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"The Expectations That We Be Educators": The Views of Australian Authors of Young Adult Fiction on Their OwnVoices Novels as Windows for Learning about Marginalized Experiences

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Abstract

This paper discusses empirical research conducted in 2016 with seven Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction who publicly identified as one or more of the following: Indigenous Australian, a person of colour, or a member of queer or disabled communities. Interview data was analyzed using critical discourse analysis to understand authors' professional journeys as publicly identifying marginalized creators within the Australian publishing industry and wider literary community. The study found that all seven authors directly or indirectly invoked the concept of education or learning through their books, with their books functioning as a "window" to readers from communities different from their own, per Bishop's 1990 metaphor. Five authors positively acknowledged this educational potential, while two did from a negative perspective. This research contributes to our understanding of the additional pressures and expectations placed on authors from marginalized communities, while inserting the voices of Australian authors into broader discussions about equity in children's and young adult fiction.

Introduction

Emerging throughout the twentieth century, young adult fiction has been recognized as a category of literature dedicated to serving the entertainment and informational needs of

teenagers.[i] Contemporary diversity advocacy has further solidified the criticisms and encouragement from landmark scholars such as Larrick for the literature to become more inclusive of marginalized voices.[ii] Groups such as We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) have made tangible industry progress by promoting the inclusion of people from marginalized communities among character casts, author communities, and other publishing industry roles.[iii] Amidst this, the label "OwnVoices" was coined by young adult fiction author Corinne Duyvis on September 6, 2015, to refer to fiction written by *and* about people from the same marginalized community, with the unspoken understanding that this personal connection will lead to more authentic depictions of the identities and experiences represented.[iv]

With Australian authors of young adult fiction increasingly being published and distributed in the U.S. market too, these U.S.-centric discussions about diversity and representation have become increasingly relevant to the Australian literary landscape. However, due to different cultural and historical contexts in the two countries, not all of the discussions about diversity and representation are comparable. Additionally, due to a dearth of local research, the perspectives of Australian authors on current global diversity advocacy priorities, such as those championed by WNDB, remain unknown.

This paper presents the findings of original qualitative research, as well as empirical evidence from participant authors' own experience based on their awareness of the conversations taking place in adjacent literary spaces such as libraries, schools, advocacy movements, and global publishing industries. Through the discussion of data from a series of interviews with seven Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction, this article contributes to an understanding of their perspectives of their own books as "windows" for learning about marginalized identities, communities, and experiences. More broadly, it provides insight into the values assigned to diverse and inclusive fiction for children and young adults, both for insiders and outsiders to the different marginalized communities. Through these contributions, it introduces the perspectives of marginalized Australian authors into prominent global discussions surrounding literature, inclusion, and youth advocacy.

Literature Review

Rudine Sims Bishop's famed metaphor of literature as a window, mirror, and sliding glass door has had a profound impact on the way representations of marginalized communities are

discussed and understood. It promoted a now-common "language of visibility," through which the importance of such representation is articulated with the use of sight- or vision-related language.[v] This language stresses that literature by *and* about people from marginalized communities has a value inherent to its existence, due to the homogeneity of mainstream literary markets, and it is frequently invoked by marginalized creators and consumers in relation to their own experience with books.[vi] As a result, the focus of related conversations and advocacy for inclusive literature is on the book as a "mirror," to reflect and allow young readers from marginalized communities to see themselves in what they read.

However, while the mirror metaphor may be of foremost interest to marginalized writers and diversity advocates, many audiences approach inclusive literature with expectations that more frequently align with the idea that books are windows. As a window that "offer[s] views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange," the book that explores a marginalized identity or experience becomes an opportunity for readers who are outsiders to that community to gain insight into a life different from their own, with characters who are influenced by the structures of society in distinctive ways.[vii] Within the context of children's and young adult fiction, this perspective of inclusive fiction as educational for non-marginalized students is amplified, due to the widespread belief that "by altering perceptions [of marginalized and non-marginalized communities] for both audiences, stories could change realities" for young people and promote greater social cohesion among the generations of the future.[viii]

Through narratives centering on marginalized voices, books create the means for readers to "locate themselves as having experienced some form of marginality and prejudice," without the "fears and questions inherent in challenging social, familial, institutional prescriptions and ascriptions" that they may face within the real world.[ix] Inviting young people to challenge these views, rather than reinforcing them, nurtures the growth of critical thinking in relation to societal norms. Brule's 2008 study "[asked] students to recognize the culturally established norms of beauty, gender roles, age, ethnicity, and ability," through the interrogation of these "socially accepted hegemonic norms" in fairy tales, which are commonly retold in young adult fiction.[x] The findings revealed that "students are often unnerved by the realization of their own acceptance of these hegemonic stereotypes," highlighting the extent to which the emphasis of "majority culture" norms in fiction read during childhood and adolescence can render these values invisible.[xi]

A three-year study by Blackburn and Clark involving the reading and discussion of queer young adult fiction by teenagers and adults who identified as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and transgender led to participants demonstrating a more nuanced understanding of how queerphobia functions, promoted the interrogation of heteronormativity, and even reduced the policing of gender norms among the group members.[xii] Similar results were reported in a classroom study by Sieben and Wallowitz, through the reduction of students' use of homophobic slurs, increased criticisms of heteronormativity and gender norms, and students' willingness to publicly identify as allies to the queer community.[xiii] Younger age brackets have also been found to be influenced positively through reading about the lives of marginalized communities, as in the Cameron and Rutland study involving 67 non-disabled children aged 5–10, who were read stories featuring positive portrayals of disabled characters and who subsequently demonstrated a reduced association between negative traits and disabled identity.[xiv] These studies alone support fiction's ability to foster a growth in understanding of marginalized communities.

Reading inclusively can therefore nurture a greater capacity for empathy, as "for those ensconced in the center, the margins can provide powerful new perspectives."[xv] OwnVoices young adult fiction, then, becomes a site particularly loaded with this potential to enhance awareness and understanding, due to its perception as inherently more authoritative and authentic in its rendering of its marginalized characters.[xvi] However, the reading of fiction exploring marginalized experiences or identities to increase one's knowledge becomes more problematic when the educational potential of the book becomes an *expectation* of the author and their art. This expectation is enhanced in children's and young adult fiction spaces, where the target readership is still "acquir[ing] their . . . meanings of gender or colour, their understanding of self and other through those discourses" of identity, through everyday exchanges with adult authority figures and the literature they are exposed to.[xvii] As a result, these expectations have the potential to disproportionately affect authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction.

The significance of school and library visits for Australian young adult fiction authors to supplement their income, alongside other related promotional activities, frequently places many authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction in situations where they may be pressured by this expectation to educate teenagers.[xviii] However, little is known about how authors of Australian OwnVoices young adult fiction perceive this expectation of the educational potential of their work: Is it a burden or an opportunity to open the minds of teenage readers to new worldviews?

How do they feel about their art being viewed as an educational tool? An understanding of these perspectives would allow teachers, librarians, parents, and other adults to better support YA authors, communicate their expectations of authors clearly and respectfully, and reduce the pressures that marginalized creators may feel when participating in public events such as school visits.

Research Questions

The findings discussed in this paper emerged as part of a larger project investigating the publishing experiences of Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction, with other results detailed elsewhere.[xix] Areas of interest included the level of publishing industry support provided to authors and the reception of their work among peers, readers, and professionals in literary adjacent spaces such as schools and libraries. All participants in the research were necessarily from marginalized communities, and the research was undertaken with an aim to empower and provide authors with the opportunity to share previously unknown experiences.

As a result, it was vital that the research question be framed in such a way that participating authors understood that the study sought to provide a channel through which their voices and experiences could be heard. Due to the unexplored territory of this research, and so as not to limit the potential for rich data that qualitative research provides, the study used a broad research question:

> How do marginalized authors writing young adult fiction that draws from personal experience challenge the lack of diverse representation within Australian young adult fiction? And how has this choice impacted them as writers?

As no research had been previously undertaken to explore this area of interest, it was not possible to anticipate the nature of the findings or form a hypothesis.

Methods

An extensive review of authors' promotional and marketing materials revealed that Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction rarely discussed their own publishing journeys within the context of broader global discussions about diversity and inclusion in young adult fiction, despite many regularly participating in these conversations at arts festivals. To gain insight into

their perspective and contribute the voices of Australian authors to these conversations, a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction was proposed and approved by our university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Following the construction of an annotated list of eligible authors (including names and publication details) through traditional bibliographic sites such as the AustLit Database and community-maintained archives such as Goodreads, seven authors were approached and agreed to participate in the research.[xx]

The annotated list totaled thirty-six authors at its point of initial completion in October 2016, with approximately twenty authors remaining active (i.e., having published a book within the last ten years) and residing in Australia, and, thus, seven authors represented almost one-third of the list. Participating authors were based in multiple states around Australia and included representatives from all major communities on the list, including Indigenous People, people of colour, queer people, and disabled people (inclusive of physical disability, neurodivergence, and mental illness), as well as participants who identified with more than one community. Though a survey had the potential to capture the perspectives of more participants, such an approach limits the richness of the data, prevents the asking of follow-up questions, and restricts the agency of respondents by limiting the topics to those of interest to the researcher, rather than that of participants. The semi-structured interview in contrast uses only guiding questions, while allowing the interviewee to follow tangents or raise additional points of interest that contribute "insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important," which was preferable due to this unexplored area of research.[xxi] Guiding questions to the interviews have previously been published and are attached below in the Appendix.[xxii]

Of the seven authors, two requested to participate through written responses due to their busy personal schedules at the time of the research. Aware of the research's original intention of spoken interview, they voluntarily provided us with supplementary materials (such as excerpts from correspondence with readers) that enhanced the richness of their responses and provided further insight into the areas of their work that they considered important. These contributions offset the limitations on data quality that the written response may have otherwise enforced. All other interviews were spoken and recorded for transcription, with interviews being conducted either in-person or over the phone based on geographic location. Written consent to publish from

the research was received from all authors, with one author requesting to not be quoted directly. This author's contributions are discussed in the aggregate with the other six participants.

Transcriptions were coded and analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), which "draws our attention to issues of power and privilege in public and private discourse"—a key interest in this research project.[xxiii] This coding process specifically sought to identify interactions where power was contested or exploited between the authors interviewed and their professional relationships with publishers; their readerships, librarians, and educators; and how a diverse sample of authors "represent[ed] the same area of the [literary] world from different perspectives or positions."[xxiv] It was not possible to anticipate the nature of such sites of power tensions, yet the code relating to education and expectations around education emerged naturally over the course of the interviews and is the focus of this paper. This qualitative approach in data collection, and coding with an eye to patterns in language and experience with multiple Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction, allowed for "revealing . . . the range of diversity and difference *within* the group."[xxv]

Due to the smaller size of the Australian publishing industry in relation to that in the United States and the study's small sample size, and to respect the privacy of the participants, all data from this research is anonymized and de-identified, with authors assigned a random number unique to this publication. Additionally, such precautions are undertaken with the understanding that, as this data discusses pressures relating to educating readers with authors who are highly dependent on opportunities to speak to readers as a source of income, identification could have unforeseen professional consequences.

Findings

All seven authors directly or indirectly invoked the concept of education, learning, or their books functioning as a "window" to readers from communities different from their own and, in some cases, considered this potential to be a secondary purpose for their OwnVoices novels. This was an unexpected finding, as no questions about education or learning (direct or indirect) were asked during the interview process—yet the concept emerged in all seven interviews to varying degrees. Within the finding of this discourse, five authors referred to the educational capacity of their books in positive albeit bittersweet terms, and two referred to education through their

novels with a negative perspective. The perspective of the author who requested to not be quoted directly is discussed in the aggregate.

Authors who invoked the concept of education or learning in relation to their novel in positive terms did so to different extents, with some explicitly discussing the benefits of others learning about the experience of being part of their marginalized community through their OwnVoices novel; others expressed an undercurrent of their belief that their book had this capacity. In each case, however, this initial positivity held a bittersweet edge, either in the form of frustration at specific stakeholders involved in their work, or at the notion of their OwnVoices books representing experiences that were so unfamiliar to mainstream audiences that they were considered educational.

Two authors wrote their OwnVoices novels with the conscious aim of informing readers about the marginalized experiences or identities within their books (though the book was still considered to be most important for readers from their own community), one author was surprised by the revelation that their novel held an educational capacity, and two simply acknowledged that the nature of the marginalized identity represented could educate uninformed readers about the experiences of their community. In contrast, the two authors who had a negative view of the educational aspect of fiction strongly believed that such an approach to writing devalued the literature itself, as well as made it less enjoyable for the reader.

1. Positive Perceptions of OwnVoices Young Adult Fiction as Educational

Authors One and Two both wrote their OwnVoices novels with the conscious aim of informing readers about particular aspects of their identity or experiences of being a member of a marginalized community. Author One deliberately set their novel in the non-Western country and city of their birth, with the intent of making readers aware of the daily life and cultural norms there. As the majority of Australian young adult fiction novels published are set within Australia, this location for the story means readers born and raised in Australia are immediately exposed to a different context and set of life experiences.

Specifically relating to the non-Western setting, Author One stated that they wanted their novel to help readers understand what it was like to live in "a developing nation like that," where "bad shit happens to good people and that's just the way it is." Author One explained that this included extreme life-threatening situations that were considered part of daily life in this country,

but which were less common in Western countries due to different political contexts. However, this also applied to the minor details that contributed to everyday life, with Author One stating:

> I tried to capture as much of the day-to-day [city] on the page without making it mundane. I wanted to have it that you can read [my novel] and kind of be able to find your way around [my city] and experience [my city], the city [itself]? Um, as much as possible because I think it's such a great experience in and of itself, and in a frightening way sometimes.

Author One's novel heavily integrates elements of the culturally specific "urban myths" that are common knowledge within the country of their birth. These elements were drawn from "stories [they] heard when [they] [were] a kid growing up" and held major cultural significance and relevance to their own teenage years. Despite the author's use of the term "urban myths" to refer to these beliefs, and their novel's classification as a work in the fantasy genre by the Australian publishing industry, Author One shared that the beliefs they integrated are not considered a fantasy concept where they grew up (in the way that Western readers might think of fairies or elves)—rather, they are a part of the cultural daily life. However, even though these beliefs are common in the country of Author One's birth, Author One felt that the responses they received from readers in Australia indicated that their novel had introduced these different cultural beliefs to Australian readers for the first time.

Author One felt that the unfamiliarity of these beliefs to Australian readers was a sign that the Australian young adult fiction publishing industry was not meeting the needs and interests of the Australian market. Author One expanded on this view as follows:

> I mean just the idea that. . . [these beliefs] are something that are *so amazing and out* . . . and out of the blue for *so* many of the people I talk to, when you consider that one-point-six billion people on earth believe in them? So there's—more people in [continent] [who] believe in [this belief] than don't believe in [it]. And I think, here's a publishing market with its own economies of scale and trends and forces, and no one in the Western world has any idea because they don't care. [. . .] Every person who reads this book [of mine] . . . and comes up and says, "Thank god I was waiting for a book like this to come along," is a person who should have been catered to already, by publishing. And they shouldn't have to wait for someone like me to come stumbling along many years into [. . .] it, and . . . be coming up through [a smaller] publisher. (emphases in original)

In addition to the artistic merit and entertainment value of their novel, Author One clearly expressed that one of their main intentions was to demonstrate that their community and cultural beliefs exist, within a market that they passionately believed was not attentive to the genuine interests of local teenagers and young adult fiction readers more broadly. But though the excited audience response to their novel was undoubtedly a positive for Author One, and they did not express any sense of feeling burdened to educate readers, Author One also expressed significant frustration at being the first writer to introduce these culturally specific beliefs to the Australian young adult fiction market. This latter sentiment was directed at the Australian publishing industry and the reluctance that Author One felt it had toward embracing books exploring marginalized, and specifically non-Western, cultures.

Author Two was very supportive of their book's potential as a window and means to educate outsider readers about their community. When describing their book early in their interview, they stated that they "think there's something to learn from the story, [regardless of] whether you're white, [or whether] you go to a public school or a [religious] school." Author Two volunteered an anecdote that reminded them that their book "always has a place, if only to educate people," which occurred "very recently, about two weeks ago," before their interview for this study. The incident occurred during a publicity event, when

> the interviewer asked me, if [my cultural group] are an actual people group, or if I just made them up because [they] had the assumption that because I was from [geographic region], that I had to be [cultural group]. And I'm not offended at that perception but it just um . . . we're never gonna go anywhere in our life or as a society if we still hold stereotypes about ethnic communities or religious communities, no matter what they are.

In this example, Author Two's novel fulfilled its secondary educational potential of informing outsiders about the existence of their community. The assumption about the non-existence of Author Two's community demonstrated the low level of awareness of their community in Australia; however, Author Two's novel became a means of resisting the erasure and stereotyping that their community faced. Author Two expressed support for the educational potential of their OwnVoices novel, due to its ability to counter societal stereotypes. Author Three, who requested to not be quoted directly, expressed the same sentiment regarding the impact their OwnVoices novel had on potential audiences, albeit with a more neutral stance.

Like Author Three, Author Four also expressed a positive but more restrained view of the educational capacity of their work, stating that their books "[provide] an opportunity for [non-marginalized] readers to understand the complexities that can exist for [marginalized] people within [marginalized] communities and [within] the broader mainstream, dominant culture." In one of their OwnVoices novels, Author Four examined equity programs for members of their marginalized community in educational institutions, as well as the societal context for why such programs have been developed in Australia. They felt that outsiders to their community in everyday life often perceived such programs as a form of "special treatment," without understanding that they are necessary to combat systemic prejudice. Author Four felt that their interrogation of these issues in their novel was "one of the areas where . . . maybe a non-[marginalized] reader might either learn or take offence."

When discussing the response they had received from teenagers outside of their community, Author Four said they "think some non-[marginalized] kids, they completely get it, they completely understand [. . .] the things I'm [communicating]." They expressed their hope that "through [their] books, readers arrive at that understanding" of the complex social context and systemic prejudices that have necessitated the establishment of these programs. Additionally, Author Four also shared that people within their personal networks had vocally supported them writing about their shared marginalized community and experiences, as they "had seen it as a way for people to gain better insight to our experiences and our history." Author Four clearly supported the idea of outsider readers being educated about their marginalized community through their OwnVoices young adult fiction novel, with this secondary potential being endorsed by Author Four's personal networks. While it was not the purpose for their writing, such expressions indicated that Author Four saw educational potential as something inherent to their OwnVoices novels, due to their status as a member of a marginalized community.

Author Five was the only author who was surprised that their OwnVoices young adult fiction had the potential to educate outsider readers about their marginalized community. Author Five had this realization when speaking to a group of school students aged 15–16 years old at a single-sex Catholic school as part of a promotional school visit. At the request of the school's staff, Author Five conceded to not mention a queer character within their novel during their presentation. However, when Author Five asked students who their favorite character in the novel was, they singled out the queer character. After only briefly acknowledging this, in

accordance with the preferences of school staff, Author Five attempted to change the topic to the students' favorite scenes in the book—only to receive the response that the favorite scene was "the scene where [the queer character] had sex with a [person of the same gender]." Author Five tentatively inquired as to why this scene was popular, and recounted the following interaction with a student they presumed was heterosexual, who

> replied, "Oh, it just made me understand my friend [name] a little bit better." And . . . that was really, really interesting, and I hadn't had someone, you know, put it back to me, it wasn't just for the [queer] kids, it was for, you know, people who knew [queer] people, and it was for them to sort of see what their lives are like.

Author Five described this revelation of their novel's educational potential as an "interesting" and a "nice" surprise, because the book had "allowed that avenue for [the students] to talk to their friends about [their sexuality]." However, Author Five also acknowledged the pressure they felt, as an author who had written about queer characters, as it was "sort of difficult to balance [their] role as someone who wants to tell stories for fun, but also the expectations that we be educators." Notably, Author Five was the only author where this expectation to educate was not limited to teenage readers outside of their community—something they directly attributed to the lack of education and support provided to queer teenagers within high school health classes and society more broadly.

Author Five shared a second anecdote to support this from when they were speaking at a different private high school to a group of students aged 13–14 years old. During their presentation, an audio alert unique to a mobile dating app commonly used by queer people sounded. Author Five began searching for the source of the audio alert by monitoring the teachers present; however it was a young student near the front of the room who removed their phone from their pocket and opened the app. Author Five was concerned for the student and recalled that in that moment they thought,

> "[This student is] getting [their] introduction to love . . . from that app," because you don't learn [queer] sex ed. [. . .] No [queer] health, nothing like that, in schools. And none of the other kids knew what was going on 'cause they didn't recognize the sound effect.

Author Five felt strongly that while it was a positive that their book could have an educational potential for teenage readers from non-queer communities, they "shouldn't have to swoop in with a book" to provide basic education to queer teenagers about relationships and physical

health, particularly as their non-queer peers received their relevant education on these topics as part of the standard Australian high school curriculum. As an author, they felt they should not bear the burden of having to "pick up the slack when schools *and parents* won't have these conversations with the kids in their care" (emphasis in original).

In this way, Author Five demonstrated a bittersweet relationship to the concept of education through their OwnVoices young adult fiction as a secondary purpose to the book—however, unlike the other six authors, this education also occurred through the book's function as a mirror to the author's own community, as well as a window to outsider readers.

2. Negative Perceptions of OwnVoices Young Adult Fiction as Educational

Two authors felt negatively about the concept of OwnVoices young adult fiction being educational, associating the idea of education with moral "messages" (Author Six) and "role models" (Author Seven) that instructed teenagers to conform to certain social norms. These authors also linked the idea of books that held this secondary potential with notions of artistic inferiority, low entertainment value, and even a lack of authenticity in the rendering of the book's marginalized characters and experiences. Additionally, both authors felt that books with this capacity could be patronizing to teenage readers of the novel, and that such books would not be realistic depictions of teenage experiences.

Author Six first drew on this discourse of education in relation to the idea of an "issue book," a term often used to deride books that explore social problems. They described such books as containing "messages" to teach the teenage reader, such as "'Don't . . . commit suicide,' I don't know. [. . .] I feel like issue books have to have a message, you know like, 'Don't do this thing . . . or this [bad thing] will happen.'" Author Six felt that books that inadequately represented the experiences of their marginalized community commonly fell into this category and, as a result, reading them felt more like an educational experience than an enjoyable one. They stated:

> I think that's when you kind of get that feeling across that "Ooh, those are the issue books" like what kind of—what I was talking about before you kind of feel like this book is tryna . . . to teach me something.

This link between inferior book quality and ideas of education and learning was strengthened with the division they established between such "issue books" and their own novel, which they

considered to be a realistic reflection of teenage life. They also extended the concept of education beyond the marginalized experiences mentioned above, of mental illness and suicidal ideation, to include moral lessons about socially acceptable and legal behavior, in relation to criticisms their book had received from educators. Author Six stated:

> I think [my novel] falls more into, it's just—this is life. This is just . . . what happens, and I'm not tryna make it, like good or bad, I think—there was a teacher review that said, "Oh there's drug use, and it's not demonized" or something like that, like, "Nothing happens to them 'cause they use drugs," like. . . . Well, sometimes kids just use drugs. And it's just what happens. [. . .] You know, I wasn't tryna say [to teenagers], "Don't use drugs." [laughs] There are drugs in the world, teenagers consume them. Like that is happening.

Author Six strongly rejected the idea of young adult fiction that could educate its teenage readers, while simultaneously emphasizing that their novel was realistic because of its morally ambiguous treatment of a common teenage experience. In addition to this, they highlighted that the expectations they had been exposed to about their writing—in particular, their inclusion of drug use by their marginalized protagonist—had come from teachers, rather than teenage readers. However, despite this strong condemnation of young adult fiction having an educational benefit for teenagers with regards to marginalized experiences or moral instruction, Author Six acknowledged that readers may still view their book as a novel that had this potential, stating, "I don't really classify it like that, but I'm like I don't really have a problem if someone did, so. That would be fine."

Author Seven viewed the educational potential of OwnVoices young adult fiction from a similarly negative stance and associated the concept of learning through books with a moral education. They felt that books that attempted to create "role models" for their readers would be perceived as insincere and patronizing by a teenage audience, describing such books as "so lame." They continued, "If I tried to be a role model and held myself up to be one, teenagers would see right through it." Author Seven added that they had "never felt external pressure to be any kind of role model" or an educator for their readers, unlike many of the authors who viewed education as a positive form of potential for young adult fiction.

Author Seven felt novels written by authors who viewed themselves as role models were compromised in the richness of the story, which also undermined the authenticity of the marginalized characters and experiences depicted. They felt that such an approach "actually

affects their work" because "they try and make their 'minority' characters more perfect, less flawed." As a result, the characters these authors write "represent not real people, but model minorities." Author Seven was more interested in representing what they felt were realistic experiences, and stated that "flaws make [their] characters" because "they give them their interesting internal struggles." Author Seven also referred to their past nonfiction publications where they *had* used their writing to educate readers. However, they repeatedly drew distinctions between these two different areas of their writing, suggesting that they consider their nonfiction and young adult fiction to have different purposes, because of the distinct literary categories.

Discussion

All seven authors who participated in this study raised the concept of education and learning of their own volition, in relation to their OwnVoices young adult fiction novels. This was unexpected, as the guiding interview questions did not make any reference to either of these concepts. Although all authors interviewed considered that the most important function of their books was to act as a "mirror" for their own marginalized communities, five authors also discussed the (at times bittersweet) educational potential of their novels to provide a positive perspective of their marginalized community to outsiders. The remaining two authors had a negative view of the idea that their novels could have an educational function for readers who were outsiders to their community.

Despite the two different stances, the consistency of this discourse of education and learning across all seven interviews suggests that all authors had previously been exposed to ideas about educating teenagers through young adult fiction. In many cases, authors referenced external expectations of them, their identity, and their books regarding this educational potential, with Authors Two, Four, Five, and Six all expressing an awareness of these expectations to educate from various stakeholders, including media, school staff, and personal networks. In contrast, Author Seven explicitly stated that they had never felt any expectations or pressure of this nature.

Five authors were positive about the idea that their books could inform teenage readers about the experiences of belonging to their marginalized community to varying extents. While Author Three simply acknowledged it, Authors One, Two, Four, and Five were more supportive of the educational potential of their books. However, this positive stance was consistently

coupled with expressions of frustration that such education was necessary at all. Author One directed their criticism toward the Australian publishing industry, which they felt were under-publishing marginalized voices, while Author Five directed theirs at school institutions and parents who restricted access to information about queer health. Authors Two, Three, and Four directed this frustration at society more broadly, specifically at the low public awareness of their communities and their experiences.

That the five authors who positively viewed the potential of their books as educational "windows" to teenage readers were the same five authors who criticized society and institutions of power and knowledge for under-representing their community's voices is likely not a coincidence. The existence of this parallel suggests that these authors may have felt it necessary in the past to provide additional justifications for their novel's relevance to the Australian young adult fiction market, beyond basic entertainment value. This indicates that authors who feel that the Australian publishing industry, educational institutions, and society more broadly are less welcoming of their OwnVoices young adult fiction are more likely to draw on the discourse of education and view it as a positive additional form of potential of their books, as it further endorses the presence of their books on the Australian market.

A stark contrast was evident between the authors who had positive feelings about the educational aspects of their work (while also criticizing the failure of institutions to provide such education), and the authors who rejected the idea of their works being educational. The latter authors expressed that they had never felt pressured to provide an educational "role model" (Author Seven) or that their book should have had an educational "message" (Author Six). That these authors were able to reject the educational potential of their books, and the external expectations of others, suggests that they may perceive the Australian young adult fiction market as more welcoming toward creative works that represent their specific marginalized community. They also shared the view that novels with educational potential were often compromised in the areas of artistic quality, entertainment value, authenticity in the depictions of marginalized characters and experiences, realism to teenage experiences, and the ability to engage teenage readers in a non-patronizing way. This view opposed that of the five authors who viewed the educational potential of their OwnVoices novels from a positive perspective, who never stated any concerns about the quality of their books. In fact, many of these authors highlighted extremely positive reactions they had received from readers who *had* learned something new

about their marginalized community through their books, with Authors One and Five being particularly notable.

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize that Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction are aware of conversations pertaining to education and learning through their books as "windows" to teenage readers not from their marginalized community. The fact that this discourse emerged so strongly across all seven interviews without guiding interview questions raising the concept of education or learning further underscores this.

Although there were distinct similarities in the views and actions of all the authors interviewed, their differing perceptions of the Australian literary market and its expectations related to their specific marginalized communities may be a key factor in understanding their different views on the education aspect. Authors who supported the potential of their books as educational windows to outsiders to their community consistently coupled this support with frustration at the societal lack of awareness of their identities, while authors who rejected this secondary purpose displayed no signs of feeling unwelcome or burdened by expectations in the literary market. However, it must be noted that the two latter authors who did so still drew on the discourse of education of their own volition, suggesting that they have had some exposure to the concept of their book's educational potential. These different views within these findings reflect the diverse perspectives of local authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction within the broader heterogeneous community of marginalized authors in Australia.

An understanding of the perspectives and frustrations felt by authors of OwnVoices YA fiction in relation to the pressure of educating outsiders is necessary for teachers, librarians, parents, and publishers, to better support these authors and their engagement with their teenage readerships. Four authors expressed frustration at the low societal awareness of their communities and experiences, with one specifically identifying the high school curriculum as particularly lacking support for their community. Stress for these authors and their potential readers may be alleviated through more active education about these communities from parents, teachers, and librarians more broadly—for example, aligning author visits to libraries with national holidays, workshops, or social events that correspond with the book's themes, such as inviting queer authors to speak during Pride Month in June.

Foregrounding the artistry of the authors over the potential to learn from them could also reduce the likelihood of this expectation being thrust on them during author events and, based on the data in this study, is likely to be preferable to the authors too. Finally, openly communicating with authors about the level of knowledge that the potential audience may have about their community and whether they will be expected to take an educational stance during the event will likely reduce the risk of authors being caught off-guard by potentially uncomfortable questions, such as what Author Two experienced.

Young adult fiction can act as a window into lives different from that of the reader and have the potential to inform teenagers everywhere about the experiences of marginalized communities. However, windows can be a vessel for voyeurism, and those behind the glass are seen more than they are heard. Highlighting the perspectives and frustrations of the authors who are too often expected to be educators provides an insight into how we can support them through bridging the educational gap for them, so they can focus on their primary responsibility—to tell a good story.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix: Guiding Interview Questions

1. How would you describe yourself and your book to potential readers?
2. Who do you consider to be the target demographic of your book?
3. At the time of writing your book, did you go through any changes in how you saw yourself, or how you perceived your experiences as a teenager?
4. How would you describe the reactions you have had to your book from teenage readers?
5. Where do you think your book fits in the Australian young adult fiction market?

6. Do you believe there is an expectation of you to write about characters from your community?
7. What would be your response to someone who classified your book as an "issue" book, or you as an "issue" author?
8. When you look back on your experience of being published, do you see any ways in which you could have been supported more by industry professionals?
9. Have you noticed any differences in how outsiders to your community write characters from your community?
10. What would you like your future novels to contribute to the Australian young adult fiction landscape?

These questions were originally published in the Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association[xxvi] wherein the authors discuss other findings from this study.

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"It's Okay to Be Confused": LGBTQAI+ Teen Novels as Sexuality and Sexual Health Information Resources

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Abstract

Although sexual education programs are staples in the middle and high school curricula, many of these courses are abstinence-based, which do not serve the needs of the teen demographic, let alone those who are LGBTQAI+. Curricula for sex education often ignores or discriminates against LGBTQAI+ teens. LGBTQAI+-focused literature can help fill the gaps in sexuality/sexual health information not addressed in public school curricula. Qualitative research such as content analysis divulges sexuality and sexual health issues examined in LGBTQAI+-marketed teen literature. Individual interviews of LGTQAI+ teens add insight into whether the positive and negative aspects of the teen literature, discovered through content analysis, affect them in their enjoyment of or willingness to read the book, whether the issues in the book are authentic and pertinent to their everyday life, and if the books fulfill an information need they have about sexuality or sexual health.

Introduction

Although sexual education programs are staples in the middle and high school curricula, many of these courses are abstinence-based, which do not serve the needs of the teen demographic, let alone those who are LGBTQAI+.[i] "LGBT teens are often left out of discussions in sex education classrooms in the United States because of discriminatory curricula, ignorance on the part of some teachers and students, or fear of retribution from conservative political and religious

activists."[ii] LGBTQAI+-focused literature can help fill the gaps in sexuality/sexual health information not addressed in public school curricula.

This qualitative research study examines LGBTQAI+ representation in the teen fiction selections named to the 2018 Rainbow Book List, and themes contained within the novels exploring intimacy, consent, and safe sex. This article considers the first-person perspective of teens eighteen to twenty years old through individual interviews given before the assignment of a teen novel from the 2018 Rainbow Book List young adult fiction data set and after the participants read the selected book.

The purpose of this study is to explore whether the novels considered to be of quality to the American Library Association (ALA) Rainbow Book List Committee—comprised of adult information professionals such as librarians and iSchool/library school faculty and staff—stand up to the realities of life for queer teens themselves. "The Rainbow Book List presents an annual bibliography of quality books with significant and authentic GLBTQ content, which are recommended for people from birth through eighteen years of age."[iii] The ALA's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) sponsors the selection of quality literature for children and young adults annually, as nominated by the public and publishers, through a committee of seven individuals who are members of the ALA's GLBTRT. Approximately 250 books were presented by publishers to the Rainbow Book List Committee for review, but many did not meet the criteria for selection. Those that were chosen were selected based on criteria such as authenticity, usefulness to LGBTQAI+ young adult readers when discovering and living their sexuality, and diversity with sensitivity toward race, ethnicity, and disability.

This study is based on several assumptions, the first being that teen literature featuring LGBTQAI+ storylines can be "used to fill the gap in sex education classes regarding queer sexuality and how it is viewed by both queer and non-queer teens. The use of explicit sexuality can promote discussion and combat homophobia by encouraging the reader to explore sexuality in all forms."[iv] Additionally, although the presentation of LGBTQAI+-positive role models are included in today's media more frequently than in the past, not all members of the LGBTQAI+ are equally represented. For instance, bisexuality is often posed as being an intermediate stage between heterosexuality and homosexuality, reinforcing the stigma associate with the "indecisiveness" of one who is attracted to either sex. Qualitative content analysis uncovers these inequalities in the representation of marginalized LGBTQAI+ protagonists. Finally, LGBTQAI+

teens may seek information on how to define, adapt, and to begin to present their sexual identity publicly, and how to establish networks of support with those who are heterosexual and LGBTQAI+.[v] It is assumed that teen literature can play a role in providing such information to LGBTQAI+ teens and that the individual interview sessions will explore the information vigorously.

Research Questions

This study endeavors to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How closely do the 2018 Rainbow Book List teen fiction novels relate to the real of life of a group of LGBTQAI+ teens?

RQ2: What do a group of teens like about the 2018 Rainbow Book List teen fiction selections? What do they dislike or disagree with?

RQ3: How does this group of teens think that these novels could fulfill the information needs of LGBTQAI+ teens relative to sexuality?

RQ4: How does this group of teens think these novels could fulfill the information needs of LGBTQAI+ teens relative to sexual health?

Literature Review: Information Needs of LGBTQAI+ Teens

Much research has been completed focusing on the information needs of teens in general; however, "4–17% of the U.S. population identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; LGBTQAI+ youth constitute a substantial segment of the population that requires attention."[vi] LGBTQAI+ teens fit the same criteria as heterosexual teens in that they are transitioning between childhood and adulthood but identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, asexual/aromantic, intersex, as well as other sexual/gender identities that are not heteronormative. The acronym LGBTQAI+ is currently considered the most inclusive and recognized for those who do not identify as straight or cisgender.

LGBTQAI+ teens may seek information on how to define, adapt, and to begin to present their sexual identity publicly, and how to establish networks of support by those who are heterosexual and LGBTQAI+. "Sex researchers and mental health clinicians have long recognized that the stigma surrounding homosexuality plays an important role in shaping the

social psychological adjustment of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people" and that internalized homophobia can be detrimental to their mental health.[vii] GLSEN (pronounced "glisten") reports that lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents are more likely to use alcohol and drugs than their heterosexual peers[viii] The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) claim that LGBTQAI+ youth are at a higher risk for depression and suicide, and older studies from the 1990s point to additional issues with substance abuse that are common in the community.[ix] LGBTQAI+ are more subject to these issues than their heterosexual counterparts as they face the additional stress of being a marginalized youth on top of experiencing the average "teenage angst." These stresses manifest as feelings of "guilt, self-loathing, shame, a delay in identity formation, poor psychosexual development, poor self-esteem, and a myriad of other threats to a positive self-concept"; in turn, these stresses are judged to be the catalysts for drug abuse and suicide attempts.[x] Bisexual teens are more at risk for mental health issues than gays and lesbians because being bisexual was associated with less family support and acceptance as well as receiving less support from the lesbian and gay community.[xi]

As Garry explains, "Libraries are heavily used by LGBTQ teens, and this group is seeking information about understanding their gay identities, coming out, learning social 'gay rules,' and where to connect with others like them."[xii] It is important for LGBTQAI+ teen readers to have a hand in the selection of books to ensure that their own interests are explored, and students appreciate the opportunity to discuss what they have read to make sense of the readings and to connect them to issues in their personal lives. Leading up to 2006, approximately "200 novels have been published that center around queer characters" with young adult protagonists seeking visibility, voice, and acceptance.[xiii] However, in 2017 alone, the ALA GLBTRT Rainbow Book List Committee examined over 260 books with queer content produced for infants, toddlers, children, and teens.[xiv] Information needs met by such books include how to deal with homophobia, stories about real LGBTQAI+ persons, coming out stories, and sexual relationships.[xv]

"Sexual minority students feel less safe, less engaged, less respected, and less valued in schools than do their heterosexual peers."[xvi] Students who identify as LGBTQAI+ are at a greater personal and academic risk because they do not see themselves positively reflected in their school curricula; English classrooms can incorporate literature that includes LGBTQAI+

characters/protagonists. Unfortunately, only 8.49% of schools indicate that they use "texts, films, or other materials addressing same-sex desire in their English language arts curriculum."[xvii]

School libraries are an asset to LGBTQAI+ teens and can be instrumental in helping these students feel safer and more accepted in their school community.[xviii] LGBTQAI teens utilize library resources to understand their identity as a member of the LGBTQAI+ community and seek information on how to come out and connect with others like them.[xix] It is important for LGBTQAI+ young adult readers to have a role in the selection of books to ensure that their own interests are explored, and students appreciate the opportunity to discuss what they have read to make sense of the readings and to connect them to issues in their personal lives.

Although many school librarians recognize the value of LGBTQAI+-inclusive literature, some feel wary of including resources with graphic LGBTQAI+ content in fear of pushback within conservative communities.[xx] Regardless of their fear of stakeholder disapproval, school librarians must maintain their focus to provide an inclusive, positive space for queer students by including LGBTQAI+ and other resources for marginalized communities in their collections or face the perception that their library is not welcoming to all students. Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris warn: "In addition to a lack of positive LGBTQ characters in literature, a lack of LGBTQ-themed books sends a message to youth that it is not okay to be gay, bisexual, transgender, or lesbian. . . . A lack of LGBTQ-themed literature in school libraries can send a message to LGBTQ teens that the school library is not the place for them, and that their lives and their concerns are not valued there."[xxi]

Currently, the National Education Association (NEA) is pressing schools to include such literature in their libraries and within their curricula as it promotes the acceptance of diversity in sexual orientation and the elimination of sexual stereotyping in schools.[xxii] This diversity must include "all types of sexual orientation and gender expressions and their intersection with age, religion, ethnicity, national origin, ancestry, disability, and socio-economic background."[xxiii] As Garry writes, "Students who are struggling to find a place to belong so often take solace in books; it is vital that all students have access to stories that validate their feelings and experiences."[xxiv] When schools incorporate such curricula, students feel safer in their school environment, have fewer absences, feel more connection to their schools, and experience greater acceptance from their peers.[xxv] These books become literature of hope as they help LGBTQAI+

teens realize that they are not alone, and they also promote empathy in straight teens as the stories foster ideals of equality and fight homophobia.[xxvi]

Methods

The population for this study were students aged eighteen to twenty attending a large public southeastern university, and the sample was drawn from eligible volunteers. Although the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) defines adolescence as the period between the ages of twelve and eighteen, participants between the ages of eighteen and twenty were recruited as there was the possibility of discussing topics sexual in nature that may not be possible with younger teens in a conservative community. Sampling was purposive and convenient (availability sampling) with evidence of snowballing; volunteers self-identified as LGBTQAI+ to participate in this study, and volunteers recruited friends who fit the subject profile. Inclusiveness was a priority as diverse samples yield the most information; every effort was made to gather equal representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, intersex, or any other person who does not identify as heterosexual. Ultimately, fifteen participants were chosen to participate in the study based on their availability and willingness to participate in two interviews. The responsibilities of the participants included completing a short initial interview, a secondary interview, and the reading of the assigned 2018 Rainbow Book List novel. Subjects were compensated with one $25 Visa gift card per interview and the novel was theirs to keep.

Participants were recruited via flyers posted on campus and through advertisements on the student research study participant recruitment website upon approval from the Florida State University Institutional Review Board (FSU IRB). In terms of reflexivity, it was possible that an LGBTQAI+ teen population may not accept the researcher as a forty-year-old, heteronormative, white female. As a result, the researcher made attempts during the initial interview to build a level of trust, facilitating robust conversation.

To best comprehend who volunteered to participate in this research study, there was an initial thirty-minute interview comprised of demographic questions. Participants self-identified as being between the ages of eighteen and twenty, with a mean age of 19.27. Five participants identified themselves as eighteen years of age, which classified them as an adult per YALSA's definition of "teen." Examining gender, 73.3% of participants identified as cisgender female, 20% as cisgender male, and 6.7% as genderfluid or nonbinary. Nine participants considered

themselves bisexual, two as lesbian, one gay, one pansexual, and one asexual/demisexual. One participant identified as queer, not specifying a label for their sexuality. This sample was 73% White, 13.3% Black, with one subject identifying as Asian and another identifying as interracial. Four subjects described their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latinx, and one identified as Haitian.

Participants were asked which socioeconomic status most reflected the status of their lives as a teen. The socioeconomic status most represented was the middle class with 53.3%, followed by derivations such as upper-middle class (13.3%), and lower-middle class (6.7%). Four participants identified as having spent their youth as impoverished, with two of these participants stating that they had been homeless at some point. Two participants reported that they were from immigrant families. The majority grew up in a suburban location (40%), followed by rural environments (26.7%), with only five participants identifying as growing up in an urban location. In terms of religion, 40% reported as growing up in a non-denominational Christian household, 13.3% of participants grew up in either a Baptist or Catholic home, and two stated that they grew up in a Christian household that also celebrated Jewish holidays culturally. One participant identified as Mormon, and two reported that they were raised in a non-affiliated household. Household compositions include adoptive families, single-parent and divorced-parent households, and some responded that they grew up in a multi-generational household that included grandparents. The majority have siblings.

Once the demographic information was compiled for each participant, they were given a novel from the 2018 Rainbow Book List teen fiction nominees with a protagonist that best matched their individually reported demographic information. Books were assigned on a 1:1 basis, meaning that each participant read a single novel and no book was read by more than one participant. This rationale was guided by Rudine Sims Bishop's concept of "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," which states that if young readers do not see themselves represented accurately in the books they read, they are in danger of viewing themselves and others like them as caricatures or less important than those in majority populations.[36] It was important to this study that participants be able to identify with the protagonist in their assigned novel to ascertain whether the novel was a realistic and believable representation of the life of a modern LGBTQAI+ teen.

Participants were sent a hardcover copy of their assigned novel through Amazon Prime and were asked to notify the researcher once they had received the book and when they

completed reading it. Second interviews, ranging from thirty minutes to one hour were then scheduled over Google Hangouts, and sessions were recorded for transcription. Transcripts were then coded using NVivo 12 software to identify nodes corresponding to the research questions. Nodes were derived from the research questions and assisted in organizing participant opinions on their assigned novel such as "Likes" and "Dislikes," "Novel's Helpfulness with Discovering Sexuality," "Consent," and "Sexual Health Information."

The second individual interview conducted with the fifteen participants occurred over Google Hangouts after each participant reported finishing their assigned 2018 Rainbow Book List teen fiction selection. Of the fifteen students interviewed, two replied with the answers to the interview questions via email due to their inability to meet over the Google Hangouts platform. Books read and reviewed individually by participants can be found in the appendix.

The participants were each asked a series of questions in the second interview that had been reviewed and approved by Florida State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to express ideas without undue restriction in order to get the richest data possible and to ensure that they relayed all their pertinent thoughts/opinions about their assigned novel. Each question was asked to each recipient even if they were not applicable for continuity purposes. The following questions were asked:

1. How closely did your selected novel relate to your own reality as a LGBTQAI+ teen?
    a. In what ways did you see your own life reflected in this novel?
    b. In what ways did you feel the novel was inaccurate?
    c. How do you think this novel will affect the way a straight peer perceives you?
2. What did you like about the novel? What did you dislike/disagree with?
3. How could this novel educate LGBTQAI+ teens about their sexuality?
    a. What information did you notice in your assigned book that could have helped you as you discovered your sexuality?
4. How could this novel educate LGBTQAI+ teens about their sexual health?
    a. What sexual health issues were addressed in the novel that would have been helpful to you? What sexual health issues addressed in the novel might be helpful to you moving forward?

Limitations in this study include issues with the subject population being somewhat older than what YALSA determines as being "teens." While a good proportion of the subjects were still eighteen years old at the time of this study and fit the definition of "teen," other participants were older and considered "emerging adults." It would be valuable to replicate this study with teens aged twelve to eighteen so that the perspectives of the intended audience of these novels are explored. Because the interviews within this study were conducted throughout the spring semester of a fifteen-week university term, time was of the essence and it was not possible to have the participants approve their transcripts. Although this research features a diverse population of volunteers, the sampling was purposive and convenient, limited to fifteen participants. As a result, not all the 2018 Rainbow Book List teen fiction selections were able to be reviewed by this sample, and this research is not generalizable.

Findings

Novels' Helpfulness When Discovering Sexuality

When asked how the assigned novel might be helpful to a teen who is discovering their sexuality, many participants appreciated themes verifying that it is okay to live outside of heteronormative norms. One reader appreciated how *The Red Queen*'s Ansa illustrated the identity of a protagonist who is female but floats between genders: "I think it leaves a lot of room for somebody to understand that they don't have to be the norm essentially, and you can be other and still basically be right." An asexual female reader valued *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* and felt it was a great novel to address what asexuality is and is not; this was very important to the reader as she was still in her self-realization phase and struggling with what it means to be asexual/demisexual:

> Like if I had read this in high school, I definitely would have been more on track about what my sexuality actual[ly] is because I only knew I was like that last year. So, like I was in college and had already passed high school, but if I had access to this book in high school and read it, I would have discovered much earlier what it is and that it is okay, you know? It's normal, right?

Additionally, readers found that the novels were helpful in realizing that many queer teens feel confusion when discovering their sexual identity. For instance, one bisexual reader

connected with the character of Suzette in *Little & Lion* and the protagonist's journey to understanding her bisexuality:

> I think it could help them realize that hey, it's okay to be confused. Mmmm . . . it's not a very black-and-white thing. Like, oh, this is what you are. You know, you have to discover that for yourself, which is something that is talked about a lot in the book.

Likes: Coming Out Stories vs. Stories Normalizing Sexuality

Participants, having identified as teen literature readers as a condition of this study, noticed and appreciated trends within the novels that diverted from the formula of the "coming out story" and that instead normalized queer sexuality/same-sex relationships. The bisexual female subject who read the novel *We Are Okay* noticed this trend within other novels, positing:

> It didn't really seem like there was much emphasis on the fact that she was falling for her best [girl] friend, more like she was just falling for someone. Other novels play into that too much. Variation should be normal. Yeah, it shouldn't be like, "Oh my God! They made a book about lesbians!" All this should be is a cute book about two best friends falling in love, right?

A nonbinary reader who read *The Red Queen* said that young people are trying to find LGBTQAI+ role models in LGBTQAI+ fiction, but "sometimes, you just want to read a normal book that just has a diverse protagonist because sometimes you don't want to read another coming out journey. Sometimes you just want to see the character already living their life. Who they are as a whole person and you want to see how they coexist and manage those identities without it being the focus of the novel." The bisexual female reader of *Ramona Blue* felt similarly and expressed desire for such a novel that expresses all of life's issues, which may include sexuality but is not limited to it, such as Ramona's struggle with poverty after Hurricane Katrina and the pregnancy of her sister, while also realizing that her lesbian identity may not be so secure. "That is something I appreciate about Ramona. The whole plot is not just 'oh, maybe I'm having this relationship with this person.' It's 'hey, I am a teenager. I'm worried about the future, there is my sister having a baby in her tiny trailer.' All of these things kind of make it more real because our lives don't completely revolve around our sexualities."

At the Edge of the Universe's male reader was also appreciative of sexuality not being the only focus of this book, which strongly featured the protagonist's mental health issues.

> The novel does great at normalizing sexuality and not putting it as a sole feature of their personality. Instead, like it should be, their sexuality is just one small part of their overall being, which might help peers see that we shouldn't be treated as if we are just our sexualities. . . . The main character is always very shamelessly himself and isn't afraid to hide any part of it. While at the same time, he doesn't let his sexuality define who he is or what he is trying to do, it's just a small part of him. I think this is a good message.

Dislikes: Toxic Relationships, Race, Drug Use, Stereotypes, Inaccuracies

While readers enjoyed reading about relationships developing, they disliked relationships that were unhealthy or "toxic." The nonbinary reader of *The Red Queen* detested the unequal relationship between protagonist Ansa and her love interest Thyra. They felt the character of Ansa was manipulated by Thyra, who would not reveal whether the love she felt for the protagonist was friendly love or romantic love: "It was very, very frustrating to see Ansa continuing to give up all of herself for Thyra and to get nothing in return."

A bisexual male reader was upset about the relationship between Ben and Hannah in *Honestly Ben*. In the novel, Ben is in denial over his feelings for his ex, Rafe, but pursues a sexual relationship with Hannah to prove to himself that he is straight. The reader was quite struck as he read the part of the book, saying, "Yeah, that really kind of hurt. It's hard to kind of read that. . . . Yeah, I know he was attracted to her and, you know, he didn't want to be gay. He didn't want to be bisexual because he didn't know what it would mean for his life." The reader lamented that the character of Hannah had been slept with and dumped by a previous boyfriend and Ben was doing the same to her.

Another example of a toxic friendship relationship that could be deemed as bullying is between the protagonists of *As I Descended*. The character of Delilah is not well liked by the protagonists of the novel as she had previously made out with Maria's girlfriend Lily and then disparaged her identity as a lesbian. Maria drugs Delilah's drink, with the dire consequence of her falling from a window at their boarding school. The reader pinpointed a line of dialogue where Delilah is called "not gay enough" and found it problematic. When discussing her dislike of the treatment of Delilah at the hands of Maria and Lily, she stated:

> Yeah, I didn't love the thing with her drugging the drink. I don't really like how they handled that and then she lied about it saying she was

> roofied, it was kind of messy and they did not portray drugs that negatively with like Delilah's oxy. I mean I don't think I would want to do drugs after reading this book. But, yeah, really, I don't think they fully explored the issue.

This participant also disliked when authors did "a rush job" with race. Although they may have found the novels useful for teen readers in learning about sexuality and sexual health, participants also noticed when authors left race in the periphery without discussing its importance in the intersectionality of the protagonists. The reader of *As I Descended* observed that the author did little to delve into adopted Maria's role as the only Hispanic girl at her boarding school and did not qualify a statement by Maria that she had to try to pass as white at the school. The reader professed, "If you are going to bring it up, I think you should go into that. Whereas not like mention it once and like a throwaway sentence and then move on. A lot of younger kids deal with this."

Stereotypes were a source of contention for some readers, and the subject who read *A Very, Very Bad Thing* enjoyed the novel overall but did not like the author's portrayal of protagonist Marley as a "gay stereotype." The reader expressed concern about how far the author was willing to go with portraying Marley as "a certain gay stereotype" who equates being gay with being common and emotionally unstable, as well as pessimistic with a propensity to crush on straight boys. The reader said, "I feel like Marley's character portrayed a lot of them and I am not sure if that's like a good thing?" The reader also felt as if Marley was too cynical, which "got very exhausting," and that the book was a "comedy that puts down other people." He wished the book was more positive. Additionally, the reader took offense to Marley's parents and the author's personification of the hippie lifestyle: "They just acted like hippies the whole time."

Another participant felt that the novel *Our Own Private Universe* perpetuated the stereotype of bisexuals as liars. "I didn't like the fact that bisexual characters were like liars, like big liars throughout the book, like they were constantly hiding things from each other." Additionally, this book is set in Mexico, where the protagonist, Aki, and her church go on a youth mission trip, and this reader did not appreciate the author's depiction of the Mexican people as a one-dimensional stereotype:

> Maybe it's just me. I kind of didn't like the way Mexico was portrayed within the novel. They are on a mission trip and there is kind of this Third World aspect. . . . I get sick of the narrative of like Latin American

> countries always being poor and not having much in terms of infrastructure or they are just so simple, when in reality, there is a lot more to it. Oh, look at this very simple town and they're not at any point made to become complex or even much of a person either.

Readers also took offense when authors were not completely factual in their books and promoted inaccurate information to make things clearer for their protagonists. An example of this was highlighted by the participant who read *10 Things I Can See from Here*; a passage portrays Maeve talking to her father and stepmother about how being queer means not liking boys, which is a simplification of queerness. The reader felt that the author incorrectly used those words to describe Maeve's sexuality and opined that "the literal definition of queer is that you are attracted to more than one gender . . . that's factually incorrect and that could also be damaging to be a young girl who's reading this book thinking she could be bisexual and seeing that line and thinking 'Oh well, I am attracted to boys.'" This statement is important to the context of this study in terms of clarity of language about the queer experience as the reader considers a queer person as someone who is attracted to more than one gender, which may apply to bisexual or pansexual people but forgets that LGBTQAI+ community encompasses persons who may identify as asexual or are not attracted to persons of any gender identity. A bisexual female reader who was assigned *Dress Codes for Small Towns* found Billie's realization of her feelings for best friend Janie Lee to be too simple: "Like I know she already had been thinking about her sexuality, but it's sort of idealistic to think that you'll have an 'aha' moment that begins your journey of questioning your sexuality."

Novels' Relevance to Real Life

This study's research questions considers whether the teen fiction novels on the 2018 Rainbow Book List may serve as information resources for LGBTQAI+ teens in their realistic portrayal of queer protagonists. The majority of participants in this study felt that the books did relate to their own realities if only in what it was like to grow up as a queer teen.

The reader of *We Are Okay* shared:

> I think it's crazy that you assigned this book to me because a lot of stuff within it I related to personally. I'm currently in a relationship with the first person I have ever been with and she is leaving for the summer. It was a little bit hard for me to read because I feel how [Marin] feels.

She also related to the characters' feelings of starting off a relationship as a friendship and realizing that they have feelings for each other, and "fumbling through it."

The bisexual male reader of *Honestly Ben* felt that the underlying theme of confusion in the novel was real especially the "confusion of not being able to figure out what you want and you meet that one person but it's like the lines are blurred, it's not straightforward like, you know, I'm like this." Confusion was also remarked upon by the participant assigned *Little & Lion*, who stated that she did not realize she was bisexual until much later and she remembered the confusion of it all: "But then it's like, oh wait, I am interested in this person. Who's a girl . . . mmm . . . that was very eye-opening." She feels that the book had great perspective with "the overall confusion of everything." The reader of *Like Water* related to this confusion and pointed out a passage in the novel where Vanny does not know if her heart is beating loudly because of fireworks or because she is close to Leah: "She has this feeling of excitement, and it's like she doesn't know if the excitement is because of what they are doing or who she is with. . . . It's very realistic." She stressed, "Had this book been available to me like eighth-grade or freshman year of high school, it would have helped me understand myself quite a bit better!"

Fear of rejection is another theme common in many of these novel selections, and many readers felt it was important to address that fear. The reader of *Dress Codes for Small Towns* related to Billie's fear of rejection from her minister father: "Although they have such a strong bond, adolescence and independence have sort of thrown a wrench in their relationship, and that's what happened to me and my mom when I was [Billie's] age. I also know how she felt about not wanting her father to know about her want/need to explore her sexuality for fear of him not accepting her."

The reader of *Ramona Blue* did not relate closely to the main character because Ramona identifies as lesbian until she feel attraction for a boy and the reader had a different experience. While Ramona pursues relationships steadily at a young age, the subject who read the book did not pursue romantic relationships until college. However, the reader stated that Ramona "is still relatable in how she processes these things and how she goes through these things, and there is still so much value in her story, even though it wasn't my own."

The reader who most saw themselves in a book was the reader of *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*, who is twenty and processing her own identity as an asexual person, much like the protagonist Tash. She said:

> It was kind of freaky how much I could see myself in this book, especially as she was going through and talking and coming out to her friends, trying to explain it to people, and trying to understand it herself because it's not a common thing for people to experience. So, trying to find information like at one point in the book about how she was going through all the forms and that kind of stuff, I have definitely been there before! It was just very spot-on to what I feel like.

Sexual Health Information and Consent

When asked about how their assigned novel could educate LGBTQAI+ teens about consent, readers valued novels that described how consent should be discussed between partners as well as books that delved into sexual assault. The participant reading *10 Things I Can See from Here* appreciated the first-time sex scene between protagonist Maeve and her girlfriend Salix. Explaining how consent was addressed in the novel, she noted that the scene was small, but "the first sex between them was good because it showed that they were both nervous, but that they both got consent from each other."

The female bisexual reader of *We Are Okay* was able to relate to scenes of consent, especially those as simple as showing affection in public when one partner is not okay about coming out. She noticed that the book does not have much verbal consent, rather relying on sounds and body language as affirmation of continuance when intimacy occurs between protagonist Marin and her best friend:

> I am very verbal. And I noticed that, you know, sometimes things do happen naturally, and you can kind of feel the vibe, you can feel it's mutual. But my girlfriend, she's sometimes very shy in public. So especially with coming out because she is a little different than I, so I do ask if it is okay to give her a kiss in public or okay to hold her hand in public, so she knows she has the right to say yes or no. It's not forced. It is completely up to her and if it does happen naturally, then that's it.

Queens of Geek features two protagonists: Charlie who is bisexual and Taylor who self-identifies as having Asperger syndrome, a form of autism spectrum disorder. Taylor's diagnosis leads her to have high levels of anxiety and an aversion to being touched. The subject who read this novel felt that the novel delved into the sexual health issue of consent particularly well in the scenes in which Taylor's best friend-turned-boyfriend Jaime asks if it is okay to hold her hand.

> I think the way this novel portrayed this [consent] was good because they have a balance of, you know, with the holding hands thing. He asks if it's okay, but then, when they kiss like a few days later, it was in the moment and natural. It's kind of like they showed a balance but also like that you should be cautious when you make moves, specifically asking for consent. People can feel pressured to do things like that.

Some participants felt that it is okay not to ask for consent once people are more secure in their relationship; they pointed out that novels that showcased consent in a new relationship and then relied on body language and affirmative sounds such as moans still did a good job of showcasing what consent looks like. In the book *Like Water,* Vanny is having her first same-sex sexual experience with Leah, which highlights the more experienced Leah asking Vanny is she is okay with what they are doing. The reader posited:

> As the relationship progressed, they did not really have to ask, right, like they can tell from the way their bodies react if it is okay to proceed or not. Just like you learn over time with a relationship, when you read the setting, if it's appropriate to try to start something. It's just like all of the external cues that determine it is okay to pursue with what your intentions are, right?

Describing the How-to's of Same-Sex Intimacy

A Very, Very Bad Thing proved to be frustrating for its reader, who was confused as to why the author chose to skip a scene of same-sex intimacy: "What is the label for a book being young adult or not? They skipped over a sex scene which makes sense as it is a young adult novel, but I wish the sex or safe sex could be described, you know? I just don't like how they glanced over it."

The reader of *Ramona Blue* mentioned the lack of information about the physical aspect of lesbian sex in books and media, but valued conversation about where things are supposed to go and quipped that those things are not shown in the movies. She stated, "Obviously, it's still a ghost-over and getting proper sex education is still rare, right?" In this case, a "ghost-over" is when intimacy is implied in a text but not described in detail.

Our Own Private Universe earned a negative review from its reader in terms of stereotyping and portrayal of bisexual persons, but the reader did laud the book for its attention to protection from STDs. She asserted:

> I mean the big thing this book does is talk about safe sex, which I didn't expect. So, it was nice to talk about the importance of a dental dam, even where to get it. I was like, okay, kudos, because if anyone is reading this and they're like oh, I identify this way and I might want to get sexually active. Let me take the steps to protect myself.

She pointed to the specific references to dental dams and latex gloves as means of protection between two intimate female partners: "It was pretty good with that scene of going to the college, asking for the dental dams, and picking up the gloves." She also appreciated a passage in the novel about open communication between sexual partners and the statement that if they are not mature enough to talk about sex, then they are not mature enough to have it.

Sexuality Information: Feelings of Desire and Passion

Many participants in this research study treasured novels that explore feelings of desire and passion with passages full of rich description. Although the reader of *The Red Queen* disliked the toxic relationship between protagonist Ansa and her crush Thyra, she appreciated the author's vivid writing style, quoting a love scene where Ansa is angry and wants to argue with Thyra, but she also wants Thyra to push her down and consume her, even to the point of violence. The reader remarked, "Obviously, while this passage like sounds violent, it's obvious that she just feeling, for lack of a better word, thirsty!" They found that passage to be powerful and shared it with their friends because it depicted an emotion beyond simple attraction: "It's not just attractions, it's everything."

Additionally, participants appreciated novels that demonstrated the passion and sex found in a new relationship while showing the reality of what relationships are like after that initial spark has passed. *Like Water*'s protagonist Vanny enjoys sex and being sexual but has also used the physical act as a means of escape from the boys in her past. In her relationship with her girlfriend Leah, she feels passion but also can spend time with her after sex is over. The reader of this book explained that "they could be together and talk to each other, and she had those sexual feelings for her. . . . They genuinely had an emotional relationship, not just a physical one used as a pastime to get her mind off something."

Sexuality Health Information: Homophobia

The authors of the books included in the 2018 Rainbow Book List do not shy away from discussions of homophobia, and readers found much of the information about dealing with homophobia to be pertinent to their real lives. The subject who read *A Very, Very Bad Thing* is a gay male who was out in high school and felt that the scene where Marley and Christopher are bullied for going to a school dance together was reminiscent of his own experiences:

> I had a boyfriend in my senior year of high school and we actually went to a prom together. Most of what I have faced was when he and I were standing outside of one of our lockers one day and a girl made an ugly face to her friends after laughing at us and pointing at us. Yeah, it felt real in the book, real enough.

While the reader of *Honestly Ben* felt that homophobia depicted in the novel was a necessary part of the plot as Ben worries about his father's reaction to him being bisexual and in a relationship with Rafe, he felt sad when reading the misogynist dialogue featuring Ben's father: "I am glad they addressed that, like it's not okay to do that sort of thing. But it's, you know, definitely not like a happy subject, you know to read or something."

Are These Books Helpful for Teens When Discovering Their Sexuality?

For the reader of *Queens of Geek,* one of the most valuable pieces of information contained in the book for readers discovering their sexual identity is Charlie's use of the internet to find information about bisexuality:

> I mean from in my experience, I totally use the internet as a resource and Google what it means to be bisexual, and I took the quizzes and stuff. I think that definitely using the internet as a resource is really realistic and also using it as an example if a good too because maybe somebody would read that; I'm sure like anyone who is questioning.

Another reader appreciated the way *Dress Codes for Small Towns* "emphasizes the need for exploration and experimentation." She continued, "Sexuality is not a one-and-done deal. The novel paints a good picture that there are different types of attraction. To me, there is sexual, romantic/emotional, and physical attraction. And a big part of sexuality is figuring out how these attractions interact with each other."

Like Water was found to be a book that would be particularly helpful for those teens who are questioning their gender identity. As its reader pointed out, the book puts a spotlight on the character of Leigh, who is not only Vanny's love interest but a character who comes out as transgender at the end of the novel: "I would definitely expose this book to middle and high schoolers; they are already questioning themselves because that it is the age where you're really realizing who you are and what you like. This book can help someone who does not have a safe space."

Our Own Private Universe also provides a safe space in that "struggling it's a common part of being queer people." Its reader, who identifies as queer, stated that she gravitated toward a line in the book that explains being bisexual as being attracted to the same or opposite sex at different levels throughout one's life. "If you are a queer person, you're like, yeah, you know, this person goes through it. We all go through it."

LGBTQAI+ Teen Novels and Straight Peers

The reader of *Dress Codes for Small Towns* feels that books featuring LGBTQAI+ protagonists can be helpful for straight teens to read as they offer perspective into the lives of queer teens. She stated:

> I think this novel would sort of help straight peers understand that sexuality isn't a choice, that it is something that wells [up] under the surface and can't be ignored. I think it also shows that just because someone is attracted to one gender or the other, doesn't mean that they like you and you can still have a close friendship with them.

Queens of Geek and the character of Charlie were also found to be excellent examples of what it is like to be bisexual, and its reader felt that the novel can help clear up some of the misconceptions about bisexuality such as perceptions that bisexual people are confused, greedy, or do not want to admit that they are gay. *Little & Lion*'s reader also thought that their book would be a good information resource for straight peers "because a lot of people have the connotation with bisexuality and that it's you cannot decide who you like more." She asserted that bisexuality may be misunderstood by others as "being selfish" and "wanting to have it all" when in reality "it would be easier not to have to struggle." Another reader shared that *Like Water* would show straight readers that queer people are not being queer for attention: "The way

society is now, people just assume when they see two girls together, it is an attention thing. So, this book kind of sheds light a bit."

Takeaways for Older Readers of Teen Novels

As the readers are at the upper echelon of what can be considered as "teen," it was important to ask them whether they still thought that teen novels gave them information to take with them at this older age. *We Are Okay* provided its reader with the takeaway that "even though you might be going through a lot of serious stuff, there are people out there who truly care about you and you could go months and they'll still come to you and make sure you are okay." The reader of *Honestly Ben* felt that readers of all ages could take something from the novel and that even if a book is set in a high school, the plot can be applied anywhere and would work just fine. *Queens of Geek* was described as being worth reading for anyone who may not feel accepted by their group and feel the need to go out and seek community, even if it is online. *Little & Lion* was the right book at the right time for its twenty-year-old reader because "in high school, it may have been overwhelming with the different situations that were going on, especially mental health. Later on, I have a bit more understanding of the themes the book was trying to present."

Discussion

Having participated on American Library Association (ALA) GBLTRT book awards and list for the past couple of years, this researcher understands the committees' quest for diverse LGBTQAI+ resources for teen readers. The composition of the committees includes information professionals such as librarians who either identify as LGBTQAI+ or who identify as allies. Although many hours of reading and analysis are completed as they sift through new publications sent for review by publishers, it is not always an easy task to select books that are perfect in every detail. In most cases, teen input is not gathered in determining which books are selected as quality books for recommendations to librarians and teachers; that is where this study comes in. It is important to have the input of LGBTQAI+ teens themselves in determining resources for teen readers, such as book lists, as their information needs and possible resources available to fulfill these needs have evolved over time. In essence, it is difficult for adults to choose what resources will make the greatest impact on today's teens without including teen

voices in their decisions. Books that are selected for promotion by book award/list committees may not always meet the needs of young readers. The voices of the fifteen LGBTQAI+ participants in this research are seasoned with the understanding of what it is like to come out and live life as a queer teen in today's society.

The first research question addressed in this paper is whether the teen fiction selections on the book list relate to the real life of an LGBTQAI+ teen. While many readers may not have identified personally with the protagonist of their assigned book, they identified with aspects of feeling confused about their sexuality and how to approach same-sex relationships. Many appreciated the books for providing a window into the experiences of a queer youth, as queer fiction has a particular role providing an acknowledgment and an affirmation of existence.[37] Additionally, they identified with characters who searched for sexuality/sexual health on the internet or in magazines to figure out where they fall on the LGBTQAI+ spectrum, demonstrating the importance of LGBTQAI+ media.

Addressing what they liked and disliked about the novel was an opportunity to share the elements of what constitutes an enjoyable/unenjoyable novel for these teen readers, and the participants were quick to pick up on stereotypes, drug use, and racism. Particularly worrisome were stereotypes such as characters acting too pessimistic and flamboyant, condensing "hippie" parents to caricatures, and perpetuating stereotypes that bisexual persons are liars. Also, some readers picked up on racism and felt that their assigned author needed to do a better job of explaining why a Hispanic character felt they had to pass as white or ensuring that novels set in different countries provide more than a one-dimensional view of foreign people instead of using them as props or their poverty as a vehicle to advance the novel. Drug use was also problematic, as readers did not like books that depicted characters using drugs as an everyday habit without experiencing any ramifications of their drug use.

In terms of how these LGBTQAI+ teens could use the 2018 Rainbow Book List teen fiction selections to fulfill information needs about sexuality by retaining knowledge from the book as a "form of residue," participants voiced their opinions that these texts could be helpful when teens are feeling confused about their burgeoning sexual identity by helping them realize that they are not the only ones dealing with these issues. Readers felt that these books might help readers to understand that life will get better and they will meet others within the queer community who will give them support. The books also provided windows into situations that

differed from the readers' own in portraying different levels of acceptance to one's coming out to parents and peers. For example, not every teen who is coming out is accepted, but conversely not every teen is ostracized. Some subjects felt that they could identify strongly with the protagonist of their assigned book and saw their novel as a mirror, while others felt that had nothing at all in common with the characters but that the overall message of what it is like to explore one's sexual identity was very relatable. Some participants also mentioned that LGBTQAI+ teens are trying to find themselves portrayed in the media but do not always find characters that are like them. Readers felt that these novels could provide sexuality health information in terms of seeing a character struggle to understand who they are attracted to and the social customs of dating in the queer community.

Participants felt that sexual health information could be found within these Rainbow List books, particularly with themes of consent and safe sex. Many participants acknowledged passages where discussions of consent took place but specify that there are many ways of gaining consent for intimate activity, from affirmative "yes" and "no" utterances to sounds such as moans and sighs. A problematic finding was that many of the teen participants, having read scenes where the consent conversation was replaced by moans and body language, felt that it was okay to read the body language of a partner in lieu of using words. For example, a couple participants felt that body language was enough and trusted themselves to read such cues as a result of knowing their partner well. In today's Title IX society, where the consent conversation is emphasized, it would be helpful if LGBTQAI+ teen authors modeled what conversations about intimacy and consent sound like.

Additionally, even if a reader did not love a book in its entirety, they were able to pick out sexual health information pertinent to teens. An example of this is the reader of a novel with a bisexual character appreciated the protagonist's research about safe sex, their quest to find protection in a campus health clinic, and the rich descriptions of what it was actually like to use those protection measures during intimacy. A barrier to the providence of serendipitous sexual health information for LGBTQAI+ teen fiction readers was that authors are not taking sex scenes far enough in these novels. Intimate scenes tend to show a "before and after" picture of intimacy without getting into the details of what occurs during same-sex intimacy. One reader questioned whether teen LGBTQAI+ books can go that in depth with the details of same-sex intimacy without facing censorship or bans and lamented that intimacy between opposite-sex partners in

teen novels is less contested. If same-sex intimacy is not explored as equally as heterosexual relationships in teen literature, a message is sent that same-sex intimacy is not okay and not appropriate material for teen readers.

Conclusion

In this study, individual interviews with fifteen LGTQAI+ teens between the ages of eighteen and twenty years old added insight into whether the positive and negative aspects of the teen literature affected them in their enjoyment of or willingness to read the LGBTQAI+ teen fiction novel assigned to them, whether the issues in the book were authentic and pertinent to their everyday life, and if the book provided them with information LGBTQAI+ teens need about sexuality or sexual health. Although this research was limited to participants who self-identified as LGBTQAI+, readers felt that these novels could prove beneficial for straight readers in understanding how binaries can be misleading and limited.[38] This research is unique in that it is one of the first to match readers with protagonists similar in demographic characteristics and ask for input on the importance of the books as sexuality health information resources by gathering a first-person perspective of what readers appreciated about the books and what they deemed challenging.

In terms of sexuality and sexual health information for LGBTQAI+ teens, more research needs to be done to determine how to get LGBTQAI+-inclusive literature prominently displayed in school libraries. Teen literature featuring LGBTQAI+ storylines can be "used to fill the gap in sex education classes regarding queer sexuality and how it is viewed by both queer and non-queer teens." Further research into how best to incorporate these books into lesson plans will allow teachers to be less fearful in engaging in topics pertaining to sexual minority students.[39]

Any research done on this topic would require researchers familiar with current policies regarding the integrations of such content into public school, considering ways that current policies may prohibit or allow such updates. Currently, "of the 20 counties in the state of Florida, only five (25%) have ordinances that protect LGBTQ communities," and, according to HRC.org, "in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia, it is not illegal to discriminate against someone based on their sexual orientation, and, with the exception of certain counties in Florida, gender identity."[40] Research must be conducted to ensure that librarians, educators, and

information scientists determine ways to provide LGBTQAI+ teens with the skills necessary to gather the information they need from reliable resources without fear of reprisal.

Appendix: Reading Rainbow List Books Read by Participants

Albertalli, Becky. *The Upside of Unrequited.* New York: Balzer & Bray, 2017.

Colbert, Brandy. *Little & Lion.* New York: Little, Brown, 2017.

Fine, Sarah. *The Cursed Queen.* New York: Margaret K. Elderberry Books, 2017.

Hutchinson, Shaun David. *At the Edge of the Universe.* New York: Simon Pulse, 2017.

Konigsberg, Bill. *Honestly Ben.* New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2017.

LaCour, Nina. *We Are Okay.* New York: Dutton, 2017.

Mac, Carrie. *10 Things I Can See from Here.* New York: Knopf, 2017.

Murphy, Julie. *Ramona Blue*. New York: Balzer & Bray, 2017.

Ormsbee, Kathryn. *Tash Hearts Tolstoy.* New York: Salaam Reads/Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Podos, Rebecca. *Like Water.* New York: Balzer & Bray, 2017.

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Talley, Robin. *As I Descended.* Ontario: Harlequin Teen, 2016.

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A Public Health Approach to Uncovering the Health-Related Needs of Teen Library Patrons

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Abstract

Widespread problems with health literacy significantly limit effective dissemination and understanding of health information, particularly among vulnerable populations. As libraries are re-envisioned as community centers and resource providers, librarians are well positioned to help patrons overcome health literacy challenges by helping them to search for and use health information. Librarians often have not had health reference training, and some are unsure of the appropriateness of their role in patrons' health. This study presents the results of a health needs assessment done in collaboration between the Teen Services Department of a major urban library and faculty from a state university. Using survey and focus group data, the research team sought to uncover the most common health-related needs among community teens as perceived by teen services librarians and staff, preparedness to respond to these needs, and interventions in addressing these needs. Findings confirm that some teens do turn to branch libraries for health information. Additional results revealed which types of health-related questions participants felt most equipped to answer (social health) and least equipped (substance abuse) and indicate staff have had altogether little formal training to address patrons' health questions. This needs

assessment presents replicable tools and questions for libraries aiming to improve health literacy in their local communities.

Introduction

Chicago has often been called a "City of Neighborhoods," made up of over two hundred unique geographic areas that characteristically differ from one another,[i] and within each community are Chicago Public Library (CPL) sites. The beauty of these differences is that one can experience cultural and linguistic diversity just a few miles from one's own home. A downfall of this diverse landscape is the vast differences in socioeconomic conditions. This means that the health outcomes of a teen library patron in one neighborhood may be worse compared to a peer's elsewhere in the city. Similarly, the health-related needs to which teen services staff at library branches attend can vary. How can such disparities and differences exist between geographically neighboring communities? And how can a library system and its branch locations positively contribute toward the unique social determinants impacting the health of teen patrons? In this article, we share how the CPL Teen Services Department and state university faculty employed a public health approach to establish priorities to support equitable teen health across the city.

Social Determinants of Health

Identifying and addressing the health-related needs of teen patrons requires an understanding of the role of social determinants. Social determinants of health (SDOH) are "conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks."[ii] It is increasingly understood that the inequitable distribution of these conditions is directly associated with the health-related disparities that exist between and within communities.[iii] In other words, where you live matters.

Operating on this belief that where you live matters, the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion's Healthy People 2020 (healthypeople.gov) uses an organizing framework that divides social determinants into placed-based key areas: *economic stability*, *education*, *social and community context*, *health and health care*, and *neighborhood and built environment*.[iv] These conditions help to explain why some people are healthier than others. Given the

socioeconomic diversity of Chicago, one could expect to see differences in how these key issues are manifested from one neighborhood to the next and so, too, the health-related needs of community members near the different branch locations. In what ways can the library be a positive force in ensuring more equitable health outcomes?

Libraries and Community Health

Libraries offer community members a nonthreatening environment and a place for lifelong learning,[v] helping people to navigate diverse areas of their lives.[vi] As such, it makes sense that patrons of all ages may turn to libraries and their staff when they have health-related needs. For example, in Philadelphia, a study found that 34% of people come to the library for health information.[vii] As libraries are re-envisioned and reborn as community centers and resource providers,[viii] what is their role in understanding and positively contributing to a given neighborhood's SDOH? And specifically, how might teen services staff, who often play an integral mentorship role, influence the social determinant of *health and health care* so teens in different neighborhoods have equal opportunity to grow into healthy adults?

Librarians as Health Specialists?

The Healthy People 2020 social determinant of *health and health care* is made up of three key issues: *access to health care*, *access to primary care*, and *health literacy*. Of these issues, librarians are well suited to positively impact patrons' health literacy, broadly defined as one's ability to understand health information. Librarians are positioned to assist patrons in overcoming health literacy challenges, particularly among vulnerable and low literacy populations, by helping them to search for and use health information.[ix] However, many librarians have not had health-related training, and some are unsure about the appropriateness of their role in advising patrons about health-related information. To support librarians with the decisions related to the latter, the American Library Association created the "Health and Medical Reference Guidelines" "to assist staff in responding to health or medical inquiries . . . and to be prepared and feel confident that they are providing the best possible response."[x] To support librarians with the former, the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM) has offered professional development to librarians such as trainings in consumer health.

While the role of libraries and librarians in community health is not widely documented in the literature, it is becoming more frequent. For example, the Philadelphia Public Library partnered with the University of Pennsylvania to train librarians in becoming community health specialists and to offer programs related to nutrition, trauma, mental health, youth leadership, and healthy behaviors.[xi] In New York, the library offers health literacy classes in neighborhoods with the greatest need.[xii] In Arizona, the Pima County Library added registered nurses to their staff who offer everything from case management to blood pressure screening.[xiii] In Dallas, the public library system runs programs for the homeless including assistance with job applications, housing, and other needs.[xiv] In New Jersey, the East Brunswick Public Library helps their linguistically diverse patrons locate health care services from professionals who speak their language.[xv] Services like these confirm the Brookings Institution's observation that next to home and work, libraries are a "third place," offering more to their community than just books. Further, it suggests that libraries are capable of offering such services, and they are addressing needs among subsets of its patrons such as teens.

Teen Services Librarians Building Bridges to Better Health

Given YALSA's mission to alleviate challenges that teens face and put them on paths toward successful and fulfilling lives, addressing the SDOH that impact teen patrons is well matched to a library's community role. While teen services staff might not directly provide access to health care, they *can* build bridges. This function aligns with YALSA's priority research area of *community engagement,* which encourages teen librarians to understand the needs of and build relationships in the community.[xvi] In doing so, they can bridge emerging literacies between teens' homes and communities, which also is a focus of the YALSA priority research area of *cultural competence, social justice and equity.*[xvii]

According to Braun and Peterson, youth are often unaware of the services in their community.[xviii] They argue that as leaders in youth development, libraries should serve as connectors between youth and community agencies. When it comes to health literacy, Hughes-Hassell, Hanson-Baldauf, and Burke contend, "it seems natural that public libraries take the lead in providing assistance to teenagers who need help finding health information."[xix] Similarly, Lukenbill and Immroth, after researching the role of librarians as health information gatekeepers, conclude, "Not only do people need information to make good decisions, they also must know

how to understand it and apply it in their lives."[xx] They further suggest that libraries can improve social equity among youth by way of policies, missions, goals, programming, and services that promote health.

Diverse Populations, Diverse Health Needs

Part of ensuring that health information is understandable and usable is knowing the target audience. Given the diversity of our nation's youth and the place-based nature of the SDOH, a "one size fits all" approach will not work. A 2015 YALSA infographic highlights this diversity:

- 39% of the homeless population are under the age of eighteen.
- LGBTQI teens are two times more likely to be physically assaulted.
- 22% of youth live below the federal poverty threshold.
- African American teens are five times more likely to be incarcerated.
- 22% of Hispanic youth are unauthorized immigrants.
- 14.2% of public school enrollees are English-language learners.[xxi]

These numbers are likely to be different in different cities. For example, in Chicago there is great diversity among its residents and their health-related needs. A Chicago Department of Public Health needs assessment revealed the following:

- Economic hardship is higher in the South and West Side neighborhoods; non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics are overrepresented.
- Child opportunities are lowest in the South and West Side neighborhoods; low opportunities are correlated with shootings, elevated blood lead levels, child obesity, lower life expectancies, diabetes-related and diet-related mortality, and teen births.
- Sexually transmitted infections and violence embody the most extreme inequities; they are fifty times higher in economic hardship areas.
- Suicide rates are three times higher among non-Hispanic whites and two times higher in low-economic hardship areas.
- LGBTQI youth exhibit higher rates of risky behaviors, bullying, depression, suicide attempts, and eating disorders.
- Violent crime is a thousand times greater in the South and West Side neighborhoods.

- Homicide rates are twenty-five times higher among non-Hispanic blacks and ten times higher in economic hardship areas; 47% of victims are less than twenty-five years old.
- Overweight or obesity rates are highest in the Northwest and Southwest neighborhoods and among Hispanics.[xxii]

Given this diversity, how can libraries strategically address the health-related needs of its teen patrons? And how can a library system ensure its teen services staff are prepared to address those needs? A public health approach coupled with a social justice lens might hold a solution.

Identifying and Prioritizing Health-Related Needs

Identifying and prioritizing the health-related needs of community teens and the social determinants at the source of those needs is the first step in developing and delivering appropriate library resources, programming, and services. It is also a step aligned with YALSA's priority research area of *cultural competence, social justice and equity*, which promotes research into the factors shaping the need for and use of library services and resources and the evaluation of the extent to which current resources meet the needs of diverse teens.[xxiii] In this section, we describe how a community health needs assessment, guided by transformative research practices, can support and honor this process.

Utilizing a Public Health Approach to Identify Needs

In public health, identifying and prioritizing health-related needs through a systematic, data-collection analysis is referred to as a community health assessment or a community health needs assessment.[xxiv] Such assessments give information that can help organizations justify which, how, and where resources should be allocated to best meet community needs. There are a variety of frameworks and models to guide public health professionals through this process. For our study, we used the process that was outlined by the United Kingdom's Health Development Agency (HDA).

The HDA process provides guidelines to organizations seeking to review the health issues facing a specific population, to establish priorities, and to make decisions about allocating resources.[xxv] The process consists of five unique but interdependent steps:

Step 1: Getting Started includes assembling a health needs assessment team, defining the population to address, establishing a rationale for the assessment, engaging others who should be involved, and securing resources.

Step 2: Identifying Health Priorities includes creating a profile of the target population and assessing the factors that impact their health.

Step 3: Assessing Health Priorities for Action is when the assessment team chooses the most significant health conditions and social determinants and determines effective, acceptable interventions.

Step 4: Action Planning for Change is how the team establishes aims, objectives, indicators, and targets for intervention(s); plans the actions to achieve them; and establishes a system of evaluation.

Step 5: Moving On/Project Review concludes with the team reflecting on lessons learned and makes decisions about further actions.

While these steps might appear linear, the process requires cross-checking and revisions such that one will regularly "loop" back to earlier steps before moving forward. Together, these steps provide a structure to make data-driven, health-related changes in a community.

Embracing Transformative Research to Prioritize Needs

As a matter of health-related equity and social justice, our project team was deeply committed to identifying ways to level the playing field among community teens from one neighborhood to the next. The HDA health needs assessment process, which utilizes a mixed-methods research approach, was well-suited for this effort. Mixed-methods research is the collection, analysis, and integration of quantitative and qualitative data. This blended approach offsets the limitations associated with one methodology by utilizing the strengths of the other approach to provide a more complete picture.[xxvi] For example, qualitatively rich narratives can humanize otherwise impersonal quantitative data.[xxvii] When used in efforts related to equity and social justice, this approach is sometimes called *transformative research.*

According to Mertens, transformative research engages culturally diverse groups to construct knowledge in ways that aid them and improve society.[xxviii] It typically employs

community-based, advocacy-focused research practices rooted in grounded theory. In grounded theory, researchers inductively build theories throughout the stages of the data collection and analysis.[xxix] Charmaz sees compatibility between grounded theory and social justice because of the emphasis on being close to one's data, being critically self-reflective, and seeking to provide reciprocal benefits. To do this, Charmaz proposes that researchers ask the following questions when collecting and analyzing their data: "What is happening?" "What are people doing?" "What do these stories indicate?" and "What might they suggest about social justice?"[xxx] Throughout our project, we asked these questions to ensure that we were open-minded about the data, that we frequently asked clarifying questions about acceptable and realistic next steps, and that we prioritized needs in a way that best supported our target population.

Project Aims

Step 1: Getting Started

The initial planning phase of the HDA health needs assessment process is Step 1: Getting Started. It entails defining the target population, having a clear rationale for the needs assessment, identifying who should be involved, and securing the resources needed. To undertake this first step, a faculty researcher from Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), met with the director of the CPL Teen Services Department to discuss interest in studying the health-related needs of teen patrons and the role that CPL could play in addressing those needs. The director obtained administrative approval to pursue the research and to utilize human resources to do so. The faculty researcher prepared a rationale for the needs assessment that guided the development of these project aims:

1. To uncover the most common health-related needs among community teens as perceived by teen services staff.
2. To document the ways that teen services staff are already addressing the health-related needs of teens and any challenges associated with doing so.
3. To identify resources, programming, and services that teen services staff would like to provide to teens and how the library can support their staff in doing so.
4. To establish partnerships that support the CPL Teen Services Department in providing resources, programming, and services to existing and potential teen patrons.

Findings from these aims would be used to form relevant research and community partnerships, to acquire necessary resources and offer training for staff, and to design and provide appropriate resources, programming, and services that help to "level the playing field" from one neighborhood to the next when it comes to teens' health outcomes.

Methodology

To accomplish our aims, we committed to conducting a needs assessment that embodied transformative research practices. In this section, we describe how we did so in relation to Steps 2 and 3 of the HDA needs assessment process.

Step 2: Identifying Health Priorities

Step 2 of the needs assessment process, Identifying Health Priorities, assumes you have a working definition of the target population and have clarified the purpose of the assessment. To profile our target population (community teens in library branch neighborhoods), we used both primary and secondary data sources to understand the primary health issues, both locally and nationally, and the SDOH influencing them. Secondary sources included the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) and the Healthy Chicago 2.0 Community Health Assessment. The YRBSS monitors health behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among young people in the United States.[xxxi] The 2017 YRBSS report revealed that significant health disparities exist among youth subpopulations defined by sex, race/ethnicity, and grade in school and between sexual minority and nonsexual minority youth.[xxxii] The Healthy Chicago 2.0 Community Health Assessment guides the city's work toward populations at most risk. Their 2016 report revealed that the neighborhoods served by the library's branch locations do indeed vary in terms of economic hardship, child opportunities, and associated health outcomes.[xxxiii] Findings from these reports, coupled with the literature review, guided the development of a data collection tool, a survey whose purpose was to gain insight into teens' health-related needs as perceived by CPL Teen Services staff (see appendix 1). Specifically, we sought to gather the following information:

- **RQ1:** How often are Teen Services staff approached with health information questions and broached with health-related needs?

- **RQ2:** What are the most common health information questions asked, health-related needs broached, and health-related needs observed of/by teen services staff members?
- **RQ3:** On which resources and partnerships do teen services staff members rely to respond to health information questions and health-related needs?
- **RQ4:** Do teen services staff feel equipped to respond to health information questions and health-related needs?
- **RQ5:** What kinds of training have teen services staff had to respond to the health information and health-related needs of youth?
- **RQ6:** To which resources do teen services staff wish they had access to respond to the health information and health-related needs of youth?

Answers to these questions were gathered via twenty-one open- and closed-ended questions in an online survey (see appendix 1). The CPL director sent a link to this survey to all teen services staff.

Because the types of data collected were mixed, analysis required different approaches. The quantitative data included responses to Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and checkbox questions. We analyzed this data using descriptive statistics via IBM SPSS version 22. For the qualitative data, consisting of responses to open-ended questions, we used a multi-phased approach. First, we independently reviewed the data, looking for emerging concepts, and compared them to the quantitative analysis. Next, using grounded theory, we conducted a second review of the responses using Charmaz's questions: "What is happening?" "What are people doing?" "What do these stories indicate?" and "What might they suggest about social justice?"[xxxiv] After this open-coding period, we analyzed and sorted emerging concepts to identify overarching themes, which we combined and revised to determine final themes. The faculty researcher then re-reviewed the results using these themes, summarized the results, and shared them with the director for confirmation. This triangulation of analysis contributes to the validity of this study.[xxxv]

Step 3: Assessing Health Priorities for Action

In Step 3: Assessing Health Priorities for Action, the assessment team prioritizes the health conditions and social determinants in terms of size and severity in relation to the target population. Then those priorities are weighed against their changeability at the local level.

Finally, the team determines effective and acceptable interventions and actions.[xxxvi] For this step, we recognized our assessment would benefit from additional expertise and insight, and so we recruited three additional CPL Teen Services administrators and one NEIU academic librarian.

To help prioritize key issues, the team hosted a focus group of key informants consisting of teen services staff from the branch locations with the most widely used teen services departments. For this focus group, we constructed a set of questions whose responses would help us to evaluate the key issues uncovered in Step 2 in terms of their size and severity, and also changeability in terms of feasibility and accessibility (see appendix 2).

Having the focus group helped us to determine the most acceptable interventions and required us having a list ready to present. To do this, the faculty researcher and academic librarian re-reviewed the literature to identify possible interventions in which libraries engaged. These interventions were presented to the rest of the assessment team to "weed" out activities that were not a good fit. Next, the team organized the remaining interventions into three categories: *professional development*, *teen-facing*, and *miscellaneous*. Within each category, we divided activities into feasibility subcategories: *easy and inexpensive*; and *involves more time but inexpensive*.

The focus group was held at a central library branch location, and participants were given leave from their duties to attend. The sixty-minute agenda was divided into four parts:

1. *Profiling the target population.* The assessment team presented a summary of local and national teen health issues, trends, and the results of the survey. Participants were invited to ask questions and offer insight.
2. *Prioritizing key issues based on impact and changeability.* Given a list of the topics ranked based on the survey results and local data, participants rated issues as *high*, *medium*, or *low* in terms of their severity and size.
3. *Selecting interventions based on acceptability.* Participants rated the interventions in terms of acceptability as *yes*, *no*, or *maybe* from the library's perspective.
4. *Questions and comments.*

After the focus group, we analyzed the new data to prioritize the health conditions and SDOH in terms of size and severity and to determine effective and acceptable interventions. The majority of the responses were quantitative and could be analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The data was rank-ordered to delineate those conditions deemed most severe and most changeable, and to identify where they overlapped (i.e., severe *and* changeable). The intervention acceptability ratings were then organized into three levels: *high*, *medium-high*, and *medium* (none were rated low). This summary was shared with the assessment team and adjustments were made accordingly. Finally, the team re-reviewed the intervention list one last time to assure that the activities would indeed address health-related equity among teens within their service region.

Results

Participants

Of 40 possible teens services staff, 27 (67.5%) responded to the online survey and 10 (25%) participated in the focus group. Survey participants represented twenty different branch locations and included a mixture of librarians, associates, and mentors. Of these participants, 21 (77.8%) held a library science degree. For the focus group, 10 teen services staff participated, of which five were members of the administrative staff.

Step 2: Identifying Health Priorities Results

RQ1: How often are teen services staff approached with health information questions and broached with health-related needs?

To understand the frequency of requests for health information or needs observed, two questions were asked. Data collected from the first question reveals that few staff are asked daily (3.7%, $n = 1$) or weekly (11.1%, $n = 1$); however, 33.3% ($n = 9$) indicated they are asked monthly. The remaining indicated rarely or never. Responses to the second question revealed of those teens who ask health-related questions, 40.7% ($n = 11$) of staff indicated there are one to five patrons who asked regularly; 59.2% ($n = 16$) indicated that they are not approached regularly. Variability may stem from local needs, staff approachability, staff proximity to teens, or other factors.

RQ2: What are the most common health information questions asked, health-related needs broached, and health-related needs observed of/by teen services staff?

Data for this research question was collected via two questions in which participants indicated their response via a checklist (see appendix 1). The first question presented participants with thirty-five common health topics divided into larger topical groups. We present these results in table 1, organizing responses into these tiers: 33%, 49%, 66%, and 74%. We based tiers on a visual scan of the data which showed that frequencies fell in four "clumps." The top tier skewed toward social and emotional health topics including bullying, violence, harassment, relationships, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and conflict resolution. Within the top 49% appeared another social and emotional-related topic: sexuality and gender.

Table 1: Health Questions Asked by Teen Patrons

Tier of frequency	**Topic**
Top 33%	Relationships: romantic, sexual Relationships: friends, making friends Anxiety, depression Self-esteem, happiness (building, fostering)
Top 49%	Relationships: romantic, sexual Relationships: parents Sexuality and gender Conflict resolution
Top 66%	Specialty diets (e.g., vegan, paleo) General nutrition Substance use: alcohol Death, dying, grief Domestic violence
Top 74%	Substance abuse: marijuana Family planning, pregnancy prevention Eating disorders Pregnancy and parenting Puberty (i.e., growth/development) Sexually transmitted infections

The second question presented factors related to the SDOH. As represented in table 2, economic: employment was the leading factor, with 85% (n = 23) of participants noting this need. The next most apparent needs were health care: mental/emotional health counseling (44%, n = 12), economic: access to food (41%, n = 11), and social: discrimination (37%, n = 10). The

frequency of these SDOH factors indicates potential gaps in community resources.

Table 2: Types of Health-related Service Questions Asked Related to Social Determinants of Health

Topic	**% of participants (*n* = 27) reporting topic as asked**
Economic: access to food	41
Economic: access to housing	22
Economic: employment	85
Neighborhood: access to foods that support healthy eating	15
Neighborhood: environmental conditions	19
Neighborhood: quality housing	7
Health care: primary (e.g., disease/illness/injury prevention, diagnosis, treatment)	15
Health care: mental/emotional (e.g., counseling)	44
Health care: reproductive, contraception	26
Health care: reproductive, pregnancy (testing, pre-/post-natal)	19
Health literacy (e.g., how to locate, evaluate, and interpret health information)	11
Social: civic participation (e.g., clubs, community groups)	30
Social: discrimination	37

RQ3: On which resources and partnerships do teen services staff rely to respond to health information questions and health-related needs?

Two open-ended questions revealed which resources and partnerships that staff relied on for health-related information and needs. The first question asked participants which in-house resources (e.g., databases, books, websites, etc.) they relied on for health information and service questions. Medical websites like MedlinePlus, the Mayo Clinic, and WebMD made up 26% (*n* =

7) of the responses, followed by nonfiction books (18.5%, *n* = 5). The remaining responses included in-house lists of free housing and community organizations, health department brochures, and general search engines. The next question asked about the resources in their professional community (i.e., fellow staff or managers, librarians in other systems, associations, other) on which they most relied. Of the 27 participants, 22% indicated fellow staff and 7% indicated their manager. The remaining responses included health professionals they personally knew, local health organizations, and librarians at other branches or systems. Collectively, these responses indicate there is not a ubiquitous "go to" resource or protocol when it comes to addressing teens' health needs.

RQ4: Do teen services staff feel equipped to respond to health information questions and health-related needs?

Two questions uncovered how equipped staff felt about responding to health-related questions and needs. The first asked about the types of questions they felt most prepared to answer; the second asked for which they felt least prepared to answer. Those areas in which the 27 participants felt most prepared included social health and issues (48.1%); food, nutrition, fitness, and weight management (40.7%); and mental/emotional health (27.0%). Areas in which they felt least prepared included substance use (59.3%), injury/disease and growth/development (33.3%), and mental/emotional health (33.3%). Worth noting, some librarians felt most equipped in topics that others felt least equipped. For example, mental/emotional health was cited as an area of both strength and weakness. Altogether, these responses show that staff might benefit from health-related training, but perhaps participants should be able to choose the type of training they would like to receive.

RQ5: What kinds of training have teen services staff had to respond to the health information and health-related needs of youth?

Regarding training, two questions asked about health-related training participants had received and the type of training they would like. Again, participants were given a checklist of responses from which to choose. Responses to the first question indicated that 55.6% had been trained informally (e.g., books, articles, blogs, recorded webinars and lectures, conversations with professional connections, etc.); 40.7% participated in formal trainings such as those

sponsored by the NNLM or other agencies; and 25.9% received training as part of their formal coursework for their degree. Of those health-related topic areas for which they would like training, the leading topic was mental/emotional health (25.9%). This finding is not surprising given the results shared in the previous section. Mental/emotional health appears to be a topic area in which staff have mixed levels of confidence. Altogether, the results indicate that the staff had not had much formal training to address the health-related information questions and needs of local teens.

RQ6: To which resources do teen services staff members wish they had access to respond to the health information and health-related needs of youth?

An open-ended question prompted participants to identify resources and partnerships they had access to in order to address the health information and service questions asked and/or health-related needs observed. The predominant response was partnerships with neighborhood health centers and community organizations. These centers and organizations would include places to which staff could refer teens for help with sexual or mental/emotional health. These organizations might also come to the library to offer mental health first-aid training to staff or to answer topical questions. Finally, staff indicated they would like support from and recognition among the larger library administration that community health is a priority for all patrons, not just teens. Overall, these responses reveal a willingness among the staff to respond to teens' health-related needs, but they require additional resources to do so.

Step 3: Assessing Health Priorities for Action

The focus group responses were intended to help us complete Step 3: Assessing Health Priorities for Action. Specifically, we wanted to identify the most significant health conditions and SDOH factors, as perceived by teen services staff, and to determine the best interventions. The focus group was split into four parts. In the first part, we shared the local and national teen health trends and the results of the survey. In the second part, we asked participants to rate the severity of the most common health-related topics in the survey as *high*, *medium*, or *low*. The topics that staff perceived as most severe included anxiety and depression; death, dying, and grief; and sexually transmitted infections. These topics were followed by bullying, violence, and harassment; self-esteem and happiness; and domestic violence. In the second part, we also asked

participants to rate the same topics in terms of changeability (i.e., ability to be effectively improved by the CPL). The areas rated as most changeable included bullying, violence, and harassment; relationships; self-esteem and happiness; conflict resolution; general nutrition; and pregnancy and parenting. The HDA needs assessment process recommends that the areas an organization should address first are those where severity and changeability overlap. For our focus group, these areas were bullying, violence, and harassment; and self-esteem and happiness. It should be noted that in this second part of the focus group, we did not discuss the most severe and changeable SDOH, because the most obvious factor, made clear by the survey results, was employment, followed by access to food and mental/emotional health counseling.

In the third part of the focus group, participants evaluated potential interventions in terms of acceptability for CPL to perform by way of indicating *yes*, *no*, or *maybe*. The tabulated results appear in table 3. Below appears a summary of the results for each of the three intervention categories: *professional development*, *teen-facing*, and *miscellaneous*.

Approval was medium-high for these professional development activities:

- Creating a professional development resource library for staff.
- Working with the CPL's Library Staff and Organizational Development Department to create webinars in collaboration with the NNLM.
- Providing onsite professional development opportunities.

Approval was high for these teen-facing activities:

- Publicizing existing SDOH and health-related resources.
- Inviting community service providers to provide teen programming.
- Constructing a teen-focused health resource list for staff and eventually a teen-friendly version to be made available at branch locations.

Approval was medium-high for these teen-facing activities:

- Constructing a teen-focused health reading list consisting of both fiction and nonfiction books about health-related topics or with a health-related theme.

Approval was medium-high for these miscellaneous activities:

- Partnering with school librarians or health teachers to ensure that teens develop health literacy and information literacy skills.

- Forming a Teen Health Advisory task force made up of three to four teen services staff, a teen services administration team member, and the library social worker. This team would meet regularly to discuss and plan health-related initiatives.

Approval was medium for these miscellaneous activities:

- Updating library policies, the Strategic Plan, or teen services' goals to include attention to and activities directed toward teen health.

Table 3. Focus Group Participants Select Interventions Based on Acceptability to Various Constituencies

Intervention Idea	**Acceptability? (*n* = 8)**
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	
Create a professional development resource library for staff.	Yes: 6 No: 0 Maybe: 2
Work with the CPL's Library Staff and Organizational Development Department to create webinars in collaboration with the National Library Network of Medicine.	Yes: 6 No: 1 Maybe: 1
Provide onsite professional development opportunities.	Yes: 7 No: 0 Maybe: 1
TEEN-FACING POSSIBILITIES	
Publicize existing/new SDOH and health-related resources.	Yes: 6 No: 1 Maybe: 1
Invite community service providers to provide teen programming.	Yes: 7 No: 0 Maybe: 2
Construct a teen-focused health reading list.	Yes: 6 No: 0 Maybe: 1
Construct a teen-focused health resource list.	Yes: 8 No: 0 Maybe: 0
MISCELLANEOUS	
School Partnerships: Partner with school librarians or health teachers to ensure that teens develop health and information literacy skills	Yes: 5 No: 0 Maybe: 3

Form a Teen Health Advisory Task Force: Consists of 3–4 teen services staff, a teen services administration team member, and the library social worker. Meets regularly to discuss and plan health-related initiatives.	Yes: 7 No: 0 Maybe: 1
Library Policy/Strategic Plan: Modify or add to the library's mission and goals.	Yes: 2 No: 0 Maybe: 6

Note: These results include a total of eight respondents and one respondent who did not answer every question.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss the implications of our findings for the CPL, as per Step 4: Action Planning for Change, preview the activities taken to date for that step, and share our intentions for Step 5: Moving On/Project Review.

Step 4: Action Planning for Change

In Step 4: Action Planning for Change of the needs assessment process, the team establishes intervention goals, the actions to accomplish them, and creates a system of evaluation.[xxxvii] For this step, we expanded our team to include a licensed professional counselor. We also established relationships with members of the NNLM and are working to create partnerships with health science librarians at nearby universities. The expertise of these individuals will help us to set realistic goals and provide avenues for intervention implementation.

With the licensed professional counselor, we reviewed the findings. Our review indicated that health information and service needs do exist among community teens and that some of these teens turn to their local library branch for assistance. The Healthy Chicago 2.0 Community Health Assessment and our survey results make apparent that needs vary by neighborhood and are influenced by the SDOH. Literature on the role of libraries in community health, coupled with YALSA's priority research area of *community engagement*, indicates there is an opportunity for, and perhaps even duty among, libraries to positively influence these conditions and factors as a matter of social justice and equity.

Given our new "charge," the team established immediate, short-, and long-term goals and identified the actions to achieve them. To do this, we began with the highest-ranking interventions. Among those, we chose one activity from each intervention category.

- *Professional development:* Work with the CPL's Library Staff and Organizational Development Department to create webinars in collaboration with the NNLM.
- *Teen-facing:* Construct a teen-focused health resource list for staff reference and eventually a teen-friendly version to be made available at branch locations.
- *Miscellaneous activities:* Update library policies, the Strategic Plan, or teen services goals to include attention to and activities directed toward teen health.

We also decided to initially focus on teen health and SDOH in general, and eventually the health topics identified both as severe and changeable (bullying, violence, and harassment; and self-esteem and happiness).

For each intervention, we agreed upon aims and objectives, and actions to achieve them. While it is beyond the scope of this article to describe these and our system of evaluation, we are pleased to have already met two of our objectives: working with the NNLM to offer a webinar and constructing a teen-focused health resource list. Due to changes in library and city leadership, updates to the Strategic Plan and policies will be more long term.

Step 5: Moving On/Project Review

In Step 5: Moving On/Project Review, the assessment team reflects on lessons learned and makes decisions about further actions.[xxxviii] While we have not fully implemented our planned interventions, we did complete the needs assessment. We evaluate our success by revisiting here our original aims and accomplishments. We also identify our limitations and make suggestions for improvement.

Our first aim was to uncover the most common health-related needs among teens as perceived by teen services staff. Via survey, we obtained perceptions from 67.5% percent of the teen services staff. Coupled with secondary data sources, we ascertained the greatest needs and the SDOH influencing them. Future research might include surveying and interviewing teens and local health professionals to improve the accuracy of our findings.

Our second aim was to document the ways that teen services staff already address health-related needs and the challenges with doing so. While our survey captured the frequency at which staff responds to health-related needs, we could have done a better job in identifying the ways they successfully do this. Future research should capture this information as interventions could be built upon those activities. Site visits, additional surveys or interviews with staff, and an

evaluative document review of programming and services on a branch-by-branch location basis could be ways to collect this data.

Our third aim was to identify resources, programming, and services that staff would like to or could provide to teens, but do not. Our survey participants identified community partnerships and administrative support as factors in being able to deliver programming and services. Though not interventions in and of themselves, the project team will set specific goals and identify actions to ensure these factors are addressed.

Our final aim was to establish both research and community partnerships. Regarding research partnerships, our team expanded to include three additional teen services administrative staff, an academic librarian, and a licensed professional counselor, each of whom afforded new insight and expertise. Regarding community partnerships, this is an area of focus for the year, though we have already established relationships at the national level with the NNLM and joined a citywide initiative to address bullying and suicide.

Conclusion

In large cities like Chicago, residents in one neighborhood may experience poorer health outcomes than in others. In large part, these are due to conditions and factors known as the SDOH.[xxxix] As libraries increasingly become a third place (after home and work) for community members, there lies an opportunity for them to positively impact these conditions and factors. For young people, we know that "when children have the opportunity and resources to be healthy, they are more likely to grow into healthy adults."[xl] Young adult and teen services librarians can help to ensure those opportunities and resources. This idea is supported by YALSA's mission "to support library staff in alleviating the challenges teens face, and in putting all teens—especially those with the greatest needs—on the path to successful and fulfilling lives."[xli]

To identify the greatest health-related needs of teens served by the CPL, we conducted a community health needs assessment. Our data collection and analysis were guided by transformative research practices to construct knowledge for the purpose of improving the health-related outcomes of community teens. Interventions will include staff training, community resource lists, and updating goals or the library's Strategic Plan to include a focus on community health. Because teens' health-related needs and the factors influencing them will change over

time, ongoing assessment and evaluation is essential to assuring that resources, programming, and services serve teen patrons in the best way possible.

Appendix 1. Survey Questions

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS
1. What neighborhood/community does your library serve?
2. What is your title?
3. Do you possess a library science degree?
4. If you possess a library science degree, at what level is it?
Circle all that apply:
Bachelor's Master's Doctorate Certificate: School Library or other

FREQUENCY OF HEALTH-RELATED QUESTIONS
5. How often do youth ask health information or health-related services questions?
Daily A couple times per week Once a week
A couple times per month Rarely Never

6. Of those youth who ask health information or health-related questions, approximately how many ask regularly?
1–5 6–10 11–15 I do not have patrons who ask regularly

HEALTH INFORMATION QUESTIONS
7. What kinds of health information (i.e., topics) questions are asked? Check all that apply.
<u>Food, Nutrition, Fitness, and Weight Management</u>
- ☐ Eating disorders
- ☐ Exercise/physical activity
- ☐ General nutrition
- ☐ Food allergies
- ☐ Food safety
- ☐ Specialty diets (e.g., vegetarian, paleo, etc.)
- ☐ Sport (as a participant)
- ☐ Weight management

<u>Injury/Disease, Growth/Development</u>
- ☐ Acne, warts, and other skin issues
- ☐ Disease diagnosis, prevention, management (exclusive of sexual health)
- ☐ Injury diagnosis, prevention, management
- ☐ Puberty (i.e., changes associated with growth and development)
- ☐ Sexuality and gender identification
- ☐ Sexually transmitted diseases and infections

<u>Sexual Health</u>
- ☐ Reproduction (i.e., "where do babies come from?")
- ☐ Family planning and pregnancy prevention (i.e., contraception)
- ☐ Pregnancy and parenting (i.e., teen pregnancy/parenting)

<u>Social Health and Issues</u>

- ☐ Bullies, violence, harassment
- ☐ Conflict resolution
- ☐ Domestic violence
- ☐ Relationships: romantic/sexual
- ☐ Relationships: friends, making friends
- ☐ Relationships: parents

Mental and Emotional Health

- ☐ Addiction (any kind)
- ☐ Anxiety, depression
- ☐ Death, dying, grief
- ☐ Self-esteem, happiness (building, fostering)
- ☐ Separation and loss (from or of loved ones)
- ☐ Sleep problems
- ☐ Suicide thoughts

Substance Use

- ☐ Marijuana
- ☐ Opiates or other prescription drugs
- ☐ Tobacco
- ☐ Alcohol
- ☐ Other drugs

8. Of those health-related questions asked, which are most frequently asked?

HEALTH-RELATED SERVICES RELATED QUESTIONS

9. What kinds of health-related service questions are asked? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Economic: access to food
- ☐ Economic: access to housing
- ☐ Economic: employment
- ☐ Neighborhood: access to foods that support healthy eating
- ☐ Neighborhood: environmental conditions
- ☐ Neighborhood: quality housing
- ☐ Health care: primary (i.e., disease/illness/injury prevention, diagnosis, treatment)
- ☐ Health care: mental/emotional (e.g., counseling)
- ☐ Health care: reproductive, contraception
- ☐ Heath care: reproductive, pregnancy (testing, pre-/post-natal)
- ☐ Health literacy (i.e., how to locate, evaluate, and interpret health information)
- ☐ Social: civic participation (e.g., clubs, community groups)
- ☐ Social: discrimination
- ☐ Other

10. Of those health-related service questions asked, which are most frequently asked?

HEALTH-RELATED NEEDS OBSERVED

11. Thinking about the health topics/issues listed in the previous questions, what kinds of health-related needs do you OBSERVE, by way of seeing or overhearing, among youth patrons in your setting?

12. Of those health-related needs, which do you most commonly observe?

RESOURCES FOR HEALTH-RELATED QUESTIONS AND OBSERVED NEEDS

For health information and health-related service questions ASKED, on which . . .

13. in-house resources (e.g., "go to" databases, books, websites, etc.) do you rely?

14. community resources (i.e., social services, medical institutions, businesses, associations, other) do you rely?

15. resources in your professional community (i.e., fellow staff or managers, librarians in other systems, associations, other) do you rely?

16. For health-related needs OBSERVED, on which resources (in-house, community, or professional community) do you rely?

HEALTH TRAINING, PART 1

Librarians are not necessarily trained in health.

17. To which health information/service questions and health-related needs do you feel most equipped to respond? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Food, nutrition, fitness, and weight management
- ☐ Injury/disease, growth/development
- ☐ Sexual health
- ☐ Social health and issues
- ☐ Mental and emotional health
- ☐ Substance use
- ☐ Other _____

18. To which health information/service questions and health-related needs do you feel least equipped? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Food, nutrition, fitness, and weight management
- ☐ Injury/disease, growth/development
- ☐ Sexual health
- ☐ Social health and issues
- ☐ Mental and emotional health
- ☐ Substance use
- ☐ Other _____

HEALTH TRAINING, PART 2

19. What kinds of training have you received to prepare you to respond to health information/service questions and health-related needs of youth? Check all that apply.

- ☐ As part of formal coursework during my professional preparation (i.e., degree programs).
- ☐ As a component of formal professional development (i.e., organized continuing education sponsored by the NNLM or other agencies).
- ☐ As a component of informal professional development? (e.g., books, articles, blogs, recorded webinars and lectures, conversations with professional connections, other).
- ☐ I have not participated in health-related training.
- ☐ Other _____

20. For which health information/service questions and health-related needs would you like training? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Food, nutrition, fitness, and weight management
- ☐ Injury/disease, growth/development
- ☐ Sexual health

- ☐ Social health and issues
- ☐ Mental and emotional health
- ☐ Substance use
- ☐ Other _____
- ☐ I do not want training.

21. To which resources and partnerships do you wish you had access in order to address health information and service questions asked and/or health-related needs observed?

Appendix 2. Focus Group Prompts

CHOOSING PRIORITIES ACCORDING TO IMPACT (SEVERITY) AND CHANGEABILITY

1. Which of the priority (in terms of size) health condition/determinant factors have a significant impact, in terms of *severity*, on teen health functioning (i.e., overall mental, social, physical health)? Indicate as high, medium, or low.
2. Which of the priority health conditions /determinant factors can be effectively improved by the CPL? Indicate as high, medium, or low.

Key

High impact on health functioning: keep on list.

Medium impact on health functioning: possibly keep?

Low impact on overall health functioning: delete.

Tier of frequency	**Topic**	**Severity**	**Changeability**
Top 33%	Bullies, violence, harassment	High Medium Low	High Medium Low
	Relationships: friends, making friends	High Medium Low	High Medium Low
	Anxiety, depression	High Medium Low	High Medium Low
	Self-esteem, happiness (building, fostering)	High Medium Low	High Medium Low
Top 49%	Relationships: romantic, sexual	High Medium Low	High Medium Low
	Relationships: parents	High Medium Low	High Medium Low
	Sexuality and gender	High Medium Low	High Medium Low
	Conflict resolution	High Medium Low	High Medium Low

		High Medium Low	High Medium Low
Top 66%	Specialty diets (e.g., vegan, paleo) General nutrition Substance use: alcohol Death, dying, grief Domestic violence	High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low	High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low
Top 74%	Substance abuse: marijuana Family planning, pregnancy prevention Eating disorders Pregnancy and parenting Puberty (i.e., growth/development) Sexually transmitted infections	High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low	High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low High Medium Low

SELECTING INTERVENTIONS BASED ON ACCEPTABILITY

Acceptability refers to what are the most acceptable changes needed to achieve the maximum impact. Consider whether interventions/changes would be acceptable to CPL.

Intervention Idea	**Acceptable to CPL?**
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT • Create a professional development resource library for staff. • Work with the CPL's Library Staff and Organizational Development Department to create webinars in collaboration with the National Library Network of Medicine. • Provide onsite professional development opportunities.	Yes No Maybe Yes No Maybe Yes No Maybe Comments:
TEEN-FACING POSSIBILITIES • Publicize existing/new SDOH and health-related resources. • Invite community service providers to provide teen programming. • Construct a teen-focused health reading list. • Construct a teen-focused health resource list.	Yes No Maybe Yes No Maybe Yes No Maybe Yes No Maybe Comments:
MISCELLANEOUS • School Partnerships: Partner with school librarians or health teachers to ensure that teens develop health and information literacy skills. • Form a Teen Health Advisory Task Force: Consists of 3–4 teen services staff, a teen services administration team member, and the library social worker. Meets regularly to discuss and plan health-related initiatives. • Library Policy/Strategic Plan: Modify or add to the library's mission and goals.	Yes No Maybe Yes No Maybe Yes No Maybe Comments:

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