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“Don’t Talk About the Gay Character”: Barriers to Queer Young Adult Fiction and Authors in Schools and Libraries

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Abstract

This article explores findings from an investigation into the publishing experiences of Australian authors of inclusive Young Adult fiction. A total of seven authors, each publicly identifying as part of a marginalised community in Australia, were interviewed. This paper concentrates on the findings of semi-structured interviews with two authors of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, and Other (LGBTQIAP+) fiction, and their experience of promoting their books in school and library environments. Findings were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis to understand their interactions with publishers, audiences, and school staff. The research was carried out in 2016 but highlights longstanding issues regarding the inclusion of queer literature for young people in educational spaces, including school libraries and high school English curriculums. More broadly, it contributes to the understanding of how diversity and inclusion within Young Adult Fiction is viewed in Australia, and the role of gatekeepers in providing or denying access.

Keywords: young adult fiction, diversity, queer fiction, homophobia, marriage equality

Introduction

In recent years, the Australian Young Adult Fiction publishing industry has increased its output of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, and Other (LGBTQIAP+) literature, with 2017 seeing the release of eight Young Adult books featuring queer leads. These titles broke new ground in representations of gender and sexuality, while simultaneously moving away from the traditional ‘coming out’ narrative. However, satisfaction with this progress is tempered by the reality that, of 131 Australian YA Fiction novels published in 2017, only eight featured queer leads (AustLit Database, 26/4/18), showing that queer stories are still under-represented. As Misson wrote in 1995, queer fiction has the particular role of providing “an acknowledgment and, hopefully, an affirmation of [queer youth’s] existence”, and an “opportunity to work through, however silently, some of the overwhelming burden of emotional issues involved in minority sexual identity” (p.29). This makes the presence of queer youth literature in the Australian publishing industry and in Australian classrooms and libraries, absolutely necessary.

This study is an exploration of the experiences of two Australian authors of YA Fiction with queer protagonists, and how their recent books have been received in educational contexts. The findings have implications for high school educators, librarians, the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA), and the Australian publishing industry. While the research involved participants with various marginalisations, this article focuses on the experiences of two authors who published works with a queer protagonist. By gaining insight into how authors’ identities have influenced their publishing journey and the reception of their queer-led novels, educators, librarians, readers and future researchers might achieve a greater understanding of how to support and include LGBTQIAP+ fiction in classrooms and libraries.

Rhodes argued that “[t]he increased quality, quantity and range of YA novels with GLBTQ content can also be seen as reflecting the changing direction of the calls for true

equality and legislated human rights for GLBTQ people throughout the world,” (2009, p.49) and the continued growth of queer representation in Australian YA mirrors the legalisation of same-sex marriage in December 2017. 2018 has built on progress in 2017 with the release of six YA novels with queer protagonists so far (AustLit Database, 25/7/18) and the announcement of two forthcoming anthologies dedicated to queer voices and stories from Black Inc. Books and Walker Books (Black Inc. Books, 2018; Walker Books, 2018).

Australian publishing of queer fiction is small when compared to the U.S. and the U.K., and the perception of queer-lead stories as ‘niche’ influences whether publishers consider them worthwhile investments. The 2017 publication of 123 heterosexual-led YA novels by Australian publishers, compared to only 8 queer-led YA books, reveals the extent to which heterosexual-led stories are perceived as more ‘mainstream’ (AustLit Database, 26/4/18).

With the highest average earnings of the top 25% of Children’s and Young Adult authors amounting to approximately \$14,000 a year (Zwar, Throsby & Longden, 2015, p. 4), schools and libraries are key sources of exposure for authors. As the public debates surrounding the legalisation of same-sex marriage revealed, there are individuals who oppose the normalisation of queer experiences, and their anxieties increase when representations of queer identities and experiences are presented to young people. As the findings of this study indicate, these anxieties apply as much to literature as to education – and in youth literature, classrooms, and libraries these often overlap.

Background

YA Fiction houses many genres and forms, reflecting ways the intended teenage readership’s “tastes vary, their abilities vary and their needs vary” (Plozza, 2015, p.6). In this paper, Young Adult Fiction is defined using a publishing industry-based definition drawing on the following sources to reflect how books are categorised by their creators. This definition requires three criteria to be filled: the book features a protagonist between the ages of 12-18

(Allen & Unwin, 2017; Walker Books, 2017); was written with teenagers as the intended primary readership (Binks, 2014a); and features characters who “live in the moment” (Tingley in Goldstein, 2011) and experience the emotional intensity (Zorn in Freer, 2016) common among teenagers. These criteria are recognised as necessary attributes of fiction for teenagers by booksellers (Armstrong in Freer, 2016), authors (Zorn in Freer, 2016), reviewers (Binks, 2014a), and publishers (Allen & Unwin, 2017; Tingley in Goldstein, 2011; Walker Books, 2017).

The call for greater diversity and inclusion in youth literature has been championed by the US-based organisation *We Need Diverse Books* (WNDB), founded in 2015. WNDB has harnessed social media to advocate for increased representation of “diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color [sic], gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities” (We Need Diverse Books, 2018) in fiction for young people. People with these “diverse experiences” are often referred to as ‘marginalised communities’ within contemporary online advocacy spaces to emphasise how the publishing industry has historically relegated stories about and by people from minority groups to the margins.

While WNDB’s goals and definitions have been embraced globally, most change is limited to the U.S., with the Australian publishing industry lagging behind in the publication of stories by and about people from marginalised communities. Stories by and about queer people written for young readers are just one category where this gap is evident, with only 4 out of 138 YA novels published in 2016 – when this research was conducted – featuring queer protagonists (AustLit Database, 25/7/18). There have been increased calls in online advocacy spaces that more authors from marginalised communities receive the opportunity to ‘tell their own stories’ about their experiences, as outsider authors are often privileged by publishers in this area. In some cases, this can lead to harmful or stereotypical depictions of

marginalised communities, necessitating the creation of 'OwnVoices'. Created September 6th 2015 as a hashtag by Dutch YA Fiction author Corinne Duyvis (Duyvis, 2016), OwnVoices has been adopted by book-blogging communities and diversity advocacy spaces to refer to books with primary characters from the same traditionally marginalised communities as the author. The label is descriptive rather than prescriptive, with the sole purpose of identifying when a novel's lead(s) and author share marginalised identities.

Literature Review

The importance of diversity, inclusion, and representation of traditionally marginalised communities has been interlinked with YA Fiction since its emergence as a distinct category of literature in the 1940s and 50s. In the U.S., youth librarians guided this focus by promoting titles featuring “main characters drawn from a variety of classes, conditions, and racial and cultural groups” (Jenkins, 1995, p.311) to re-engage teenage readers. As these stories gained popularity, authors catered to this market, centring teenage protagonists in stories with similar themes. In 1956, the original booklist “Adult Fiction for Young People” had its name changed to “Young Adult Fiction” (Cart, 2007, p.4) to reflect this. YA Fiction soon gained popularity in Australia through the importation of American titles in the 1970s and 80s, highlighting topics “such as divorce, drugs, death, teen pregnancy, disabilities, sexuality and minority groups” (Ullin in Munro & Sheahan-Bright, 2007, p.219).

Despite inclusion and representation of traditionally marginalised communities being one of the original goals of YA Fiction, publishers have been slow to embrace this. The metaphor in Bishop's seminal 1990 article “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding-Glass Doors” demonstrates the value of inclusive fiction, and the ways in which young readers respond to and benefit from the representation of diverse experiences and communities in youth literature: representation can act as a mirror that allows readers to see lives and experiences

like their own reflected and validated. For readers outside these communities, these stories can act as “windows” and “sliding-glass doors” for readers to look and step through to gain insight into other lives and experiences (Bishop, 1990). This reading experience is vital to all young people — by reading fiction that illustrates “fears and questions inherent in challenging social, familial, institutional prescriptions and ascriptions”, they can develop frames of reference to “locate themselves as having experienced some form of marginality and prejudice” (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995, p.35) and/or better understand prejudices that disadvantage their peers. However, recent U.S. based research has shown their publishing industry does not reflect the realities of young readers, with only 6% of all youth fiction published in 2016 being written and/or illustrated by “*Black, Latinx, and Native authors combined.*” (Ehrlich, 2017, emphasis original)

Scholarship on the topic of the inclusion of traditionally marginalised communities in Australia’s YA Fiction publishing industry is lacking compared to the U.S., reflecting the local publishing industry’s smaller output of fiction. Recent contributions to scholarship have largely been made by freelance writers and authors of inclusive fiction themselves, with an eye to the representation of their own community. One of the most significant contributions to queer representation in Australian youth fiction was made by author Jenny Pausacker, known for writing “the first Australian young adult novel with a gay main character” (Pausacker, 2016), *What Are Ya?* (1987, Angus and Robertson). In 2016, Pausacker published a comprehensive survey of Australian youth fiction with queer characters, spanning three decades. The survey, “*So Gay: A List of Australian Children’s and Young Adult Contemporary Realist Novels with LGBQ Characters 1985 – 2015 (plus three remixes)*” concluded that within this timeframe, there had been “at least 134 Australian novels for or about kids dealing in some way with LGBQ experience” (Pausacker, 2016). Pausacker concludes:

...134 books is a relatively impressive total, which bears comparison with the 187 American titles listed by Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins in their 35-year survey *The Heart has its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay / Lesbian / Queer Content, 1969 – 2004*, especially given that the American publishing industry is estimated at ten times the size of the Australian publishing industry.

However, the *protagonist* is LGBTQIAP+-identifying in only 35 of the titles listed (including characters “questioning” their sexuality). Additionally, few of these books are currently accessible to Australian young people. Many titles mentioned in Pausacker’s study, including all eleven of her own novels (many of which can be classified as OwnVoices, due to their lesbian protagonists), are out of print, or were self-published with limited copies and now unavailable.

Pausacker also touched on the lack of queer YA Fiction published by publicly queer authors. Diverse representation among authors is a persistent issue in literary markets globally. Academic and YA Fiction author Ambelin Kwaymullina, who has written extensively about diversity and representation in Australian youth fiction, has highlighted this. Kwaymullina’s 2016 post on the blog *Alphareader*, “Privilege and literature: three myths created by misdiagnosing a lack of Indigenous voices (and other diverse voices)” as a ‘diversity problem’”, examines how “diversity problems” are often framed as the failure of individual authors to be traditionally published. Kwaymullina proposes there is instead a “privilege problem” within the industry: “a set of structures and attitudes that consistently privilege one set of voices over another” (Kwaymullina, 2016), leading to few Indigenous Australian authors and People of Colour being published (and by extension, other marginalised voices). Kwaymullina’s article strongly influenced our research and raised questions about the experiences of traditionally published authors of OwnVoices YA Fiction in Australia. Our research was guided by questions about the level of support authors had received from the publishing industry, how their work had been received by various

audiences, and whether they had been challenged for writing about communities they belong to.

Methodology

Data collection for the primary research took the form of semi-structured qualitative interviews with traditionally published Australian YA Fiction authors who identified publicly as belonging to a marginalised community, and had published an OwnVoices novel. To select interviewees for the research, it was necessary to know which authors active in the Australian publishing industry had written an OwnVoices novel. In the U.S., there are resources for this research, such as the *Cooperative Children's Book Center* (CCBC), founded by the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1963 (CCBC, 2017), online readers hubs like *BookRiot*, or the growing number of websites with 'curated recommendations' for fiction about marginalised communities like *LGBTQReads* (Adler, 2016). Australia does not have equivalent organisations or platforms, although community-generated archives on forums such as *Goodreads* (<https://www.goodreads.com/>) can provide guidance. It was necessary to create our own annotated list with information about all OwnVoices novels by Australian Young Adult authors, as of October 2016.

Methods to develop the list included searching the *AustLit* database (<https://www.austlit.edu.au/>) and communal archives on *Goodreads* for eligible authors, and investigating publicity materials released by authors and their publishers. For ethical reasons, we only included authors who publicly and freely identified themselves in written material as part of a traditionally marginalised community. (The list continues to be updated. Due to ethical considerations, currently there are no plans to make it publicly accessible.) At the time this research was concluded in October 2016, the list contained approximately 30 authors, of which 20 were currently writing and residing in Australia. This included Indigenous Australian, People of Colour, and LGBTQIAP+ author, as well as authors with experience of

disability (including mental illness). After receiving human ethics clearance, seven authors from the database were contacted (representing the aforementioned communities), and all agreed to be interviewed.

The interview format prioritises the voices of already marginalised representatives of the Australian publishing industry, for “if we genuinely want to hear, to understand an individual we must provide a way for her or him to speak in a genuine voice” (Cisneros-Puebla, Faux & Mey, 2004, p.3). Semi-structured interviews allowed us to speak at length with the authors, with follow-up questions for a deeper understanding of the authors’ “motivations [and] feelings” (Sahu, 2013, p.6) about their writing. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded to foreground overlapping or contrasting themes in interviewees’ responses, allowing us to “[understand] the data in a more meaningful way” (Sahu, 2013, p.79). These findings were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a method that has historically examined “the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result[s] from it” (Van Dijk, 1993, p.252). CDA “draws our attention to issues of power and privilege in public and private discourse” (Huckin, Andrus & Clary-Lemon, 2012, p.111), making it appropriate to scrutinise how marginalised authors perceive their publishing journey and experiences in an industry with a “privilege problem” (Kwaymullina, 2016). Bean and Moni (2003) used CDA to examine Australian YA Fiction, with an emphasis on how teenage readers respond to portrayals of adolescent identity in fiction. Our transcripts were coded using CDA, with particular attention to exchanges or usages of power by authors, publishers, their readership, and educators; as well as whether the authors interviewed faced the same expectations as their non-identifying peers.

This article focuses on two authors who have written novels with queer protagonists: one author self-identified as queer (referred to as Author 1) and the other heterosexual (Author 2). Both authors are from different cultural backgrounds marginalised by the

Australian publishing industry. Although Author 2 was not queer, their protagonist is from their same ethnic background, meaning the book fitted OwnVoices criteria. To respect the privacy of the interviewees, interview findings have been anonymised and de-identified for publication due to the personal nature of quotes. Both authors gave written permission to be quoted directly in publications using this research.

Findings

One primary discourse established from the research was that the experience of promoting books with queer characters, and accessing audiences to promote to, was negative for both authors. Librarians and other school staff had enforced barriers on multiple occasions, while the Australian high school English curriculum was found to be unsupportive of using LGBTQIAP+ fiction in classrooms. While the only State curriculum identified was NSW, both authors have spoken at schools across Australian States and Territories and reside in different States, meaning it is possible similar curriculum issues occur in other States and Territories. Australian authors are dependent on schools and libraries to connect them to young audiences through author visits, and with a quarter of Australian authors stating in 2015 that they depended on jobs connected to their author status to supplement their income (Zwar, Throsby & Longden, p.4), these barriers are concerning because they impact authors' livelihoods. The experiences described by these authors indicate a much larger issue of identity-based opposition experienced by marginalised authors – one author found this prejudice extended beyond their book's content to their identity.

1. Librarians, School Staff as Gatekeepers

Author 1 experienced incidents of prejudice regarding the representation of diverse sexualities in their books, and prejudice in-person because of the public status of their sexuality. They

described instances as “well-meaning opposition”; perpetrators often expressed prejudice directly, with the expectation that Author 1 would “understand”. While some staff potentially act on the instructions of school boards or larger governing bodies such as in faith-based schools, this does not neutralise the prejudice inherent in asking an author to “understand” why an aspect of their identity is considered inappropriate for teenagers. The author recounted an encounter with a teacher several years prior:

What she said was, “I’ve heard people really love [your novel] [and that it] really looks at family [...] but I don’t have it in my library because I’ve heard there’s a gay character.” And I’m like, “So I have a book about the importance of family, but you won’t stock it in your Catholic school because there is one character in 250-something that kisses [someone of the same gender].” And she’s like, “Yes.”

When the author explained that the book is, at its core, about family and faith, the teacher struggled to respond: “She just looked at me and blanked out.” This was one of many examples of deliberate gatekeeping by high school staff the author gave throughout the interview, with other incidents including teachers “warning” them before speaking to students on school visits: “don’t talk about the gay character.”

Author 1 confirmed they knew of “certain [...] high school libraries” that only stocked the author’s book in the “adult section”, “where only teachers are allowed to borrow it.” The author believed this was because the novel was perceived as inherently more sexual than novels centred on the heterosexual experience: “That’s the thing, if you say ‘gay’, whether you write about gay sex or not, people think ‘gay sex’”. The novel’s only sexual interaction between two gay characters is a kiss. The “implication that a character may be gay makes it adults only”, rather than graphic content, resulted in the novel’s restricted access. The complicity of school staff in censoring stories about queer protagonists is concerning because teachers and librarians are entrusted by schools to educate and inform students — yet in these examples, they have created and maintained barriers that deny teenagers the ability to access literature depicting sexualities other than heterosexual.

Author 1 was aware they must tread a fine line to be perceived as acceptable by (presumably heterosexual) informational gatekeepers in schools and libraries:

If I wanted to write an authentic gay experience for teens, there's no way it would get into schools.

There is absolutely no way that it would win any awards. So if I can't sell it in the first week, then it's stuffed.

In this way, Author 1 faces limitations on their creative work because of their dependency on support from schools and libraries. The author stated publishers' awareness that many schools display these prejudices has meant publishers have in the past advised the author to "walk it back a bit" when writing queer characters' experiences, so novels are more palatable to gatekeepers. Although school and library staff may believe their practice of denying access to LGBTQIAP+ fiction in their institutions to be "well-meaning", or "understandable" to the author, their gatekeeping produces creative limitations for the author, as well as negative psychological or emotional impact.

Despite Author 2 feeling it had been "tricky to get traction" for their YA Fiction in the past, "probably because I'm [a marginalised] writer and the stories I write reflect the experiences of a minority group," they stated that one of their motivations to write a queer protagonist was:

...because of the real conservatism around in Australia [...] particularly around, you know, talking about a plebiscite, and all of this stuff [...] I thought this character has to be same-sex attracted.

In contrast to Author 1 being hyper-aware of appearing palatable to gatekeepers, Author 2, a self-identified heterosexual, was prompted to write a queer protagonist because of the "real conservatism" they had observed in Australian society. Author 2's lack of hesitation in writing a queer experience clearly demonstrating how possessing a sexuality perceived as 'acceptable' by gatekeepers – and thus, not being exposed to "well-meaning opposition" – does not produce anxiety and creative limitations. The lack of direct opposition to Author 2's

sexuality can therefore be seen as influencing their creative process, in the form of ‘giving them permission’, as the author themselves is still seen as ‘appropriate’.

2. High School Curriculums as Barriers

Author 1 expressed they experienced a lack of support for YA Fiction that featured queer protagonists, stating, “if it’s not the librarians, it’s the organisations librarians work for that are very, ‘we don’t want diverse books’” in their approach to managing their materials for young people. This suggests the prejudice goes beyond individuals actions, and is systemic in nature. The author believed Australian high school English syllabi do not support the teaching of literature exploring queer identities and experiences, and referred to the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) English syllabus (formerly known as the Board of Studies, Teaching & Educational Standards (BOSTES)), which highlights different marginalised voices and communities that students must study:

If you look at the New South Wales syllabus, there [are] dot points for every single kind of human experience you have to look at, Indigenous experience, you have to look at migrant experience [...] there’s nothing about diverse sexualities. [It is] completely missing from the entire rubric.

With the governing body for education in NSW neglecting to highlight the value of understanding queer experiences, and failing to provide necessary support that would allow teachers to respectfully and organically facilitate the growth of their students’ empathy for queer individuals, this responsibility falls to individual teachers. Rhodes’ 2009 assessment that “[t]he current absence from the curriculum of any valid information about same-sex attraction in most schools fails all students and staff” (p.45) is as accurate today as it was nearly 10 years ago, because, as Author 1 stated, “[a] largely queer experience written by a queer person will not be [put] on a syllabus.” This has consequences for the author, “because Young Adult [fiction] is so tied to schools, and so tied to syllabuses [sic]”, the author must

choose between writing books that reflect their community, and books with greater probability of providing financial stability necessary to continue their career.

Author 2 stated that “one of the objectives [is that my] publishers try to get [my books] on the curriculum [...] or read in schools”, which has at times led to their work being “toned down a bit” in order to appeal to educators. When writing their novel featuring a queer protagonist, they stated one motivation was “I don’t [want to] see [people I care about] go through this rubbish [where] they’re ostracised”. They sought to create an authentic depiction: writing the novel involved consultation with people who shared the same cultural *and* sexual identity as the protagonist, who also read the novel in its early drafts and provided feedback. This was to capture the nuance of the intersecting identities, because “part of [the author’s] whole process is really ... engaging, [with] the people, that I’m representing.” A sincere and respectful portrayal was paramount to the book’s creation, and realities of the queer characters were likely not “toned down” the way some aspects in the previous novels may have been. However, it is possible this was a contributing factor to the reluctance of educators to incorporate the text into classrooms and libraries: despite the publisher’s efforts to support the book’s use in classrooms through the development of teaching resources, as the author stated they didn’t “know of too many books [like theirs] that have been picked up” by schools. Thus, while Author 2 did not face direct opposition to their book from educators, the lack of engagement with their novel indicates a reluctance to engage with it’s themes.

Discussion

The experience of support from educational institutions ranged from neutral to negative for both participants, and demonstrated significant prejudice in specific schools and libraries. The findings provide three insights on parameters established by educational institutions

(including individual schools and the NESAs themselves) for authors who write fiction that features queer protagonists.

Author 1's public non-heterosexual status foregrounded the non-heterosexual content within their novel, leading to more opposition from librarians and school staff. This practice deprives students from engaging with texts (and authors) who can give an understanding of LGBTQIAP+ identities. For heterosexual students, restricting access to queer fiction reduces exposure to "window" books (Bishop, 1990) that would allow them to "experience[...] some form of marginality and prejudice" (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995, p.35), with which they may better understand their LGBTQIAP+ peers. Similarly, queer teenagers are denied "mirror" books (Bishop, 1990) that would give "an acknowledgment and, hopefully, an affirmation of [their] existence." (Misson, 1995) As Author 2 did not experience this same opposition from librarians and school staff, it is possible that the author's known heterosexuality mitigate the queer protagonist, making the story (and author) "more appropriate" in the eyes of gatekeepers. It is also possible that some contemporary LGBTQIAP+ authors do not publicly identify as queer to retain access to schools. This could explain Pausacker's (2016) observation that few OwnVoices queer YA have been published in recent years, though not the comparative lack of queer YA more broadly.

The limited amount of OwnVoices queer YA fiction being published in Australia (Pausacker, 2016) may also be influenced by publisher awareness that some school and library staff are hesitant to embrace queer YA. This awareness leads to pressure on queer authors of queer YA to self-censor the "authentic gay experience" in their writing. While schools and libraries are not required to support Australian authors, authors are dependent on them to access audiences and promote their books (Zwar, Throsby & Longden, p.4). The importance of a book being capable of "win[ning] any awards" was also mentioned as a contributing factor in relation to schools, suggesting youth literary awards play an important

role in the selection of YA fiction for school libraries and classroom use. This raises questions about the inclusivity of youth literary awards committees in Australia.

These findings of these interviews revealed that the NESA curriculum plays a significant role in the crafting, promotion, and reception of Australian YA Fiction novels, particularly those featuring queer characters. The “dot points” referred to by Author 1 are cross-curriculum outcomes teachers address throughout their instruction of English students from grades Kindergarten to Year 10. The “priorities” are “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures”, “Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia”, and “Sustainability” (NESA, 2017). Acknowledging the intersectionality of some of these categories with queer identities, there is no emphasis on queer identities and experiences, just as Author 1 noted. This observation echoes the way in which “...lip-service is usually paid to “politically correct” attitudes on class, race and gender, [but] it is not nearly as evident when dealing with sexuality...” (Misson, 1995, p.30). In this way, NESA’s requirements possess the same “privilege problem” identified in the Australian publishing industry (Kwaymullina, 2016), wherein NESA’s own “set of structures and attitudes” does not highlight queer voices for particular attention in an educational context. In this instance, the “set of voices” (Kwaymullina, 2016) NESA privileges over queer voices are from the heterosexual demographic.

The schools that invite Author 1 to visit go beyond syllabus requirements to benefit students — and this freedom can allow them to negatively influence the author presentations. Another possibility is that schools might use the absence of queer experiences on the NESA’s outcomes to avoid education. This disadvantages all students, potentially contributing to a more hostile environment for queer teenagers. Heterosexual students are deprived of an opportunity to be educated about queer identities and expand their “ethical understanding”, their “intercultural understanding”, and their “personal and social capability” — what NESA

calls “general capabilities” that “encompass the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours to assist students to live and work successfully in the 21st century” (NESA, 2017). Author 2, whose cultural community is covered under the “cross-curriculum priorities”, did not experience opposition from school staff or librarians to the same extent as Author 1 for their representation of queer characters. This indicates that NESA’s structure can enable inclusivity in classrooms, further supporting the need for queer experiences to be highlighted in the same way.

Conclusion

Based on the relevant data in this study about the experience of promoting of queer YA fiction, many contemporary Australian schools still express prejudice against queer fiction by restricting access to the books and authors who publicly identify as queer. In order to improve this, it is vital that school and library staff actively source and promote queer YA Fiction, make it freely available to students, integrate it into classrooms using teaching resources developed by publishers, and invite authors of queer YA Fiction to speak to students without restricting their speech. However, this only addresses barriers at an individual level.

The research shows that authors of queer YA Fiction are disadvantaged by their exclusion from the NESA “cross-curriculum priorities.” This can force creators to choose between their livelihood and their art, and negatively impact Australia’s arts industry by enabling prejudice against these authors. It is therefore necessary that NESA revise the cross-curriculum priorities to include learning about queer experiences, and no longer enable systemic discrimination. This would also allow students a richer, more holistic learning experience, and alleviate strain on hard-working teachers currently undertaking this extra labour alone. Where Australian authors of queer fiction encounter gatekeeping upheld by individuals and institutions with influential positions in libraries and schools, young queer readers will have limited chances to see their identity validated in the fiction they read, and

heterosexual readers will have fewer opportunities to gain insight into lives different from their own, particularly if they lack visible queer friends and role models.

Australian authors of queer youth fiction continue to tell stories reflecting and validating the experiences of queer Australian teenagers and “contributing to the richness and well-being of a diverse society” (Misson, 1995, p.29). If educators, librarians, and publishing industry professionals work to challenge barriers and gatekeepers, Australian young people will have greater access to narratives that include queer identities in all their colours.

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