Minority Provision C̲ Majority Provision

By Verity Jones

Snapshot

This reflection piece extends the research and analysis presented by Verity Jones (Atwell) in the article entitled "In all areas, I cater for the majority': An investigation of LGBT+ provision in school libraries from the librarian's perspective' reprinted in this issue of *Synergy* after first appearing in *School Libraries Worldwide*.

Editor's Note: This reflection piece is to be read in alongside the original article published in *School Libraries Worldwide* and reprinted here in *Synergy* with the editor's permission.

Section 28, a piece of legislation that ascertained:

> a local authority shall not – intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (HM Government, 1988)

was abolished in 2003 for England and Wales, and in 2000 for Scotland. The idea of a 'pretended relationship' or that this could be 'promoted' were ideas in both the library sphere and in society, although opinions on both topics; Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity have now shifted considerably. This has been seen in legislation as well as a cultural shift. In 2018, I undertook a thesis as part of my Masters in Library and Information Studies, looking at the perspectives of school librarians on the topic of LGBT+ provision in light of these changes and since the abolition of Section 28.

The thesis was based upon a survey of 115 school librarians, with 75 complete submissions, building upon the work of Walker and Bates (2015) who had focussed on the school library users' perspective. The thesis looked at the UK without attempting to take on a wider world perspective. The intention had been to determine what, if anything, was hindering LGBT+ provision from the librarian's point of view – whether this was controlled by the librarians themselves or external influences.

Upon analysing the data, it became clear that though the hinderances were indeed very varied, including things that were beyond the remit of the librarian as well as those within their control, the focus of many respondents was overwhelmingly on majority provision. This revealed itself both explicitly, with direct quotations citing reasons to provide for the majority first, as well as implicitly, with references to neutrality and avoidance of favouritism.

Equality vs Equity

It is an issue of Equality vs Equity, a concept that directly contrasts the resounding response of 'majority' or neutrality. The conclusion I have since made is that Minority provision is a subset of

Majority provision and that seeming neutrality only benefits those already benefitting from a skewed system. Intentional intervention to ensure access to resources written by or covering LGBT+ topics not only allows LGBT+ pupils to access those titles, but also provides more resources for the majority.

Minority provision exclusively for minority

There is an unvoiced belief about an idea of majority vs minority, that provision for one does not include the other. The assumption that LGBT+ books and resources are purely for any who identify within that spectrum harks back to the unspoken fear Section 28 addressed, that providing LGBT+ material will 'promote' LGBT+ lifestyles, that this is a negative thing and is something that people can be persuaded into.

The assumption is that cis-heterosexual pupils are not expected to read/make use of LGBT+ resources, unlike LGBT+ users who are and have been expected to read/make use of cis-heterosexual resources as the 'norm'. This division of purpose for resources is a concept to be combatted, there is a need for all students to have access to books both as mirrors and windows, as Jorgenson and Burress clearly outline this:

Diverse texts allow students to see themselves in mirror books with characters who look and act like them; they also enable students to look through windows to gain a better understanding of others' lives by reading about characters from different backgrounds (2020)

The definition of 'norm' could be debated, so for the purposes of this piece, I would like to frame it by what it is not. In your library collections, you could define the 'norm' by observing what is not seen, what is not represented. If your library collection has very little to represent women, you could conclude the 'norm' is a male narrative. If your library collection has very little to represent the LGBT+ community, you could conclude the 'norm' is a cis-heterosexual narrative. This 'Other' or lack, defines what your individual school's 'norm' is - which may very well differ from another school's 'norm'. This 'norm' may be created through simple omission, lack of resources available, outdated resources or through a choice to reflect a personal view of what is the 'norm'. The issue remains the same. If the information on a topic e.g. A book about marriage, does not include Gay Marriage, the 'norm' being represented is of being heterosexual, simply through omission.

Ideal world

If you buy a book with minority representation for your library collection, that should be seen as one more book for everyone. In an ideal world it should not matter whether that book includes narratives from the minority.

As it stands, books which provide LGBT+ provision are seen as purely for those who identify as LGBT+, a step in addressing the imbalance in provision. Until LGBT+ provision has caught up with the majority provision and reparative action is no longer necessary because minority provision equals majority provision, in opting to remain 'neutral' you allow majority provision to dictate what minority pupils consume, as well as limiting all pupils to an unspoken normal/other mentality. This double standard, then feeds into all the areas identified throughout the original thesis.

It is necessary to highlight that although ideally all resources will benefit all pupils, positive action is vital to create this 'ideal world'. It cannot be expected that an individual librarian can combat both personal and external hinderances in order to create a space where 'all books for all' does not become 'cis-heterosexual books for all' and 'minority for minority only'.

Negative impact

The impact of majority only provision, or seeming neutrality, can be seen throughout the restrictions on library provision raised in my thesis:

Budget: LGBT+ provision will not be deemed important enough to allocate funds, especially if budget is tight, particularly if the perception is that catering to a minority in direct competition with your majority provision. The resources themselves may cost more as they are cutting edge (read hardback). It is perceived as if LGBT+ resources will have limited users or no measurable way to know there are any users at all.

Demand: LGBT+ provision, if reliant on demand, relies solely on the user being 'out', asking for resources or simply engaged with the library service (which not all school-age pupils are). It places the onus on pupils to seek provision for themselves, which is something pupils considered part of the 'majority' are not expected to do. Even if a librarian is an active and vocal ally of the LGBT+ community, this assumption does not take into account students still figuring out their Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity, or those who do not want to be 'out'. This will always be skewed for those protected characteristics that can remain hidden.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, unlike almost all other protected characteristics, is or can remain a hidden characteristic. This is especially true in schools, where disability and race are often covered in questions on entrance forms, or data held behind the scenes. However accurate data about LGBT+ students is not collated. Even if it was, having definitive data may be difficult, due to those who have not fully figured out how they identify, or change how they identify later on.

Age appropriate: LGBT+ provision has historically been censored more harshly than other areas, an example of this is the recently 'banned books' in America, where a large proportion were banned simply for having LGBT+ representation in them. In addition, if your demographic of users is younger, then many titles might be filtered out or censored by the librarian – though often not using the same qualifiers as cis-heterosexual content. This may be even more prevalent in areas where the librarian is facing external pressure, say from parents or the Headteacher, so may be overly cautious.

External/Internal influences: LGBT+ provision, although now not actively criminalised or discouraged, does not receive the same buy-in or support from several influences, external or internal. This may be due to a number of factors; personal views, religious affiliation, perceived beliefs, backlash from parents, funding providers or the pupils themselves. Although a fair and real problem, the external influences that surround school libraries could be combatted with education. The underlying fears and unspoken beliefs should be addressed, instead of opting for the route of least resistance.

Librarian's perspective: LGBT+ provision relies on a librarian having some training in these areas, so they can be approached sensitively and appropriately. Often, a false sense of security can be achieved, through minimal training or by knowing one person who identifies somewhere on the LGBT+ spectrum. This level of knowledge can in fact hinder provision. For example, having a friend or family member or knowing a Lesbian, or even being Lesbian themselves, would not fully explain or educate an individual about the experience of being Transgender. It remains an issue that expending time and energy researching areas of minority experience, will not take priority unless this energy is seen as benefitting the majority of library users.

Neutrality: LGBT+ provision appears to run in direct competition with neutrality, with an unspoken 'I wouldn't do that for one child so why would I for another' mentality. This concept ignores the need for equitable treatment instead of equal treatment whilst the external influences and systemic issues remain.

Solution

Top-down policy is often criticised – for overreach, in-action or tone-deaf solutions. Although this may be true and the reasons for disliking this approach valid, I believe that in the instance of school librarians, the need for standardisation of practice means that although grassroots change is often the most realised and holistic in its approach, it may not extend beyond the one school library setting. It is necessary to have top-down policy, which creates a room for the dialogue where criticism and improvements can then be made. Instead of individual action which is not shared/replicated elsewhere or postulation without universal change. Criticism is the privilege that comes after some change has begun taking place.

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Top-down policy is not a solution for all things and must go on to be critiqued and adjusted However it can be a first step in removing barriers to LGBT+ provision. It limits the reasons for inadequate provision and would safeguard pupils from anyone who had personal views which caused their provision to be subpar.

There is a need for top-down policy as positive action to counter the systemic prejudice and years of discrimination caused by legislation such as Section 28. It is not enough to assume individual attempts at minority provision will receive the attention and efforts required to achieve a world where minority provision truly is seen as majority provision. After years of active legislation

criminalising being LGBT+ as well as 'promoting' LGBT+ as a 'pretended lifestyle' the need for active legislation that protects and includes LGBT+ provision is essential.

The best solution remains as a top-down approach, wherein whatever the reasoning, personal or otherwise, whatever the ignorance or limitations –good LGBT+ provision is an expected minimum for school libraries. Top-down policy in turn allows for funding bids, standardisation of what this looks like, support and resources being shared more freely once those standards are known.

Positive impact
Top-down policy alleviates some if not all the above problems:

Budget: Top-down policy justifies budget increases, additional funding opportunities, funding bids and availability of resources as they become mainstream/required.

Demand: Top-down policy takes the emphasis off the end user; whether they are a small contingent, a hidden minority, or for any other reason unwilling to reveal their status to gain access to provision. It allows for provision which is not based on seeming demand but on external benchmarks, therefore provision will be unilateral, as opposed to directly proportionate to the visible minority e.g. one 'out' pupil in the pupil body.

Age Appropriate: Top-down policy will address the pipeline of resources, as demand will equal supply, resulting in a broader age range being covered as well as sub-group (e.g. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Asexual, Non-Binary etc). It would not entirely take the issue of censorship and what is 'sensitive' out of the hands of the librarian/school itself, but this reason would not result in no provision as alternative resources could be found.

External/Internal Influences: Top-down policy would frame minority provision as an expectation, of not only libraries and librarians, but also the school as a whole. Therefore, it will no longer be down to one person (the librarian, if so inclined) to combat the ethos of the school, parents, teachers, religious affiliation on behalf of users. It offers a defence for those librarians who face backlash such as parent's protesting outside school, or trustees, or a school ethos that does not agree.

Librarian's perspective: Top-down policy requires professionals to be educated on these areas, taking the emphasis off of the individual, to either self-educate or rely upon personal relationships or experience e.g. friends/family. It will lead to a unilateral approach to the spectrum, not favouring one sub-group (e.g. Gay) and will result in more opportunities to undergo this training arising.

Neutrality: Top-down policy negates the idea of neutrality, as it recognises the need for positive action as opposed to 'favouritism' or unfair distribution of resources. You cannot be neutral if the area is addressed by authorities in charge of real-life school implementation, e.g. Ofsted, Local authorities, Funding bodies. Any logic of 'equal' treatment can no longer be applied. For example, you would not give pupils all E-books, then blame the user for not having a PC at home

in order to access it, you would need to address the imbalance that already exists for that 'equal' treatment to be meaningful.

Top-down policy although necessary as explored, does need to come from places/organisations that are not opt-in (e.g. Stonewall, LGBT Youth Scotland, Educate and Celebrate) as this relegates good practice to those already proactively improving LGBT+ provision.

References

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Verity Jones *is a school librarian at Fettes Collee, Edinburgh. She has worked as a school librarian in the private and state sectors in co-educational and single-sex day and boarding school and received her MA in Library and Information Science from University College London (UCL).*