



“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 LGBTQAI+ 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+.¹ “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 if 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.
- Self, Jeffery. *A Very, Very Bad Thing*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2017.
- Stevens, Courtney C. *Dress Codes for Small Towns*. New York: Harper Teen, 2017.
- Talley, Robin. *As I Descended*. Ontario: Harlequin Teen, 2016.
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