School Library as a SAFE HARBOR for LGBTQ STUDENTS and FAMILIES

Mary E. Bannister
mebannister@seattleschools.org
Creating a safe harbor is all about relationships. Currently our students talk about our school library as a safe harbor where they feel represented by the books and materials in the collection. We actively collaborate with students on collection development; students give input both verbal and written) on titles and areas where we have holes. Students address topics such as “Does our GGLOW [Gay, Gender-Queer, Lesbian, or Whatever, as coined by one of our students] collection represent all our diverse students?” And “Do you feel seen in our library collection?”

Creating the GGLOW collection began with a conversation with a PTA parent at our school. The school was transitioning from a K–5 to a PreK–8 learning community. The parent’s daughter wanted to start a GGLOW student chapter in our school. The mother asked what representation would our library collection have for LGBTQ students, and how could the parents donate more books. Since that conversation, we have been on a three-year journey to create an inclusive library collection for our LGBTQ students, from the youngest patrons to our tweens and teens, so they see themselves and their families in our collection.

I shared with the parent my beliefs about representation in our collection: that all students should see themselves and their families in our library materials. This belief was a lesson imparted in a collection development course during my school library preparation program at the University of Washington. When I was a classroom teacher in the 90s, I became aware of the idea of “mirrors, doors, and windows,” coined by Rudine Sims Bishop. Bishop noted, “When a child cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (1990). (Children’s author Grace Lin has an excellent TEDxTalk on the importance of windows and mirrors resources titled “The Windows and Mirrors of Your Child’s Book Shelf,” available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wQ8wiV3FVo>.) This idea of what role books can serve students is still being built upon, as evidenced by a post from author and illustrator Grant Snider titled “Books Are…” Snider’s post adds anchors, beacons, escape hatches, flying carpets, overcoats, quiet corners, springboards, stepping stones, and warm blankets to the role books serve for students (2018). Representation in the collection also aligns well with the Include Shared Foundation from AASL’s National School Library Standards, as students create their own identity and grow to understand the experiences and perspectives of others. Further, inclusion and representation are highly valued in our school district.

Relationships with the GGLOW Advocacy Committee

During year one, I pulled together a list of books we would love to add to the K–8 collection. Parents donated some titles directly. To raise money for the other books, the GGLOW committee, a subcommittee of the school’s PTA, organized two fund-raisers: a t-shirt sale with t-shirts that read “STEM is a SAFE PLACE” with rainbow-colored owls (the school’s mascot) and a GGLOW dance party in June for Pride month. Through sales from these items, the committee purchased books from the list for the school and classroom libraries. Committee members placed a GGLOW bookplate inside each book. I also added a GGLOW genre spine label to the books so students could easily locate them throughout the library collection.

Relationships with Administrators

When we embarked on developing our GGLOW collection and considered the possibility of book donations from parents, we realized that we did not have a policy for accepting book donations for the school library and classroom libraries. I discussed concerns with my principal about just taking books parents wanted the library to have versus using collection development best practices for building age-appropriate special collections within our library. Of immediate concern was some of the books people wanted to donate were definitely adult, as in not rated for elementary or middle school libraries in professional book reviews such as Booklist, Kirkus Reviews, Publishers Weekly, and School Library Journal. This required having a delicate conversation with our well-meaning school community and telling them that just because the public library or their favorite bookstore carried a particular book, didn’t mean that book met the district criteria for our school library. Our second concern was adding a balance of LGBTQ books in our realistic fiction section.
The GGLOW copy category has also been added to our library catalog, so students can search for books by the copy category and I can pull the list of GGLOW titles and print out the entire list for patrons on request.

During year two, the GGLOW committee chair and I started to collaborate on the project earlier in the academic year. The committee acquired PTA funds to support the GGLOW fund-raising dance annually and repeated the t-shirt sale. I had begun an ongoing list of GGLOW titles in my library jobber’s system, so that I would be ready to purchase new books for the collection once the funds were raised from the GGLOW dance. Maintaining a current list of GGLOW titles meant less cataloging for me and getting books into kids’ hands more quickly. We were also willing to take book donations from the list that families purchased and donated.

As of year three (spring of 2019), it feels like the book donation and fund-raising processes have been streamlined. Not only did I generate the desired booklist in my jobber’s catalog with balanced representation in picture books, middle grade, and teen fiction/informational text, but the GGLOW committee also posted it as a wish list on Amazon. This enabled families to look over the list and order the titles for themselves as well as the school library. At the dance, we received two dozen book donations, and the committee raised nearly $500 for the library wish list. This year the committee added a new t-shirt that reads: “Hello, my name is ________ and my pronouns are….” as well as the popular “STEM is a Safe Place” version.

The PTA created a hallway bulletin board of pronouns, and I also posted the pronoun chart from the book A Quick and Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns on the library check-out counter. Students feel safe discussing how they identify and asking for help locating GGLOW books. A fifth-grader’s face was literally glowing, with GGLOW book list in hand, as she enthusiastically described her outfit for the GGLOW dance that week. A third-grader shared “BEST PAGE!!!” when reviewing Who Are You: The Kid’s Guide to Gender Identity, and he spun the removable gender wheel to answer “I have…” “I am…” and “I like…” sentence stems.

As of year three (spring of 2019), it feels like the book donation and fund-raising processes have been streamlined. Not only did I generate the desired booklist in my jobber’s catalog with balanced representation in picture books, middle grade, and teen fiction/informational text, but the GGLOW committee also posted it as a wish list on Amazon. This enabled families to look over the list and order the titles for themselves as well as the school library. At the dance, we received two dozen book donations, and the committee raised nearly $500 for the library wish list. This year the committee added a new t-shirt that reads: “Hello, my name is ________ and my pronouns are…” as well as the popular “STEM is a Safe Place” version.

The library received positive end-of-the-year feedback from many students. A student claimed, “Everyone is different, even if you’re a part of the LGBTQ community. I, myself, am queer, and here in STEM Library I feel comfortable in my own skin!” Some of the students are critical readers and now feel confident in providing feedback on books in the GGLOW collection, noting that one book may be stereotypical or another book was “queer” but not in the way that they were “queer.” Another student checks out many books because they are still trying to figure out how to be who they are. One student noted, “I think this library is a safe place, but I don’t see a lot about myself. I honestly see some lies about myself, and I am trying my hardest to find the truth about myself.” Some students acknowledge they check out the books so that they can be allies to their classmates. Another student stated, “The library is a safe place because I will read LGBTQ books and then I can understand more about my friends.”

A fifth-grader’s face was literally glowing, with GGLOW book list in hand, as she enthusiastically described her outfit for the GGLOW dance that week.
Relationships with District Initiatives

About the same time as our GGLOW group was forming at our school, there was a district initiative to develop gender identity lessons for K–5 students. These gender identity kits include copies of a book with the lesson that is designed to be taught by the classroom teacher with that book. The district librarians house these kits in the library office for teachers to check out for their grade level. I immediately contacted the district manager of health education, Lisa Love, to make certain we would have enough copies of the books referenced in the kits for students to check out. Ms. Love stated, “Our students need to see themselves reflected in the classroom, in history, in the community, in the media, including in the books they read. We should proudly display a wide range of books for kids to access, including those reflecting LGBTQ+ people. Visibility literally saves lives. Librarians play a key role in providing this kind of visibility.”

I also connected our GGLOW advocacy committee with Ms. Love for any resources she could share with them. As I find excellent LGBTQ library resources, I share these titles with Lisa Love for the district gender kit program so that they can continue to add to their lessons with more titles.

Our library services program manager, Marian Royal, also provided the link to an important AASL resource, Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ+ Materials in School Libraries. This will be a beneficial resource to consult as we continue to formalize the library policies at our school around collection development and book donations as well as any potential book challenges we may face in the future.

Relationships with Families

Making acceptance and support visible has been a part of the school library’s safe harbor work, not just for students, but their families.

Recently after school, a dad stopped outside the library, exclaimed to his husband, and pointed to the sign posted in our library’s entrance window, “All Families Are Welcome” superimposed on rainbow stripes.

I purchased and display both the Pride flag and the transgender flag, sometimes arranged with topical book displays and at other times draped casually on a library surface so that all year students know they are safe and supported in the school library.

Building relationships with students is by far the most important part of building a safe space for students in this school library.

I collaborate with the parents in our community that started the Gender Family Alliance. For example, in fall of 2018, when transgender students and Title IX was in jeopardy, Teaching Tolerance magazine provided resources such as the article “Affirming Transgender Students with Their Rights under Attack,” which I shared with the Gender Family Alliance to post on their website.

In November of 2018, when the Gender Family Alliance held a parent event in our library, I again promoted the gender kits to all our teachers so that they could implement the classroom lessons. I printed out the lessons for the books for each grade-level teacher, e-mailed the lesson plans to teachers, and bar-coded the books for easy check out.

Below is the list of Seattle Public School’s gender kit list of books by grade:

K = Introducing Teddy
1 = My Princess Boy
2 = Jacob’s New Dress
3 = B in the World
4 = I Am Jazz
5 = Red: A Crayon’s Story and George

Relationships with Students

Building relationships with students is by far the most important part of building a safe space for students in this school library. One student wrote, “STEM Library is a safe place ‘cause it supports LGBTQ students and TRANSGENDER kids so they can know that they feel important.”

Jacqueline Woodson’s book Safe Harbor is an excellent literary example of students upholding each other. Many school librarians have that “lunch bunch” or “early arrivers” or “daily dawdlers” for whom our libraries are that safe harbor. When students feel safe, they will share with you who they are. A student proclaimed, “Being able
to talk about important topics with friends and with the GGLOW books I’m allowed to show my brave colors!” Several students have even come out to me during writing opportunities in the library.

How to Create that Safe Harbor

School libraries can be refuges in many ways. Here are some action steps to make your school library that safe harbor for LGBTQ students:

1. **Acceptance.** Students need to see through your actions and words that the library is a safe harbor. Banned Books Month is a great way to start the year bringing to light all the books that have been challenged, from *Tango Makes Three* to *George to Drama*. One of my biggest challenges and a work in progress after 30+ years in education is to no longer address my students in binary terms such as “ladies and gentlemen/boys and girls,” but to now address groups as “everyone,” “friends,” “students,” or “scholars.” I found I also had to educate myself and admit what I did not know. I had to learn what the I and A+ in LGBTQIA+ meant on the local teen library summer book bingo. I also realized that we didn’t have any books on pansexuality. Apparel such as our safe place and pronoun t-shirts are great, and my over-the-top GGLOW dance outfit with rainbow tutu, bow tie, hair bow, and boa demonstrate to students I will support them in big and small ways.

2. **Program Implementation.** Make a safe harbor/LGBTQIA+ plan to pitch to administration. Get a commitment from administration to support the work. Many of the most-challenged books every year have to do with LGBTQ topics. You will need both budget and policy support for present and future years.

3. **Community Collaboration.** Identify the allies in your school community. If your school doesn’t have a GGLOW or LGBTQ committee or student group, find out how to start one in your community. The school library is a great meeting space for the group, and you’ll be able to hear first-hand their needs and wants. Determine whether there are local organizations that would help with funding and support.

4. **Curricular Resources.** What are your district initiatives for acknowledging and supporting
5. Collection Development. Every year there seem to be more resources available for our K–8 collection. Our library jobber offers a category for LGBTQ titles. Use awards lists such as the ALA Stonewall Award. (Click on the “Winners list all years” if you are just beginning your LGBTQ collection.) Follow print and online resources with topical articles, such as the School Library Journal and the Knowledge Quest website. Other resources include Booklist, VOYA, Center for the Study of Multi-Cultural Children’s Literature, We Need Diverse Comics, Teaching Tolerance, Read Brightly, and Common Sense Media. Once you start searching for lists, you will be amazed at how many different sources there are. Read as many of the books as possible in order to know which titles will best serve your students’ needs. Also, look for books that include supporting LGBTQ characters, such as Shadowshaper by Daniel Jose Older or the gender-fluid Alex Fierro in Rick Riordan’s Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard series. It took a student explicitly stating in their library feedback to realize that an important part of collection development is what we DON’T select. “We don’t get books encouraging homophobia or anti-LGBTQ excluding people because of what/who they like/prefer would be unacceptable for school behavior. Everyone is different and that is what defines us.”

6. Displays. Post those welcome signs and pronoun charts. Order a Pride and transgender flag. Create ongoing GGLower/ LGBTQ book displays, not just in June. Infuse LGBTQ titles throughout the year in a variety of library display topics. Add the GGLower or LGBTQ spine labels for easy location of books, but keep in mind that for closeted students this overt labeling of the books may not be comfortable.

7. Student Voice. Include students in decisions such as book ordering and display creation. Trust students to help you do this important work. Explicitly ask them what you and your school library can do to create a safe harbor for them. Then your students can feel as ours do that the “library is a safe place because all gender identities and sexual orientations are respected and celebrated.”

Mary E. Bannister
is a teacher–librarian at Seattle Public Schools.

Recommended Reading:

Works Cited:

Lisa Love. 2019. Personal e-mail correspondence.