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► **To cite this version:**

Bérengère Stassin, Emilie Lechenaut, Elodie Géas. School Librarians and LGBT+ Students. Mind The Gap 2023: Disrupting LGBTQIA+ Divisions, University of London, Jul 2023, London, United Kingdom. hal-04186049

HAL Id: hal-04186049

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-04186049>

Submitted on 22 Sep 2023

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School Librarians and LGBT+ Students

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In France, school librarians are both teachers and librarians: they manage a library's collection, respond to students' information needs, and also contribute to the development of their critical thinking skills and their "media and information literacy". According to the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature, we know that young LGBT+ people face various difficulties and barriers in accessing information both in school and public libraries because of a lack of resources, because of the fear of being stigmatised that prevent them from consulting or borrowing certain kinds of books, because the resources are made invisible due to wrong indexing and cataloguing, because of political reasons: some librarians do not want to display LGBT+ culture. In some countries/states they are just not allowed to do it. Young LGBT+ desert libraries in favour of the web and social media. This allows them to join online communities where they can forge links with people like themselves and protect themselves from the transphobic or homophobic discourse circulating in society (Pierson, 2017¹; Stassin, 2022²).

Understanding the information needs of all students, enabling them to develop their critical thinking skills, self-esteem and information literacy is also one of the fundamental missions of school librarians. Moreover, since the publication of the French law of 8 July 2013 for Restructuring Schools the fight against sexist, homophobic and transphobic discrimination has been at the heart of the missions of schools, which, in the name of the values of equality and respect for others in their diversity, have a duty to ensure the inclusion and safety of LGBT+ students who are vulnerable and at high risk of being bullied because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020)³.

The aim of this paper is to present some results of a qualitative study we have conducted in school libraries in different types of high school (urban, rural, with professional degree, with artistic degree) between 2022-2023. The research project is entitled *School Librarians and Gender Issues*⁴. Its main goals are to analyse how school librarians deal with issues such as "gender equality", "effects of stereotypes on career choices", "gender-based violence" or "the inclusion of LGBT+ students and how these issues are reflected in their collection. Here,

¹ Pierson, C. M. (2017). Barriers to Access and Information for the LGBTQ Community/Obstacles à l'accès et à l'information pour la communauté LGBTQ. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, vol. 41, n° 4, 245-262. [En ligne]. URL : <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/699702/pdf>

² Stassin, B. (2022). Les pratiques informationnelles des personnes transgenres. Quels besoins et usages de l'information dans un parcours de transition ? *Balisages* [En ligne]. URL : <https://publications-prairial.fr/balisages/index.php?id=979>

³ Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2020). Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity. Cyberbullying Research Center (cyberbullying.org). URL : <https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-cyberbullying-sexual-orientation-lgbtq.pdf>

⁴ Les professeur-es documentalistes et les questions de genre (Prodoq). The project is funded by la *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (MSH Lorraine)* : <https://cenhtor-msh-lorraine.cnrs.fr/s/prodoq/page/projet>

we are only going to focus on the results related to the LGBT+ issue and to the inclusion of LGBT+ students.

We met and conducted in-depth interviews with 7 librarians. There were 6 women and 1 man between the age of 38 to 58 (females outnumber males by 86% in this profession in France). We listed the types of LGBT+ books present in the collections, and analysed how they were catalogued and indexed. We also carried out two participant observations of encounters between students and comic book authors.

Difficulties Facing School Librarians in their Work Around LGBT+ Issues and Audiences

It is difficult for school librarians to identify the LGBT+ students who are present in the school with the exception of those who are open about their identity or those who are bullied and seek refuge at the library. So, they have to provide specific information needed by a public that they suppose is present within their library but that they cannot identify precisely. Furthermore, LGBT+ students are not a homogeneous group: the needs of a cisgender gay boy are not the same as what a transgender girl will expect.

School librarians are not always familiar with LGBT+ culture and may have difficulty finding relevant resources that convey positive representations and discourse. This is more difficult when it comes to getting resources for transgender students, as transidentity is still a vague concept for many librarians. The difference between transgender, crossdresser, and drag queen is not always easy to make. They also mention difficulties in managing the collection. They lack vocabulary and knowledge (even when they identify themselves as LGBT+ individuals), and do not always know how to index or categorise resources. They also wonder where LGBT+ material should be displayed. For example, some create specific shelves for LGBT+ manga, while others stick a rainbow sticker on the books and leave them in the general collection. The challenge is to showcase a collection without stigmatising a public. A challenge that also exists in public libraries (Beyron-Whittaker, 2018)⁵.

School librarians face resistance when carrying out specific actions. This may come from students who refuse to talk about these issues for various reasons (religion, group dynamics, fear of being noticed or outed as gay, trans, feminist...), from parents, from other teachers (due to lack of time, interest, personal convictions) or even from librarians themselves, who also have to overcome their own stereotypes, prejudices and representations. This sometimes leads to a form of self-censorship or circumvention strategies (Oltmann, 2016)⁶. Finally, they find themselves in a "double bind" situation. The institution wants them to welcome and include LGBT+ students, but does not provide them with the tools, resources, training, funding, or the time necessary to do so properly. Furthermore, the School wants to combat sexism and homophobia, but still operates within a very heteronormative framework.

⁵ Beyron-Whittaker, V. (2018). Les bibliothèques, lieux ressources pour les publics LGBT+. *Inter CDI*, 276. [En ligne]. URL : <http://www.intercdi.org/les-bibliotheques-lieux-ressources-pour-les-publics-lgbt/>.

⁶ Oltmann, S. M. (2016). They Kind of Rely on the Library": School Librarians Serving LGBT Students. *Journal of Research on Libraries & Young Adults* 7. [En ligne]. URL : <https://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrly/2016/03/they-kind-of-rely-on-the-library-school-librarians-serving-lgbt-students/>

Hybridisation Between the Professional Knowledge and the Situated Knowledge

School librarians recognise the usefulness of the training courses to which they have access thanks to the institution (especially when they are involved as gender equality officers) as they help to define the institutional framework of equality policy, implement projects and find resources for students and educational teams. However, these training sessions are often too short and too few in number to enable them to acquire new knowledge and put it into practice. The school librarians then learn vocabulary, culture and history from other actors:

- the LGBT+ students involved in school or library activities;
- their own children/family (for example, one librarian talked about her two lesbian daughters who help her a lot);
- their younger colleagues who are queer, feminist, allies;
- the LGBT associations with which they organise events⁷, meetings with artists, and authors.

The need for closer collaboration with such associations⁸ to acquire resources that meet the students' needs, using appropriate vocabulary, and becoming familiar with the "queersaurus" (Bourcier, 2017)⁹ has also been mentioned during our survey.

Therefore, there is a kind of hybridisation between the librarians' professional knowledge and the situated and community-based knowledge of LGBT+ people they meet both in their professional and private life. The study also pointed out an upward socialisation process of children/students and young teachers towards teachers who have been in their positions for several years. These processes are explained by the use of multiple sources of information, which promote relevant and non-stigmatising collection management and the inclusion of LGBT+ students in schools' cultural scene.

The School Library as a Safe Space

The school library is a safe space for many students who are or feel discriminated against due to their appearance or difference. The close relationship that teachers can have with students also fosters the sense of well-being they can experience in these spaces. There are also other spaces connected to the library that are presented as safe and relevant for addressing gender issues in general. For example, one librarian described the manga club she has created within her high school as a means of thinking about sexuality and gender, a

⁷ e.g. Video made with students from Marie de Champagne High School in Troyes on the topic of LGBTQ+ representation in the media, TV series, and advertising. In partnership with the Exaequo association in Reims (French): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkkGWmAU2m8>

⁸ e.g. The catalog Big Tata references the documentary resources of the collectives and associations that are part of the network, as well as freely accessible web resources: <https://bigtata.org/>

⁹ Bourcier, S. (2020). Les archontes ont du souci à se faire. *Sociocriticism*. [En ligne]. URL : <http://revues.univ-tlse2.fr/sociocriticism/index.php?id=2740>.

space where diverse gender-related topics are openly discussed. Comics and manga are relevant to analyse gender stereotypes and to deal with topics such as identity, body, LGBT+, feminism, because images improve the understanding of complicated topics and facilitate the understanding and the reading of complicated topics. The utilisation of visual elements and a less densely packed narrative allows space for the description of emotions that convey the intended message.

Manga as a Medium for discussing gender issues

Within the manga industry, production is intrinsically intertwined with gender dynamics. Manga encompasses various narrative categories where gender stereotypes are notably prevalent. The "ecchi" and "yaoi" categories (commonly known as boys' love or girls' love) revolve around the exploration of sentimental and/or sexual relationships between male or female characters. Thus, in a diverse array of stories and characters, it becomes evident that the medium fearlessly addresses a multitude of issues.

Certain stereotypes are perpetuated through distinct visual representations in many works: some female characters are highly sexualised, characterised by exaggerated features like disproportionate breasts, suggestive postures, and revealing attire (as seen in Eiichiro Oda's "One Piece," with characters like Nami and Nico Robin). Conversely, male characters often exhibit androgynous, almost feminine traits, deliberately cultivating ambiguity (as exemplified in "Fruits Basket"), embracing bi-gendered identities (as seen in "Ranma ½"), or occasionally "cross-dressing" for specific purposes (evident in books like "Hana-Kimi" and "The Inner Chambers"). Furthermore, certain manga, both within and beyond the "yaoi" genre, draw attention to LGBT+ characters and depict love stories between two individuals of the same gender ("Our Dream at Dusk," "My Brother's Husband," and "Tokyo Babylon"). Beyond the realm of LGBT+ representations, manga, especially the subgenre of "mecha" that combines humans and robots, allows the reader to think about identity or about one's relationship with oneself and one's own body ("Gunm" and "Metropolis").