in the school library. What’s more, school librarians can help students extend the safe space of the physical library into finding safe places online, merging the traditional with the techy and helping students navigate their digital and non-digital worlds. Future-



ready students need the capacity to live comfortably in both, after all. Vulnerable students, including LGBTQ students, especially need support when navigating the online world. If LGBTQ students are not out to their parents or other adults in their lives, they are less likely to tell their grownups what they are looking at (or who they are talking to) online. The Web can be a wonderful, affirming resource for students trying to figure out their identities, but if they lack strong information- and media-literacy skills, they can also put themselves in danger. Information-literacy instruction for all students might save a student—LGBTQ or not—tempted to meet face-to-face someone met online if the young person is too afraid to talk to adults about what they are doing.

As a librarian and a school district library supervisor, I believe that we have a responsibility to all of our students to look beyond our personal lenses—of privilege, of diversity, of experience—and to consider lenses that are not our own. Confronting our own privilege and sharing our own stories can be hard. I have never been officially closeted at my district, but I have at times chosen the path of omission, especially when working with those I did not know well. When writing this article, I was tempted to write broadly about diversity in collection development and information-literacy instruction, leaving out any mention of my personal perspective, but our students—all our students, in all our schools and districts—deserve better. They deserve school librarians and administrators who are willing to have hard conversations and consider difficult issues. If we are willing to do this work, we can help our students find strength in their diversity and in the perspectives and truths they have to share with us and the world. The future is theirs, and we can help them have the agency to create it.



Rachel Altobelli,
a 2015–2016 Lilead
Fellow, is the director
of library services and
instructional materials,

Albuquerque Public Schools. She is also a member of the New Mexico State Library LSTA Advisory Council. She recently wrote “Gain Support When You Support District Goals,” a blog posting in *School Library Journal’s* *Take the Lead* series <www.slj.com/2016/07/schools/gain-support-when-you-support-district-goals-take-the-lead/#_>.

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