On Sunday, April 25, 1993, the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal

Rights and Liberation took place in Washington, D.C. ("March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay

and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation", n.d.). At the time, I was in 8th grade, and I was attending

Walnut Hills High School, a college preparatory high school for grades 7-12 in Cincinnati

where I grew up. I remember the march got a lot of news coverage. I also remember how I was

treated the following Monday at school.

Some of the kids sniggered when I walked into class and took my seat. One of them, a

boy I remember as having shoulder-length dingy red hair, turned to me and asked loudly

enough for everyone to hear, "Hey, Dyer, how was it?"

"What?" I replied.

"The march in Washington, faggot."

They laughed.

I hadn't gone to the march and they knew it, but it was an easy way to make fun of me

for being gay – a fact I was still coming to terms with. I blushed, and told them to shut up. I

don't remember if I cried or not. The teacher walked in shortly after that and things quieted

down, at least for the time being.

Several years later, after I had come out as gay but while still in school, mine was the

first high school in Ohio to start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). Despite this micro-culture of

inclusiveness, I and the other LGBT students and allies continued to face ridicule on a regular

basis.

Back then, "marriage equality" wasn't a buzzword. It was the era of Don't Ask, Don't

Tell. Optimism was hardly an option; there was no Will or Grace on the television to tell kids

like me It Gets Better, the L Word was not spoken in my house, and Ellen made headlines instead of selfies. Matthew Shepard was to be murdered the year after I graduated, the same year The Trevor Project was founded.

Today in parts of America, the tide is turning. 24 states and the District of Columbia allow same-sex marriage, and a recent court ruling may lead to gay marriage in 30 states (Wolf, 2014). But even with this trend towards acceptance, are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth being treated any differently by their peers than I was? According to the 2011 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 71.3% of LGBT students hear homophobic remarks such as "fag" or "dyke" frequently or often, and 81.9% were called names or threatened in the past year (2011). A study compiled by The Trevor Project estimates LGBT youth are four times more likely to contemplate suicide than their straight peers ("Facts About Suicide", n.d.). Perhaps the times aren't changing as quickly as we think.

Because of frightening statistics like these, LGBT youth are a specific user group that has special information needs and specific barriers to information beyond those of the general K-12 school population. Their information seeking behaviors may also be different than those of their peers due to the sensitive nature of the type of information being sought and fear of retaliation. These needs, behaviors, and barriers will be explored below.

User Group Demographics

The age range typically included in studies of LGBT youth can vary. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) consider the ages 13-21 to encompass "youth" (2014). Research conducted by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) looked at youth ages 13-17

(2012). GLSEN, which has been researching and reporting on the state of LGBT youth affairs since 1999, conducted a climate survey in 2011 and sampled over eight thousand students between the ages of 13 and 20 (2011).

All three organizations begin surveying students at age 13 indicating a consensus that sexual orientation confirmation begins around puberty, but the top end of the samples used differs, which could indicate that the specialized needs of this group extend into post-high school/college years. This variance in ages studied also shows that LGBT youth as an information seeking group may have varied levels of education ranging from approximately 6th grade to some college.

The general background of LGBT youth is also varied and encompasses a wide array of races, genders, religions, socioeconomic statuses, and other factors. Of the students who participated in the 2011 GLSEN study, 67.9% identified as White, nearly half identified as female, and over half identified as gay or lesbian. Students were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers in grades 10 and 11 (2011). The GLSEN survey had 8,584 student respondents. The HRC survey had over 10,000 respondents and the majority (65%) of respondents who identified as LGBT also identified as White. Nearly 20% identified as Hispanic, 6% identified as Black/African American, 3% identified as Asian, and only 1% identified as Native American (2012).

The learning styles of LGBT youth may vary; the research does not specifically report on the learning styles of the respondents. However, both the HRC study (2012) and the GLSEN survey (2011) indicate challenges faced by LGBT youth in learning environments such as classroom settings. The challenges include hearing derogatory comments directly related to

identifying as LGBT, being bullied and/or verbally and physically harassed (the CDC estimates

1 in 5 LGBT students have been the victim of a physical assault at school) (2014), and feelings

of isolation. The HRC study found that 4 in 10 LGBT youth say that the community in which

they live is not accepting of LGBT people (2012).

Along with this background information, it's important to note that, according to the

National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT (LGBT

Homelessness, n.d.). NCH goes on to state:

> LGBT individuals experiencing homelessness are often at a heightened risk of
>
> violence, abuse, and exploitation compared with their heterosexual peers.
>
> Transgender people are particularly at physical risk due to a lack of acceptance
>
> and are often turned away from shelters and in some cases signs have been
>
> posted barring their entrance.

This statistic is particularly disturbing when considering the information needs of the population

since basic needs like a stable home, food, and family are not being met. Without these basic

needs being met, one can only imagine the information being sought includes answers to

questions like "Where is my next meal coming from?"

User Group Information Needs and Uses

The unique aspects driving the information needs and uses of this user group include

several key indicators revealed from the studies performed by various LGBT advocacy groups

such as GLSEN, HRC, and the CDC. These findings can be arranged into high, medium, and

low priority information needs.

High Priority

The evidence indicates the majority of high-priority information needs of the LGBT youth population are related to safety and security. Unless a young person feels safe and secure, the research indicates that he or she is more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as heterosexual peers (2014). The information needs for this group may include suicide prevention resources, self-esteem building resources, and homelessness prevention resources.

The HRC study (2012) confirms that the needs of this user group differ from the needs of the general youth population. When asked to describe the most important problem facing their lives at the time of the survey, non-LGBT youth responded that classes/exams/grades, college/career, and financial pressures related to college or jobs were the most important. Conversely, LGBT youth responded that non-accepting families, school/bullying problems, and fear of being out or open were the most important problems they were facing.

Sexual health resources are also an important information need, as the CDC estimates nearly two-thirds of new HIV infections among adolescents aged 13-19 are from male-to-male sexual contact (2014). Sexual health and safer sex information may be extremely important, but HIV infection rates could indicate that either the information available is not being sought, or there is a barrier to accessing or using the information that is available.

Medium Priority

The medium-priority information needs of this user group could include information that is less critical to safety, security, and self-worth, but could be related to the types of information needs non-LGBT peers may have. For instance, the LGBT youth population still have to address school grades, college admissions, and financial pressures related to applying to

college. For most students, these may be considered high priority needs, but for the LGBT population, the issues of safety, security, and self-esteem must be addressed first.

Low Priority

It is difficult to suggest that LGBT youth have any information needs which could be considered low-priority, since so many of their information needs are critical to survival. However, perhaps the lowest-priority information needs of this population are related to entertainment and popular culture.

The American zeitgeist indicates a trend towards acceptance and equality on a broader basis, as evidenced by television shows that positively portray and normalize LGBT characters. Such television shows include Modern Family, in which a gay couple adopt a baby from a foreign country and integrate her with their existing family. Another example could include the show GLEE, which features several openly gay characters who are in the high school glee club and compete in contests. There are even entire television stations, such as Logo and Here TV, which target the LGBT population.

In the performing arts, entertainers such as Lady Gaga and comediennes such as Kathy Griffin are openly supportive of their LGBT fan base. Another supportive artist is Cyndi Lauper, whose True Colors fund was established in 2008. The True Colors Fund mission statement is: to raise awareness about and bring an end to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth homelessness, and to inspire everyone, especially straight people, to become active participants in the advancement of equality for all ("Mission", 2014).

In print media, popular magazines such as Out, The Advocate, and Curve Magazine target the same population. Superficiality and sexual content are the dangers with these forms

of entertainment. Suggesting that a young LGBT person needs to read The Advocate to remain informed is akin to telling a young girl she needs to read Cosmopolitan to be a "better" woman.

User Group Information Seeking Behaviors

In his article "Question-negotiation and information seeking in libraries" Robert Taylor (1968) says that information needs typically go through four stages as they are being articulated: a visceral, unexpressed need for information that may not be fully formed; a conscious need which may be a little more formed in the information seeker's mind but still needs refinement; a formalized need where the information seeker can qualify and rationally state the need; and finally, a compromised need where the information seeker "recasts" the question in light of the resources available to him or her. In the case of LGBT youth as information seekers, the typically unsupportive environment in which LGBT youth exist, evidenced by afore mentioned research and statistics, complicates these four stages. Depending on where the youth is in his or her coming out process, the visceral stage could take months or years before the youth can begin to move to the conscious stage where he or she has identified what sorts of information he or she needs to seek. Typically, around puberty, the LGBT youth may begin to formalize the need for information about the feelings and emotions being experienced, and finally may be able to ask or search for information related to sexual orientation.

The information seeker may also fit into Nicholas Belkin's anomalous state of knowledge (ASK) theory. That is, the young person typically begins with a gap or uncertainty about his or her sexual orientation, and begins to address that gap by seeking and evaluating

knowledge from friends, peers, and information resources. Belkin states that this cycle repeats itself until resolved. In the case of LGBT youth, this could also take months or years before the information seeker comes to terms with the information found.

The need for valid, reliable, and supportive information during any information seeking stage is absolutely imperative. Some organizations complicate the information seeking process by peddling conflicting, harmful misinformation stating that being gay is a choice, that sexual orientation can be "prayed away", or that conversion therapy is beneficial when it is notably harmful.

While Belkin's and Taylor's theories are applicable to information seeking behaviors in a general context, the process of seeking information while under such a state of perpetual and taxing emotional duress as experienced by LGBT youth may be best encapsulated in Kuhlthau's findings in "Inside the search process: Information seeking from the user's perspective" (1991). Through her research, which comprised high school students as subjects, Kuhlthau found that the beginning stages of searching for information are marked by "discomfort and anxiety which in turn affects articulation of a problem and judgments of relevancy" (1991). The additional pressures faced by a young person questioning his or her sexual orientation must only magnify this discomfort and anxiety. Kuhlthau's six stages of the information search process acknowledge that the information seeker will move back and forth through feelings of uncertainty, optimism, confusion, doubt, clarity, confidence, satisfaction, and disappointment. Based on the research of organizations like GLSEN and HRC, one could easily say LGBT youth go through these feelings on a daily or hourly basis.

One finding that is particularly relevant to the information seeking behaviors of LGBT youth is found in the HRC (2012) research which states, "Roughly three-quarters (**73%**) of LGBT youth say they are more honest about themselves online than in the real world, compared to **43%** among non- LGBT youth" and later, "…**52%** of LGBT youth say they participate very often or sometimes in an online community that addresses issues facing LGBT youth." These findings could strongly indicate that LBGT youth are searching for information online at home, in public libraries, or on personal mobile devices. Therefore, information provided to LGBT youth should be provided in a format the youth are more likely to access, such as electronic resources.

User Group Information Access Barriers

The GLSEN study revealed a major information access barrier for LGBT youth who are in school: "… less than half (44.1%) of students reported they could find information about LGBT- related issues in their school library, and only two in five (42.1%) with Internet access at school reported being able to access LGBT-related information online via school computers" (2011). This indicates that even if the questioning youth is comfortable enough to approach a school librarian, the chance of finding relevant information is diminished, thus adding to the frustration and confusion of the search process.

Another barrier to accessing information is the disproportionate number of homeless youth who identify as being LGBT. Homeless shelters may provide some of the basic necessities of life such as food and shelter, but it is unclear if they provide access to information that LGBT youth may be seeking.

Because LGBT youth worry most about ridicule and acceptance, another barrier could be the willingness to approach someone for help for fear of being judged. This makes it critical for any librarian assisting an LGBT young person to reassure him or her about intellectual freedom and to use a very neutral questioning approach during the reference interview.

Conclusion

As a gay teenager, I experienced a lot of turmoil. I know today that my parents did the best they could with the upbringing and belief systems they held, but I'll never forget the day my mother turned to me with tears burning her cheeks and told me, "You make me sick," before she left the room.

Thankfully, my relationship with my parents today is much more nurturing and positive. But, it took 20 years to get to this point. My heart goes out to the LGBT youth of today who experience similar distress as I had in high school. But even though today's youth experience similar feelings to what I did, they have at least one clear advantage: the Internet. Because LGBT youth are accessing information online, and because librarians are committed as information providers to remain neutral and protect intellectual freedom, valid and reliable electronic resources are available to meet the young LGBT person's information needs and demonstrate just how, indeed, It Gets Better."

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