

SILENTLY CENSORING?: INFLUENCES OF COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT POLICY ON LGBT YOUTH

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Collection Development Policy Goals

It is important that public libraries create, implement, and make available their library's collection development policy to the public. Collection development policy should review a public library's selection policy (how materials are selected, acquired, housed, weeded, etc.) and describe future planning processes (assigning collection priorities, funding allocation, etc.) (IFLA, 2001). As the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) remarks, this "reduces personal bias by setting individual selection decisions in the context of the aims of collection building practice, and identifies gaps in collection development responsibilities." Public libraries have the opportunity to support LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer or Questioning) youth by providing a safe virtual and physical space through the development of inclusive and open-minded collection development policy, and in turn, inclusive library collections.

Canadian Library Association's *Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom*

The Canadian Library Association (CLA) developed a position statement (amended in 1985) on intellectual freedom for Canadian libraries to refer to when developing their own inclusive in-house policies. The following statement by CLA is the most important to Canadian libraries when developing their Collection Development Policy: "It is the responsibility of libraries to guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable. To this end, libraries shall acquire and make available the widest variety of materials." In alignment with IFLA guidelines, CLA rejects personal bias and

supports inclusiveness in collection development.

Halifax Public Library's Collection Development Policy

Halifax Public Library's (HPL) Collection Development Policy supports CLA's *Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom*. In their own words, HPL expresses their stance on collection development: "The library attempts to make available, the widest diversity of views and expressions, including those which may be regarded as unorthodox or unpopular with the majority. To accomplish this, the library will purchase controversial materials in order to ensure public access to all sides of an issue." This statement highlights that HPL is committed to purchasing materials to enhance access to information, whether or not those materials represent a popular viewpoint or theme. As Morrissey (2008) remarks, "it's not the library's role to determine what is morally appropriate, but instead to provide access to enough resources so that each individual can make that decision for her/himself" (p. 165).

Influence of Collection Development Policy on LGBTQ Youth

How can Collection Development Policy affect the experiences of LGBTQ youth?

Public libraries have often been a space for LGBTQ youth to turn to for information about their individual "realities and identities" (Schrader, 2009, p. 107). In fact, studies have revealed that public libraries were the "most important information source for LGBTQ people" to learn more about their sexual identities and the LGBTQ community (Alexander and Miselis, 2007, p. 45). Librarians responsible for acquiring library collections representative of the "widest diversity of views and expressions" (HPL) are,

then, also responsible for providing marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ youth, with access to information sources and other materials reflective of their identities and experiences. As IFLA, CLA and HPL claim, inclusiveness and removal of personal bias is an important goal in collection development.

However, how effective is policy in creating an inclusive space and collection for LGBTQ youth?

While a Collection Development Policy should be considered a “course of action adopted . . . by an organization” (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.), it is impossible to always ensure that policy is internalized by members of the organization. Indeed, it is possible that moments of self-censorship occur when choosing and acquiring library materials. Duthie (2010) notes that, “Self-censorship is governed by the prejudices and preferences of individual librarians. Although this stance is not always consciously adopted, it often determines which books are purchased for the library and which books are promoted within it” (p. 90). A study by Boon and Howard in 2004 reinforces the concern of self-censorship discussed by Duthie (2010). Boon and Howard (2004) studied several libraries’ collections, looking at LGBTQ titles and control titles to determine whether Canadian libraries have adequate LGBTQ collections. They found that “the average number of copies held in all nine libraries was 40.57 for the LGBT titles and 68.14 for the control titles” (2004, p. 136). This means that randomly selected titles were more likely to be selected for a collection than a title containing LGBTQ content. Of the libraries studied, the Halifax Regional Library was examined. Boon and Howard (2004) found that Halifax had 85.7% of the control titles in their collection, but only 65.7% of LGBTQ titles. Indeed, they recommended that Halifax “examine its collection practices” (2004, p. 137). In addition to an absence of adequate LGBTQ collections in the libraries, Boon and Howard also found that few LGBTQ titles were actually identified

as such in the library catalogue’s subject headings.

Concluding Thoughts

A Collection Development Policy is meant to govern and guide the collection choices made by public libraries. The Canadian Library Association highlights the importance of choosing library materials that are representative of all beliefs, identities, and experiences no matter the popular opinion or personal biases involved. However, it is impossible to always control for self-censorship and prejudices. People follow policies, but people are fallible. While it is clear that the Halifax Regional Library was not providing adequate LGBTQ resources, the direct cause cannot be determined outright. Librarians must also work with a limited number of reviews on LGBTQ material, which they often rely on heavily to choose quality or popular materials (Greyson, 2007). Librarians need to look beyond the reviews and personal biases to develop a collection that is inclusive and representative of their communities. To determine the current state of LGBTQ collections in Canadian public libraries, further research is required.

Note: This article has been adapted from one originally written for Information Policy, INFO 6610.

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