

# “I Don’t Fit Into Your Neat Little Plan”<sup>1</sup>: Defending Queer Youth From the Censorship Crusade

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## ABSTRACT

The current attacks on minority representation and visibility are often given cover by claims of “protecting the children.” Too often this excuse goes unchallenged and marginalized youth suffer the consequences. This white paper shows how public libraries, librarians, and the programs that train them can step up to protect part of this forgotten population – LGBTQ+ youth – by: actively positioning themselves as public health partners in combatting negative health outcomes in LGBTQ+ youth, utilizing intergroup frameworks around empathy building to promote social justice in their communities, and actively integrating training to become social justice leaders and advocates into MLS/MLIS curricula.

## Protect the Children! As Long As They’re Straight.

In the current socio-political climate, ideas of “parental rights” and “protecting the children” have once again become central talking points on the political right in a renewed American culture war. When I hear these phrases, however, I’m often left wondering which parents are we deferring to? Which children are we protecting? A cursory glance at the legal, social, and cultural landscape makes it easy to see that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) youth are not the children being protected.

In legislative sessions across the United States there are currently 515 anti-LGBTQ+ bills either under consideration or passed into law (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2024)<sup>2</sup>. These bills range from issues related to healthcare, public accommodation, free speech and expression, and information access in school curricula and libraries. Taking into consideration the last several years of increasing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, there are now 11 states that require or promote the outing of transgender youth in school to their families without regard for their safety at home, and 16 states either censor LGBTQ+ issues and information in schools or allow for parents to opt their children out of inclusive curricula (Movement Advancement Project: LGBTQ Curricular Laws, n.d. -a; Movement Advancement Project: Forced Outing of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a line from the song “Heterosexuality Is a Construct” by Onsind, a punk band from Pity Me, Durham (UK). I highly recommend checking them out. (Onsind)

<sup>2</sup> The ACLU’s webpage has an active dashboard tracking anti-LGBTQ bills in the U.S. The link is in the references.

Transgender Students, n.d.-b)<sup>3</sup>. Public libraries have not been immune from this assault on the LGBTQ+ community either. In March 2024, the American Library Association (ALA) released data on book challenges in 2023, tracking over 1,200 attempts to censor library materials and challenges to nearly over 4,200 titles (ALA, 2024).

This attack on LGBTQ+ representation and inclusion is part of a larger cultural backlash against diversity and acknowledging the existence and lived experiences of marginalized communities more broadly, and erasing stories that run contrary to the predominant conservative American historical narrative. This aggressively resurgent anti-queer animus runs parallel to attacks on Black identity, history, and experience. Emboldened by the reframing of Critical Race Theory into a catch-all progressive boogeyman, works that deal with civil rights and anti-racism are frequent targets for erasure. No better example of this exists than the list of 850 books compiled by a Texas state lawmaker, Rep. Matt Krause (R), composed mostly of books written by and about people of color, LGBTQ+ authors, and other marginalized groups (Chappell, 2021). Rep. Krause's rationale for targeting these books was that they "might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex." It's important to note that only one percent of bans were initiated by students themselves (Bellamy-Walker, 2022).

The Trevor Project, a non-profit focused on ending suicide among LGBTQ+ youth, conducted a survey of over 18,000 individuals between the ages of 13 and 24 who self-identify as LGBTQ+ in 2023, their sixth annual survey tracking mental health in this population (Nath et al., 2024). The results show a community in crisis. From this report we see 38% of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the last year, with higher rates among youth of color, and transgender/nonbinary youth. More than one in ten attempted suicide. Ninety percent of respondents indicated recent politics has negatively impacted their well-being, with over half ranking the impact as "a lot." Of those who had access to an affirming space at home, school, a community event, or online, there was a marked decrease in attempting suicide. Additionally, respondents ranked school (52%) and online (68%) higher than home (40%) as an affirming space.

Given the information from the mental health survey, one would assume any initiative supposedly centering the protection of children would work toward supporting LGBTQ+ youth by providing them with access to the resources, support, and information they need in order to survive. This includes increasing access to affirming spaces, access to resources so they can better understand themselves and make healthy choices, and seeing themselves reflected as part of the community. This assumption supposes those waving the standard of protecting children are engaging in good faith, something easily disproved by their own words. For example, speaking with the conservative Christian organization Family Policy Alliance, Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) stated a major priority for conservatives should be "protecting minor children from the transgender [sic] in this culture and that influence" (Sprayregen, 2023). Senator Blackburn's statement was in reference to a bill currently under consideration at the federal level, the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA); a bill many LGBTQ+ advocates worry would further erase queer identity and community online. This is just one example where allowing queer people to exist in a space, this time on social media, is met with accusations of "indoctrination," and any defense of queer people's right to inhabit these spaces is met with being labeled a "groomer".

<sup>3</sup> Movement Advancement Project has several active dashboards tracking state-level policy impacts on the LGBTQ+ community. Relevant links can be found in the references.

It is within this context that public libraries must step up in order to protect LGBTQ+ youth. I believe there are three key ways in which this can be accomplished:

1. Acknowledge access to LGBTQ+ materials and representation is an issue of public health, health justice, and health information access.
2. Develop programming focused on social justice and building empathy utilizing intergroup frameworks.
3. Fill the gaps in MLS/MLIS curricula to better prepare public librarians to become social justice change agents.

The remainder of this white paper will address these three topics individually, beginning with the public health argument against LGBTQ+ censorship. This is a complex approach that requires addressing the history of censorship of LGBTQ+ health or community material, the correlation of information access with positive health outcomes, social connectedness and mental health, LGBTQ+ health education and health literacy for family and allies, and the unique needs of the transgender community.

## LGBTQ+ Censorship as a Public Health Issue Impacting Queer Youth

The majority of the American voting public is already against book banning and only a third are in favor of banning books due to topics concerning sexuality (EveryLibrary Institute, 2023). Public libraries and librarians, already under-resourced and with precious little extra time and energy, should focus their efforts not on point-by-point refutations of outlandish interpretations of their collections, but instead publicly situate themselves as an active player in public health initiatives serving the LGBTQ+ community. They would be better served by positioning their inclusion of LGBTQ+ materials and programming, and collaborations with local queer community organizations, as centered on health information justice and human rights in the service of protecting LGBTQ+ youth who are at greater risk of negative mental, physical, and sexual health outcomes than their heterosexual peers.

One of the biggest challenges in positioning the public library as a key player in meeting the public health needs of the LGBTQ+ community is expanding the general notion of what constitutes public health and health interventions. On the immediate heels of the COVID pandemic many people may equate the idea of “public health” with things they can tie to traditional markers of the health field - medical research, vaccinations, etc. The general public may not make the connection that information access plays a vital role in individual and community health, and they may struggle to understand how access to non-health related materials can be related to health outcomes. For example, research has shown that positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters in fiction can reduce feelings of isolation (Alexander & Miselis, 2007). Helping to ensure access to this type of representation is just one way public libraries contribute to more positive mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth.

Many of the major arguments made by those in favor of the erasure of LGBTQ+ identity and the censorship of vital and affirming resources is that this material is “indecent” or “obscene”. These arguments assert queer identity is inherently adult, sexual, pornographic, and otherwise unsuitable for minors. To those involved in LGBTQ+ advocacy this seems all too familiar. The benefit of the lack of creativity and new material on the part of the book banners, however, means we can look back at the long history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement for examples on how to combat this narrative. (It should not be overlooked that this is precisely

why book banners want to eradicate access to this history and information, so that we can't collectively build on the successes of those who came before us.)

The 1997 ruling in *Reno v. ACLU* struck down the Communications Decency Act (CDA) as unconstitutional. The majority opinion ruled the CDA violated the First Amendment and that "the interest in encouraging freedom of expression in a democratic society outweighs any theoretical but unproven benefit of censorship" (Stevens et al., 1996). It also makes an amazing comparison of the World Wide Web to both a vast library and sprawling mall. The ruling also directly references the work of the Critical Path AIDS Project, an HIV/AIDS education and community support project founded by LGBTQ+ activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya. What began as a newsletter to provide information on HIV/AIDS to the queer community grew to become an advocacy and information website as well as an Internet Service Provider to the HIV-positive community in Philadelphia (Lubin & Vaccaro, 2020). Kuromiya was one of the first twenty plaintiffs to file a suit challenging the constitutionality of the CDA, recognizing the impact this law would have on the distribution of queer-centered and sexually explicit information about HIV/AIDS prevention given its vague policing of "indecent" and "obscene" material.

Shortly following this ruling similar legislation allowing for the restriction of information access on the internet passed at the federal level with the purported intention of protecting children, the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA). One of the most insidious aspects of legislation such as CIPA is the way its negative impacts fall on those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities given its connection to federal programs such as grants and E-rate discounts, which are more likely to service patrons at the crossroads of compounding oppressions. Studies have found that the implementation of blocking and filtering software has a disparate impact on sexual minority youth as the information they are more likely to be seeking on sexual identity and safer sex practices is at higher risk of being labeled as "pornographic", depriving them of equal access to health information (Holt, 2006). Additionally, others have recognized the negative impact filters have on the ability for LGBTQ+ youth to find community and access information that leads to a reduction in negative health outcomes (risky sexual behavior, depression, self-harm, suicide, etc.) and recommend libraries meet the minimal levels of compliance for CIPA and develop practices for ensuring information on gender identity, sexual identity, and sexual health remain accessible to teen and adult patrons (Holt, 2009; Jardine, 2013).

The attacks on LGBTQ+ expression and information today are similarly vague, relying on the emotive power of rhetoric by accusing libraries and schools of providing "pornography" to children, "grooming" them, and "indoctrinating" them into a homosexual agenda. Excerpts from books are provided with absolutely no context, deceptively seeking to muddy the waters and somehow compare adult memoirs to the story of a penguin with two dads. This type of censorship also carries with it the same dangers Kuromiya foresaw with the passage of the CDA in advancing tangible harm to the health and safety of the LGBTQ+ community through lack of access to information to promote better health outcomes.

It is fair to say there is a mental health crisis among LGBTQ+ youth. In addition to higher rates of suicidality, 50% of queer youth who want access to mental health care are unable to receive it, and among the 13–17-year-old respondents, 67% reported symptoms of anxiety and 57% reported symptoms of depression (Nath et al., 2024). Public libraries can serve a vital role in addressing this issue by working to provide access to affirming physical and online spaces, access to information resources that allow LGBTQ+ youth the ability to learn more about themselves, and provide education and training to those who care about this population to be better equipped in providing support.

There exists a “grand narrative” among LGBTQ+-identified librarians that “libraries save [LGBTQ+] lives”, which was interrogated in a 2016 study by Rachel S. Wexelbaum. The qualitative data provides numerous examples of the lifeline provided by school and public libraries during the K-12 experience. One particularly powerful example describes access to LGBTQ+ books and history as a “light at the end of the tunnel” and an “assurance that the light wasn’t an oncoming train, but a way out” (Wexelbaum, 2016 pp.42). While this study specifically looked at the role of libraries in retaining LGBTQ+ students in a higher education setting, the ways in which libraries and librarians meet the needs of those students is easily translatable to serving the LGBTQ+ community writ large in an effort to combat the types of systemic barriers and intersecting oppressions that lead to statistically higher negative health outcomes (Adelson et al., 2021, pp. 804).

In addition to ensuring minimum standard compliance with federal barriers to health information such as CIPA, public libraries should appoint a liaison who works with local LGBTQ+ community groups, student groups, etc. to better understand the health information needs of the community and facilitate access to literature, government agencies or non-profits, or other resources. Ensuring health education and community service resource brochures are readily and discreetly available can also support LGBTQ+ youth, who do not feel comfortable either disclosing their queer identity or asking for assistance in researching a health need. Many libraries are already providing this type of support, even in states that are traditionally considered hostile to the queer community. Bharat Mehra and Baheya S. Jaber recently investigated how public libraries in Alabama are serving their local LGBTQ+ communities (Mehra & Jaber, 2023). They found several examples of how public libraries are serving the 53,000 LGBTQ+ students who are 15+ by providing free LibGuides on community resources for children and teens, facilitating connections to LGBTQ+ organizations, and leveraging the interlibrary loan system across the state. Resources and services like this should be broadly replicated across all public libraries.

Having an online presence, whether a website or social media outlet, that provides LGBTQ+ affirming content can also help to increase engagement with queer youth and make them more likely to feel safe engaging with library resources and services. Fostering this type of trust is incredibly important given many LGBTQ+ youth do not receive adequate health information in schools and so tend to rely on their peers, who often provide inaccurate information, or the Internet, which is awash in misinformation (Jia et al., 2021). Public libraries should also foster greater self-efficacy in queer youth and help prevent negative health outcomes by offering programming that teaches greater information literacy skills when seeking health information online.

Public libraries should also engage the friends and family of LGBTQ+ youth in working to combat negative health outcomes or risky health behaviors. A study published in 2018 in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* focused on the sexual health communication between parents and their LGBTQ+ adolescent children (Newcomb et al., 2018). In the study a third of parent participants reported feeling unequipped to talk to their LGBTQ+ children about sex and dating due to lack of understanding. The inability for LGBTQ+ youth to receive accurate sexual health information from trusted sources can lead to experiences resulting in negative mental and physical health outcomes, or potentially put them in life threatening situations. Libraries can address this issue by ensuring they have resources available to educate not only LGBTQ+ youth but their parents or guardians, as well. A majority of participants in the study also indicated that family-based sexual health programs can serve a role in providing better sexual health information to LGBTQ+ teens as well as education on LGBTQ+ sexuality, dating,

and identity development to their parents or guardians. Again, this is a need public libraries are well-positioned to address by partnering with community organizations such as PFLAG, an LGBTQ+ family advocacy and support group, to offer programming to facilitate better access to LGBTQ+ health needs. Partnerships such as this also help to publicly situate public libraries as anchors in community-based health information outreach and public health initiatives.

A study conducted in Ireland, published in a 2019 issue of the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, explored the power of social connectedness in advancing wellbeing in the LGBTQ+ community (Ceatha et al., 2019). Its findings, informed by the World Health Organization's *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* and an approach to social justice that centers identity recognition as a catalyst for social change, can be used to inform and justify the role public libraries can play as active participants in inclusive public health interventions for the LGBTQ+ community (World Health Organisation, 1986). Anti-discrimination policies and laws promoting inclusivity do not cause the social manifestations of homophobia and transphobia, which negatively impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals, to disappear. The fostering and sustaining of supportive environments are crucial to promoting better wellbeing. Through actively providing targeted programming, or passively by creating a space where LGBTQ+ youth feel safe and welcome, public libraries can facilitate social connections that help offset the stressors of stigmatization and prejudice. This is why public libraries should not silo their LGBTQ+ outreach or visible allyship to Pride Month, but should engage with and promote LGBTQ+ materials and community year round to communicate that their services and spaces remain welcome, accessible, and safe.

Particular attention needs to be given to meeting the health information needs of transgender (*abbreviated hereafter as "trans"*) youth. There has been limited research into the information needs and information seeking behavior of this subset of the LGBTQ+ community, but what research has been done shows trans patrons' needs shift depending on where they are in their coming out process. Early on, these patrons are trying to learn more about trans identity and the experiences of others who identify like they do, eventually shifting to look for information on public policy, activism, and discrimination as they become more comfortable with their trans identity (Taylor, 2002). A study by Beiriger and Jackson identified the top three information needs of trans patrons as legal, health, and community support (Beiriger & Jackson, 2007). Legal information ranges from document changes to non-discrimination policies in healthcare, employment, and housing. Unfortunately, because of the uncertainty of a welcome environment and a desire for anonymity, trans individuals tend to rely on the Internet to meet their information needs (Taylor, 2002). This leaves them susceptible to misinformation and disinformation that can result in negative health outcomes. Moreover, those patrons who might rely on public libraries for Internet access face the added obstacle of website filtering and blocking software.

Public libraries must work to make their spaces more welcoming of trans patrons as part of their role in serving as a partner in meeting the public health needs of the LGBTQ+ community. They can do this by creating more displays and exhibits of works featuring trans characters or written by trans authors, that moves away from a gender binary to language more inclusive of the spectrum of gender expression, establishing gender-neutral restrooms, and coordinating more intentional programming that centers trans lives and experiences (Jardine, 2013). Unfortunately, the current cause célèbre among the far-right – perfectly exemplified by comments made at the American Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2023 who called for the “eradication of transgenderism” - is whether trans individuals have a right to exist, so libraries committed to serving this particular population need to do so with contingency.

cies in place for navigating political and social blowback (Luneau, 2023). Steps should also be taken to ensure the safety of trans patrons and this might include compiling a trans resource list in lieu of consolidating information within a particular space in the collections (Jardine, 2013). Consolidating materials under a “Trans Resources” category can invite harassment, violence, and draw attention to specific titles for attempted censorship, whereas an available resource list outlining the various fiction, nonfiction, media, etc. that may be of interest to trans patrons allows for a more discreet way of meeting the needs of this population in a safe, anonymous way.

As reactionary nationalist movements seek to remove material not in line with their social order, it is increasingly important for public libraries to critically examine how they ensure access to information resources to this at-risk community. These resources run the gamut from queer-centered YA fiction to children’s books that allow the child of a same-sex couple to see their family reflected in a positive light, to information about LGBTQ+ history, to access to online social groups, and to sexual health information. Public librarians must also partner with local LGBTQ+ community organizations and offer physical space to allow for in-person community building, networking, and resource sharing. Programming should also help to educate the friends and family of LGBTQ+ youth on how to better understand their lived experiences and show up as allies and advocates.

Public libraries are also in an ideal position to serve as leaders in their communities by stepping up to build bridges between partisan and cultural divides through social justice oriented programming. The skills required to successfully manage this should be introduced while pursuing the MLS/MLIS degree.

## Building Safe and Affirming Community

Public libraries have historically played a role in fostering civic engagement within their communities. They should continue to build on this legacy through programming that utilizes frameworks that build empathy for social change. This can be done through programs that pull from intergroup dialogue research, community events modeled on the Human Library project, and programming aimed at increasing the awareness of lived experiences of the LGBTQ+ community (Abergel, 2019). Helping to demystify the lived realities of LGBTQ+ people and provide multiple avenues for shining a light on their humanity can help shift local communities to create more spaces where they feel seen, safe, and affirmed.

One such example is the Human Library, which was developed in Copenhagen in 2000. Its basic premise is positioning a person as a “book” that answers questions based on their personal experience. These “books” often represent a marginalized population. The interaction allows the “reader” to be in control of the conversation to foster openness, curiosity, and an environment to build empathy. Public libraries exist at a community crossroads that makes them the perfect institution to partner with this project to increase community connection and understanding within their local community.

An excellent example of the power of this type of programming comes out of Hungary, under the the banner of the “Living Library” toolkit through the Council of Europe, which was assisted in its development by the Human Library Organization. This study examined the impact of the Living Library’s prejudice reduction intervention programming in combating social stigma against Roma and LGBTQ+ people among high school students in a culture where prejudices towards these communities are highly explicit across media and political discourse (Orosz et al., 2016). Representatives from the Roma and LGBTQ+ communities served as the “books” while the high school students were the “readers.” The result of this study

found that prejudice towards these populations decreased significantly as a result of this type of intergroup programming.

When this study was published in 2016 the authors made a point to highlight how the Hungarian social context was unique and specifically named the United States as an example where tolerance is more extensively endorsed. In the years since publication, the American political right and social conservatives have openly embraced far-right authoritarian leaders, including the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, and his concept of “illiberal democracy.” Hungary has become such a central model of the Republican vision for America that a premier annual conservative conference, CPAC, has hosted two events in Budapest, and hosted Orbán as a featured speaker at their 2022 conference in Dallas (Spike, 2023; Weber, 2022). Orbán’s speeches at these events consistently highlight a shared disdain for “progressive elites,” “woke culture,” LGBTQ+ rights, and education - often under the guise of protecting children (Spike, 2023). Many of the anti-LGBTQ+ attacks we’ve seen in the United States in recent years, such as the increased attacks on trans athletes and Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law, bare remarkable similarities to Orbán’s attacks on depictions of LGBTQ+ content in media and the erasure of discussion on gender or sexuality in Hungarian schools.

A prejudice reduction initiative that found success in Hungary in 2016 can serve as a powerful roadmap for combating homophobia, transphobia, and bigotry in the current American political and social landscape. The tactics employed by the political and social right rely on creating deep divides rooted in misinformation, distrust, and suspicion of those they consider undeserving of equal rights or the ability to exist in public. The constant refrain of “groomer” is a resurrected tool meant to tie any trace of queerness to the notion of child sexual abuse. The accusation of “indoctrination” is both an immediate shutdown of the recognition of the innateness of sexual and gender identity in an individual, as well as a callback to the dangerous rhetoric of social contagion. These tactics are meant to build walls between individuals and communities. Programming like the Human Library helps to prevent or dismantle these walls.

However, this should only be one of many tools employed by public libraries, which serve as agents of social change in their communities to help overcome division and polarization. Another effective tool at their disposal is the intergroup dialogue program.

The overwhelming majority of anti-LGBTQ+ animus currently overtaking social discourse is rooted in far-right evangelical movements, and much of the legal cover given by both legislatures and the judiciary is framed within the context of “religious freedom” that, strangely, seems deferential to a very specific, very narrow understanding of faith and religiosity. Given this, a perfect example of the type of intergroup dialogue programming that could be pursued by public libraries comes from a study examining social work students’ experiences in a Christianity and sexual minority intergroup dialogue (Joslin et al., 2016). (*Note: The authors use the acronym “LGB” within the context of their study, but this paper will continue to use “LGBTQ+” to encompass the range of queer community.*) While participants in this dialogue reported challenges such as Christian students conflating discomfort with oppression, navigating the perspectives of those who identified as both LGBTQ+ and Christian, and struggles with appropriate use of the term “ally,” there were also several positive outcomes. Christian-heterosexual students appeared to have gained a better understanding of their LGBTQ+ peers and the issues impacting them, participants who identified as both LGBTQ+ and Christian were better able to integrate their identities, and several participants reconsidered certain political opinions after having been exposed to the lived experiences of others. It is also important to note that many of the challenges experienced in this dialogue could have been overcome through better, or more informed, facilitation.



A similar study looked at the experiences of heterosexual students in sexual orientation intergroup dialogue courses (Dessel et al., 2013). This study found that, due to engaging in the intergroup dialogue process with LGBTQ+ peers, heterosexual students developed a better sense of empathy for their peers and there was a measurable reduction in bias. One of the key ways intergroup dialogue helped to achieve these outcomes was because it allowed students who had no prior interaction with LGBTQ+ people to engage with the community. Additionally, the heterosexual participants that fell into this category “unanimously concluded that partaking in the dialogue helped them to accept [LGBTQ+] people and better understand this community” (pp.1067). Participants also left this experience with a reported set of intended behaviors which included gaining more friends and acquaintances in sexual minority groups, and interrupting discrimination and offensive language used by peers and family members.

I have been a facilitator in an intergroup dialogue program at the University of Maryland, College Park since 2017. In that time I have co-facilitated dialogues on topics including race, gender identity, sexuality, and disability; worked with groups consisting solely of students, or blended groups of faculty and staff; assisted in the training of staff and student facilitators; assisted in the development of college and program-specific dialogue courses across campus; and participated in research examining the efficacy of intergroup dialogue in virtual spaces during COVID utilizing Critical Race Theory. I have witnessed firsthand the successes and challenges of this practice and pedagogy and know, if properly implemented within public library spaces, it can serve a vital role in bridging community division, generate more civic engagement, and build empathy.

The type of intergroup dialogue I am trained in, and which I am proposing be utilized in public library programming, is based on exploring group differences with a goal of fostering individual and systemic change by:

- Developing awareness of one’s own power and privilege
- Exploring the similarities and differences both within and across different social groups
- Fostering dialogical skills for addressing conflict between groups
- Examining social justice issues across various levels (personal, interpersonal, institutional, etc.)
- Identifying actions that contribute to more inclusive, equitable, and socially just outcomes (Zúñiga et al., 2002)

Successful intergroup dialogue programs bring groups together for sustained conversations over a number of weeks. Participants must have time to build relationships and establish trust. It is also important for the facilitators to ensure a safe, collaborative environment that is co-created and co-owned by all participants. The model I use and recommend spends several weeks familiarizing participants with the dialogue process, explains the difference between dialogue and debate, and utilizes a number of relationship building activities before actively engaging in dialogue over “hot topics” over several sessions. Most importantly, the intergroup dialogue process must allow for time to discuss and plan actionable steps that participants can take to foster more socially just outcomes around the dialogue topic (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001).

While my experience and much of the literature around this particular form of dialogue focuses on its role in fostering individual growth and building understanding across group differences in higher education settings, this has been shown to be a powerful tool in community-based settings as well. For example, a community-based intergroup dialogue lead by Adrienne Dessel on same-sex marriage within a Baptist church raised the possibility that their

community could choose to marry same-sex couples even if that meant breaking away from their parent organization (Dessel et al., 2006).

When designing this type of programming, it is important that public libraries understand that facilitated dialogue is not a silver bullet that can be offered once and solve homophobia. In order to have a measurable impact, participants must meet consistently over several weeks to allow participants the opportunity to get to know and trust each other and to allow the facilitator to create and hold space where participants can be challenged in their beliefs and invited to be vulnerable.

Finally, programming that exposes the broader community to the lived experiences of the LGBTQ+ community can help to build empathy and understanding. With respect to inter-group dialogue programming, these types of initiatives need to be consistent and not just a one-off guest speaker or movie night during Pride Month in order to truly have an impact in the community. It's also important that any programs about the LGBTQ+ community provide context and engagement, especially to people who are not members of that community. Simply putting out information about the LGBTQ+ community could just as easily elicit indifference, suspicion, or fear, as it could empathy or compassion (Maoz & Frosh, 2020). Are you hosting a screening of *Love, Simon*? Why not pair it with a panel of LGBTQ+ youth talking about their coming out experiences in the local community? In your celebration of Black History Month, why not provide a spotlight on the impact of Black queer authors and artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jimmie Daniels, and Ethel Waters? Are there works by LGBTQ+ authors or featuring queer characters that take place in your town or state that could be highlighted to show LGBTQ+ people are, and have been, part of the community?

Coalition building with community, understanding how to navigate cross-community tensions in order to build empathy and understanding, and designing intentional partnerships with government agencies and local resources to support LGBTQ+ youth, or any marginalized community, should not be skills that librarians are expected to inherently possess or learn on the job. In order to maximize the impact public libraries can have as allies and advocates these skills need to be intentionally incorporated into the professional and academic training they receive through accredited MLS/MLIS programs.

## Teaching for the Reality of Public Librarianship

A 2016 paper by Paul T. Jaeger and Lindsay C. Sarin makes the argument that librarianship is inherently political and that expecting "the profession to be neutral on issues that impact our jobs, institutions, and the people we serve is cowardice" (Jaeger & Sarin, 2016). They correctly draw attention to the fact that MLS/MLIS curricula today have more in common with the 1950's focus on reference, management, and research methodology than in meeting the needs of the modern library and contemporary information landscape. Their paper mentions several educational components that should be embedded in MLS/MLIS curricula; of those, five are intimately relevant with the ideas for protecting LGBTQ+ youth put forward in this paper. They are: activism and advocacy, leadership, public policy and law, community outreach and engagement, and human rights and social justice.

In the current socio-political environment almost any initiative that centers a historically excluded population will be labeled as "woke" and become a magnet for political gamesmanship, fearmongering, and backlash. Public librarians find themselves needing to step up as not only advocates for these vulnerable communities, but also as spokespersons for the inherent public

good provided by libraries. It seems the current approach to equipping librarians to navigate these responsibilities is less about academic or professional preparation and more about expecting them to be forged into leaders in the crucible of public scrutiny and attack. Not only has this consistently left libraries unprepared and two steps behind, it is unethical and inhumane.

In January 2023 the ALA approved and adopted as policy a new set of Core Competences for Librarianship (American Library Association, n.d.-a). This document acknowledges it is the first time that social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion are intentionally incorporated into these core competencies. It also notes that this newly adopted policy is not intended “as a prescriptive document for library school curriculum” but that it can be used to inform curriculum development and professional development for early career library professionals. The inclusion of diversity, equity, and inclusion focused themes throughout the various competencies, as well as the inclusion of a competency specifically focused on social justice is admirable, but the passive positionality of this policy places the burden of preparing culturally competent advocate librarians on higher education institutions, who are likely to avoid rocking the socio-political boat if they can help it, or on individual libraries or librarians, who may not have the resources to pursue professional development opportunities.

On December 1, 2023, the ALA announced updates to their Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies (American Library Association, 2023). One of the most remarkable aspects of these updated standards is the explicit focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Instead of limited references to a “diverse and global society” and “underserved groups” the new standards center these values uniquely within each category, and specifically name the inclusion of underrepresented and underserved communities in the systematic planning and curriculum review processes (American Library Association, n.d.-b). Of specific relevance to this paper, the standards call for program-level learning outcomes in MLS/MLIS programs to be informed by the most recent version of the ALA Core Competencies and Core Values, include a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and names social justice and equity as specific areas in which faculty should be expected to remain updated and current in their skills.

Under these new standards, I encourage MLS/MLIS programs to critically examine how they can better prepare their students for the reality of public librarianship. One example, as mentioned earlier, is facilitator training for intergroup dialogue programs. Incorporating this into MLS/MLIS curricula can better prepare future librarians to navigate difficult conversations and develop community-specific programming aimed at bridging divides, fostering empathy, and promoting increased civic engagement. This is borne out in the results of a study tracking graduates of Skidmore College’s Intergroup Relations minor, the first established intergroup dialogue minor in the United States (Ford & Lipkin, 2019). Students in this minor trained to become co-facilitators in race dialogues, and the study found these facilitators “developed dialogic skills that were paramount to leadership education, including their ability to understand, synthesize, and translate social justice principles to their post-college lives” (pp.53).

Incorporating the intergroup dialogue experience into the MLS/MLIS program should expose students to the experiences of being both a participant and a facilitator. A potential approach is to develop a two-semester sequence that exposes students to the intergroup dialogue process and encourages critical self-reflection. In the first semester, students engage as participants in a 7-week intergroup dialogue so they not only experience what it is like to be a participant, but they also learn how to engage with their own internal biases. The following 7 weeks should consist of reflection on the experience as well as facilitator training and dialogic skills building. In the subsequent semester, students serve as co-facilitators helping to lead an intergroup dialogue. Students are paired with experienced co-facilitators, and meet weekly

with their intergroup dialogue instructor to reflect on the process and check in. A course sequence such as this would more than meet a program-level learning outcome associated with the social justice core competency adopted by the ALA, while also preparing future librarians for serving as bridge-builders and advocates for social justice in their communities.

The updated accreditation standards also encourage looking to the ALA Core Values for informing program-level learning outcomes. Three of these values are Democracy, The Public Good, and Social Responsibility, and yet to meaningfully express these values would run counter to the neutrality expected of librarians and libraries as institutions (American Library Association, 2006). Are librarians only expected to help create an informed citizenry while relegating themselves to the sidelines of the democratic process when their jobs are at stake? To position libraries as a public good inherently means coming into conflict with forces that view information access as anathema to their preferred social order. How does a librarian engage in “solving the critical problems of society” without taking a non-neutral stance (American Library Association, 2006)? Whether they are testifying before a school board to oppose censorship, justifying their budgetary needs to a municipal board, or communicating the impacts of proposed policy decisions to their community, public librarians are already engaged in advocacy and should be properly equipped to navigate this arena upon completion of their graduate program (Durney, 2023). Teaching future librarians to interpret local, state, and federal laws that govern everything from information access to discrimination to funding decisions allows them to be proactive advocates instead of reactive defenders, and also equips them to be better community leaders on matters of civic engagement (Fogarty, 2016).

Public librarians should also be better trained on community organizing and coalition building with the communities in which they work. A review of libraries “coming out” in support of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States, Canada, and Brazil found the common theme across institutions was the role of partnerships with community members and organizations (McEachreon, 2016). This review specifically mentioned a 2014 study of how Brazil has been working to combat homophobia since the United Nations declared “zero tolerance” against discrimination or violence based on sexual orientation. Survey responses from 61 LGBTQ+ organizations in Brazil specifically named public libraries as having promoted LGBTQ+ citizens through both collection development and supporting events aimed at LGBTQ+ visibility (Alentejo, 2014). While the power of partnering with local community resources and organizations to support historically marginalized communities may be apparent, how are future librarians being prepared to do this work? Neither the current nor proposed accreditation standards address leadership in a way that acknowledges that public librarians work beyond the physical and virtual confines of the library itself.

Aside from instruction on developing targeted programming, how are MLS/MLIS programs training future public librarians on how to be active and engaged members of the community? Kan-Rasmussen succinctly summarizes the impossible position of being a politically neutral social justice change agent when they state that libraries “are places where values such as diversity, equity, and inclusiveness compete with values of neutrality, anti-censorship, and freedom of speech (Kann-Rasmussen, 2022). In their 2021 paper, they offer the use of an Orders of Worth (OoW) framework established by Boltanski and Thévenot for understanding the legitimization and justification of librarians’ engagement in social agendas (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). This framework allows discursive space for understanding the inherently non-neutral positionality and tensions between librarians’ individual identities, institutional identities, and perceived or real obligations. It establishes libraries as a compromise between three of the eight established worlds in the OoW framework: the industrial world (efficient,

professional), civic world (collective, rule governed), and projective world (proliferation of connections, flexible, involved).

An example of the projective world provided in Kan-Rasmussen’s research highlights the benefit of creating networks and establishing partnerships as strengthening an organization’s legitimacy (Kann-Rasmussen, 2022). MLS/MLIS programs should look for ways to incorporate the application of this OoW framework to legitimize public libraries’ involvement in social agendas in order to provide an operational foundation in which future librarians can justify their involvement in advancing social justice within their communities. Additionally, the three worlds approach provides a possible curricular framework that allows space for reflection on the tensions librarians will need to navigate in meeting legal, institutional, community, and ethical obligations.

With the adoption of new accreditation standards, the ALA has provided an opportunity for universities to fundamentally reshape how they prepare students for librarianship that centers community leadership and advocacy. The changes proposed in this white paper are just a few ways in which MLS/MLIS curricula can better acknowledge the modern landscape in which librarians find themselves. While this argument puts forward several avenues public libraries can better protect LGBTQ+ youth, the reality is that all members of the community would benefit from librarians that are better equipped to step up as social justice leaders.

### The Mouse Will Not Appreciate Your Neutrality<sup>4</sup>

On October 25, 2023, two members of Moms for Liberty, a far-right extremist organization that opposes LGBTQ+ and racially inclusive materials and that has been one of the key drivers of book bans across the country, reported school librarians to the Santa Rosa County Sheriff’s Office in Florida on accusations of distributing pornography to minors (Legum, 2023). The “pornography” in question was *Storm and Fury*, a popular young adult novel, which had been checked out of a school library by a 17-year-old student. Beyond the inherent absurdity in “protecting” a 17-year-old from a young adult novel lies the fact that this student apparently only checked out the book at the request of a teacher, who is not an employee of their school or even in their county, who then immediately turned the book over to Moms for Liberty. In their crusade to safeguard children from the dangers of teen romance, gargoyle shape-shifters, and communicating with ghosts (the plot synopsis of the offending text per the author’s website) it would appear conscripting and manipulating the children they are supposedly out to protect is not off the table (*Storm and Fury*, 2019).

This incident is a perfect example of how “protecting the children” is just a smokescreen for the true goal of rolling back decades of progress in elevating the voices of historically oppressed and erased communities. If this is how they are willing to treat young people in general, it is no surprise that the impacts their attacks on schools and libraries have on marginalized youth, especially LGBTQ+ youth, do not phase them. All children need advocates and allies to ensure their right to access information to foster learning and development about themselves and the world. However, marginalized youth who are most at risk of being left behind in these conversations need support most of all.

Public libraries are uniquely positioned to serve as bastions of support for LGBTQ+ youth in this intensified culture war. They have the potential to be critical partners in combat-

<sup>4</sup> You are most likely familiar with the full quote by Desmond Tutu: “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality” (Ratcliffe, 2017).

ing the negative health outcomes plaguing LGBTQ+ youth as a result of stigmatization, bullying, and the callous way in which culturally conservative politicians demean and dehumanize the LGBTQ+ community. Their ability to provide access to information resources on identity development and sexual health, an accurate portrayal of LGBTQ+ history, queer representation across media, community organizations, and physical or virtual safe spaces, can literally save lives.

This white paper has addressed the role intergroup dialogue programming can, and should, play in public libraries' responses to anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in building deeper community engagement and empathy. This type of programming requires proper training of facilitators to ensure safe, productive learning environments. An additional need coming from this discussion is the necessity of public librarians to learn the skills necessary to engage with their communities, public officials, local schools, and other resources and institutions to anchor themselves as key players in advocating for LGBTQ+ youth. However, the skills necessary to pursue these kinds of initiatives and partnerships are ones that tend to be excluded from core curricula in MLS/MLIS programs. The new ALA accreditation standards, core competencies, and core values allow space to infer the skills to be social justice advocates and defenders are critical parts of modern librarianship, yet too often inference alone allows room for omission when it comes to curricula or practical skills development.

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