
Current research shows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) teenagers are being physically and mentally harassed at an extremely high rate. School libraries are in a position to support LGBTQ teens by collecting and promoting LGBTQ themed literature and resources. This study investigates the availability of positive, appropriate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) themed internet resources from behind the filtering systems at high schools in North Carolina. The results were mixed; some schools blocked none of the websites included in the study, while others blocked as many as fifteen.

Headings:

LGBT library materials

LGBT internet resources

Internet filtering software

High school libraries
LESLIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUESTIONING (LGBTQ) WEB RESOURCES: ARE POSITIVE, APPROPRIATE WEBSITES AVAILABLE BEHIND SCHOOL SYSTEM’S FILTERS?

by
Laina M. Stapleton

A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

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Approved by

______________________________
Sandra Hughes-Hassell
**Introduction**

It is no longer a question that schools offer internet access to students. In fact, schools have embraced the internet as an educational tool, using email to communicate with parents and students more frequently, allowing electronic submission of student work, providing opportunities for students to collaborate with other students across the world, using web-based learning tools, and bringing students’ learning into the digital, 21st century. Students use free media to create book trailers to entice other students to read their favorite works. They conduct research on South Africa and have the ability to actually speak to students their own age in South Africa. They communicate with experts on numerous topics using Twitter and other social media. They are able to create communities that support their own learning, and they work within the safety net of the educational environment to expand their knowledge and come to an understanding of their own identity as a person.

It is that process, coming to know one’s true self or understanding what it is to be one’s self, which is the main task of adolescence. Navigating through adolescence successfully can be a difficult, confusing, and lonely experience for teenagers. They must contend with the dichotomy of feeling as grown up as possible but still living within the reality of parental and educational expectations. The formation of one’s own identity requires a relatively safe, supportive environment
in which to work (Hughes-Hassell and Hinckley 2001). While those safe spaces exist for most students, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth often have a much more difficult time finding ways and spaces to learn more about themselves, speak freely about their feelings, and work with positive role models. LGBTQ youth are often part of a silent group, who are reluctant to ask for information, which makes them easy to ignore (Rauch 2010). Librarians and other educators may simply say that students have not asked for LGBTQ resources, so that need does not exist within their school. However, it is estimated that five to six percent of teens identify as LGBTQ, and 80 percent of teens know someone who identifies as LGBTQ (Rauch 2010). This is a large group with very distinctive needs but rather limited resources with which to act upon those needs (Schrader 2009). “Without addressing the needs of LGBT[Q] students, educators are not addressing the needs of all students. Educators must include LGBT[Q] students in their conversations” (Dewitt 2012, 32).

Beyond simply including LGBTQ teens in conversations, educators must create safe spaces for those students to form their identity. There is often a distinct lack of both physical and mental safe spaces for marginalized LGBTQ students at schools. Even students who may not publicly identify as LGBTQ can be traumatized at school. According to the 2011 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 84.9 percent of students heard “gay” used in a negative way at school and 91.4 percent reported that they felt distressed because of it. Additionally, students reported hearing other homophobic words like “dyke” or “faggot,” negative remarks about gender expression, and a shocking 56.9 percent of students reported hearing similar remarks from teachers or other school staff. Furthermore, 55.2
percent of LGBTQ students surveyed reported that they experienced electronic
harassment in the past year (Kosciw et al 2012). Physically, bathrooms, locker rooms,
and other areas with no teacher supervision can create a hazard, as can any exclusionary
policies for clubs or athletics. School libraries that do not include LGBTQ-themed
literature in their collections, and a curriculum void of literature that includes LGBTQ
themes can add to the feelings of marginalization many LBGTQ youth feel at school
(Vaccaro and Kennedy 2012).

The same 2011 National School Climate Survey found that 81.9 percent of
students were verbally harassed in the past year because of their gender orientation, 38.3
percent were physically harassed, and 18.3 percent were physically assaulted (punched,
kicked, injured with a weapon). To exacerbate the concerns for their personal safety,
students do not believe that schools will help them. A majority of them (60.4 percent)
said that they did not report incidents of harassment or assault to the school staff, most
often out of the belief that no action would be taken, probably because 36.7 percent of
students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response (Kosciw
et al 2012).

Concerns for safety are not the only effects of homophobia and anti-gay bullying;
some studies show a correlation between the levels of harassment students experience
and their attendance and performance at school. The 2011 National School Climate
Survey reported on other issues that arose for LGBTQ teens. 31.8 percent of students said
they had missed an entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or
uncomfortable, while 29.8 percent said they had skipped a class. Students experiencing
higher levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation were three times more
likely to miss than those who experienced lower levels (Kosciw et al 2012). A Massachusetts study asked a similar question of both LGBTQ and heterosexual teens and found that 13.9 percent of LGBTQ teens had skipped school due to feeling unsafe while only 3.4 percent of others had (Massachusetts Dept. of Ed. 2009). More frequently harassed students had lower overall GPAs than students harassed less frequently and were more than twice as likely to say they were not planning on getting a post-secondary education (Kosciw et al 2012).

Additionally, students who experience harassment have poorer psychological well-being overall. One study focusing on LGBTQ male teens found that 95 percent of those surveyed experienced feelings of separation and isolation from peers because of feeling different (Savin-Williams 1994). Students also reported higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem (Kosciw et al 2012). Another study found that 24.7 percent of LGBTQ teens surveyed had attempted suicide in the last year versus 5.6 percent of non-LGBTQ teens (Massachusetts Dept. of Ed. 2009). LGBTQ students who are struggling with their identity are also more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol (Sears 1991). These teens are also at a high-risk for other problems such as violence, verbal abuse, and homelessness (Ryan and Futterman 1998). There is also a greater risk for teens of color who identify as LGBTQ. Those students experience harassment on multiple levels (85 percent hear LGBTQ related negative insults; 47 percent also hear racist remarks), often attend schools in communities that lack Gay Straight Alliances, and are surrounded by a society that considers LGBTQ issues a predominantly “white issue” (Moodie-Mills 2011). Continued bullying and harassment will only add to the already existing achievement gap for African American and Latino youth (Moodie-Mills 2011).
Clearly, LGBTQ teenagers need a place they can turn to for support, information, and resources. Research shows that libraries are “the most important information source” for LGBTQ people (Alexander and Miselis 2007, 45). Rauch (2010) tells us that library resources can provide self-affirmation, offer characters and experiences with which to identify, and decrease the feelings of isolation. Other studies show that “when a young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) teen knows there is an affirming teacher, school nurse, clergy member, or parent they can trust, they are much more likely to turn to them for help when they are bullied or depressed” (GLSEN 2010).

One of the easiest ways for schools to create a safe space, with the information, support, and resources LGBTQ teens need, is to provide student access to appropriate, reliable, and positive LGBTQ-themed web resources via school computers. While many local, state, and national organizations provide programs for LGBTQ youths, locating these programs may prove difficult for many teens (Hughes-Hassell and Hinckley 2001). Technology helps bridge the gaps. Maintaining a LGBTQ inclusive print collection is important in a school library, but LGBTQ-themed web resources have a number of advantages over print resources including: a greater level of anonymity (students do not have to ask anyone to use the internet); more current and up-to-date information (there are a number of LGBTQ-themed news websites); the ability to connect with a larger number and greater variety of people (websites can provide access to people outside of known and familiar communities); and, depending on the website, the ability to interact with those people (many websites include online discussion forums, for example).

The school librarian must consider how the library webpage can best meet the needs of students as well as meet standards for 21st century learners. The mission of the
school library is “to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information” (AASL 2009, 8). The American Association of School Libraries (AASL) adds guidelines for how school libraries should go about meeting this mission, specifically stating “the school library program includes a well-developed collection of books, periodicals, and non-print material in a variety of formats that support curricular topics and are suited to inquiry learning and users’ needs and interests” (2009, 41). Allowing access to LGBTQ-themed web resources can help schools and school libraries create an environment in which students will be most successful. The guidelines list advocating for and protecting “intellectual access to information and ideas” as an action point for librarians (AASL 2009, 41). The AASL also publishes its Standards for the 21st Century Learner. Standard Four reads pursue personal and aesthetic growth and includes the following skills, dispositions in action, and responsibilities: seek information for personal learning; connect ideas to own interests; use social networks to gather and share information; display curiosity by pursuing interests; seek information to personal questions and interests; maintain openness to new ideas; and participate in the social exchange of ideas. The American Library Associate (ALA) goes beyond the mention of personal interests and specifically addresses sexual and gender issues. Section 53.1.15 of the ALA policy manual states that the ALA “stringently and unequivocally maintains that libraries and librarians have an obligation to resist efforts that systematically exclude materials dealing with any subject matter, including sex, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation” (ALA 2008b).

These guidelines suggest that libraries need to build collections that include not only materials that support the classroom curriculum, but also resources that address
teens’ social, emotional, physical, and sexual needs (Agosto and Hughes-Hassell 2006). The education of a teen does not stop with the formulas they learn in algebra, their ability to conjugate a verb in Spanish, or the thoroughness with which they conduct a scientific experiment. Schools must have a sense of responsibility for teaching young people the skills necessary to become a successful adult. In a 2011 report, the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention urges educators to help teens “recognize and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish positive goals, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively” (¶ 5). With this kind of support from experts and governing organizations alike, school “librarians can provide materials and even programming with the knowledge that they are doing so out of professional responsibility” (Rauch 2010, 217)

Most school systems employ a filtering or blocking system to make sure that students do not have unrestricted access to the internet. Filters were used by 87% of schools in the U.S. in 2001, and we can assume that use has increased because of the requirements of the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) (Myrick 2003). Internet filters give users the ability to prevent children from accessing inappropriate resources, but they can also incorrectly block legitimate material that is being accessed by both teachers and students” (Myrick 2003, 1).

Legally, teenagers are protected by the First Amendment rights to free speech and do not give up that right simply by being at school, as ruled by the U.S. Supreme Court in Tinker v. Des Moines (ACLU 2007). Furthermore, teenagers have a “right to receive information and ideas” as set forth by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the 1982 case of Board of Education v. Pico, which addressed the removal of certain books from school
libraries (Dewitt 2012, 81). The Supreme Court found the removal of certain books unconstitutional under the First Amendment, stating that “inherent to the right to speak was a right to receive information and ideas” (Dewitt 2012, 81). Decisions like that made in *Reno v. ACLU* in 1997 have further strengthened the right to receive information and ideas. In the case of *Reno*, which opposed the Communications Decency Act, the Supreme Court called the online environment a “dramatic and unique…marketplace of ideas,” referencing *Pico* and indicating the constitutional right to receive information and ideas via the internet, a relatively new technology at the time (Dewitt 2012, 81).

Currently, CIPA requires that any school or library that receives discounts through the E-rate program must have an “internet safety policy that includes technological protection measures” that must block materials that are deemed to be obscene, child pornography, or harmful to minors (FCC). In the case of *Franks v. Metropolitan Board of Public Education*, a U.S. District court case from 2009, the ACLU fought and won the right for students to have access to positive LGBTQ web resources. Previously, only negative websites had been accessible in schools (Storts-Brinks 2010).

Unfortunately, little to no research about what websites, if any, are actually available to students in schools exists and less than half (44.1 percent) of students surveyed in the 2011 National School Climate Survey reported that they could find information about LGBTQ-related issues in their school library (Kosciw et al. 2011). How much access to appropriate, reliable, and positive LGBTQ-themed websites do high school students actually have at school? To address this gap in research, this study looked at the accessibility of sixteen websites from behind school district’s filtering or blocking systems.
Literature Review

Filtering Software

Internet filters are a form of “computer software that is installed on a computer or a network of computers that filters out certain information that would otherwise be available” (Myrick 2003, 1). There are numerous filter programs, each with their own unique configuration abilities, blocking mechanisms, and reporting tools (Myrick 2003). In her 2000 article, “Use of Internet Filters in Public Schools: Double Click the Constitution,” Whitney Kaiser discusses how filters work before analyzing the constitutionality of their use in schools. Filters usually work in a one of two ways, either by employing a list of websites that are blocked for any number of reasons and allowing access to all others or by blocking based on the use of key language, where the appearance of a word on a website would result in its blockage. She says the use of filters allows parents and school boards to prevent children from accessing unsuitable material but that “filters sometimes block valuable information because of imperfections in the technology” (50). James Myrick agrees. In his dissertation for the University of Alabama in 2003, “A Study of Internet filters in Alabama public school systems,” Myrick’s analysis of a number of different filtering products, found “that nearly every filtering product suffered from extensive over-blocking” (43).
There has been only one major study of the availability of LGBTQ-themed web resources from behind a filter system. This study, conducted in 2002 by the Kaiser Family Foundation through a partnership with Dr. Paul Resnick, of the School of Information at the University of Michigan and Dr. Caroline Richardson, of the University of Michigan Medical School, focused on student access to non-pornographic health information and measured the impact of seven different filtering products on those searches, looking at both the effectiveness of the filters at blocking inappropriate or pornographic materials as well as the rate at which they also blocked the non-pornographic health information. This study did not single out LGBTQ resources but does mention them in the findings. Six of the filtering products were ones commonly used by school systems at the time, while the seventh was a generic setting on AOL’s Parental Controls. The study considered the different “blocking configurations,” which are essentially levels of protectiveness that schools can choose between, from least to most restrictive, and compare each level within each filter system. A total of 3,053 health web sites and 516 pornography sites were tested.

The study showed that at the most restrictive levels for the filters, 24 percent of all non-pornographic health sites were blocked. At the least restrictive setting, only 1.4 percent of those websites were blocked. Certain topics, such as “condoms” and “safe sex” were more likely to be blocked, even at the least restrictive level. Most importantly for the current study on LGBTQ-themed resources, the Kaiser Family Foundation study found that at even the intermediate level of blocking, 24 percent of the health websites that contained the word “gay” were blocked. Health websites that contained information
on sexual health were much more likely to be blocked; 33 percent were blocked by at least one filtering product at the least restrictive level, 49 percent were blocked at the intermediate level, and 91 percent were blocked at the most restrictive level. The researchers concluded that incidental exposure to pornography during health information searches did not appear to be a substantial problem. The study concluded by stating that all decisions “should be made with an awareness of the impact on young people’s access to health information” (13).

In her 2010 article “Censorship Online: One School Librarian’s Journey to Provide Access to LGBT Resources”, Karyn Storts-Brinks recounts how she discovered that her students were unable to access the websites for the Human Rights Campaign (http://www.hrc.org) or the Gay Lesbian Straight Educator’s Network (GLSEN) (http://www.glsen.org), the latter of which is an organization that is fully endorsed by the National Education Association (NEA). Storts-Brinks started her push to get these websites out from behind the blocking system by working within her own school system but was unable to accomplish her goals. Eventually, she took her case to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and it became Franks v. Metropolitan Board of Public Education in 2009. In her experience, all of the websites that addressed LGBTQ issues in a positive way were blocked, while almost none of the “con” sites were. The article provides good insights into working with the ACLU, as well as some revelations about how the filters were used by the school system that may not have been common knowledge, such as who actually decided what was blocked. The filter product company denied that it was their decision and directed her back to her school system. Her school system’s responses to her questions tended to deflect or tell her that websites could be
unblocked for a certain amount of time by request and that had proved sufficient for teachers’ needs in the past.

Storts-Brinks’s concerns were not about teacher access, however; she was both the school librarian and the faculty sponsor of the school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) and was concerned about students’ general accessibility outside of the curriculum requirements of classes. In the end, the lawsuit was successful and the LGBTQ category of websites was unblocked before the start of the 2009 school year.

An equally few number of studies about LGBTQ-themed print resources available to students in school library collections exist. Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Elizabeth Overberg, and Shannon Harris recently conducted a study of LGBTQ-themed print literature available for teens in school libraries (2013). The study found that school libraries were under-collecting in the area of LGBTQ literature, and that “the number of LGBTQ-themed fiction, nonfiction, and biographies held by these school libraries was minimal.” LGBTQ-themed literature made up an average of 0.4% of each library’s total collection. On average, schools held 20.8 LGBTQ-themed fiction titles in their collections. This study concluded that while “school librarians are in a position to support LGBTQ teens by collecting and promoting young adult literature that portrays positive, realistic images of the LGBTQ,” the majority of school libraries are failing to do so (20).
Methodology

Sample

The recruitment process for inclusion in this study was completed using the North Carolina School Library Media Association’s (NCSLMA) community blog and listserv. There is no contact list for every school librarian or technology coordinator in the state or any required listserv for those educators, so NCSLMA was the easiest, most accessible way to reach a large number of school personnel with one message. Because of this method, inclusion in the study was completely voluntary. I also reached out to personal contacts I have in several school systems in North Carolina to ask for their help specifically. They received the same cover message and survey that went out on the NCSLMA blog and listserv. To gather the results, I created an online survey that included the websites and asked participants simply if they could or could not access each one. Responses were returned automatically to me.

The message included an explanation of my study and a link to the survey. The cover message can be seen in Appendix A, while the text of the survey used to gather results can be seen in Appendix B.

The final sample included 27 schools in North Carolina. Twenty-two of the high schools are public high schools; three are independent schools; and two are charter schools. The schools are located in 20 of the state’s 101 school districts.
For the purposes of this study, I make the assumption that each public school system selects a system-wide filtering program that is employed in each school in the system. In this manner, I am able to talk about school systems and districts as a whole rather than as individual schools.

**Websites Searched**

A 2001 article by Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Alissa Hinckley offered a list of appropriate LGBTQ-themed websites for adolescents. Because of the time sensitive nature of the internet, some of the websites are no longer in existence and others have not been updated in a number of years. However, the article provided a good starting place for creating the list of websites for this study. After considering each of the websites from that list, I also consulted other websites included in a few of the other resources I consulted. I also consulted the LGBT Center of Raleigh to see if they had a list of resources for teenagers. I narrowed my list by visiting each website to determine what they offered for users.

Web resources included in this study were given careful consideration based on research from experts, as well as exploring each website individually. Websites that were included in the study meet all or most of the following requirements:

- They were either developed for an adolescent audience and/or are appropriate for an adolescent audience.
- They are sponsored by and/or recommended by a credible source.
- They contain accurate and reliable information.
• They include links to other resources and/or house resources for adolescents within their website.
• They provide opportunities to interact with other youth and adults in a safe, nonjudgmental environment.
• If the above is true, they also protect the anonymity of the user.
• They are currently active or updated regularly.
• The websites are well designed and relatively easy to navigate.

Sixteen web resources were selected for inclusion in the study; three of those sixteen are pages within the websites of larger organizations (Table 1). These embedded pages were included because a filter may block only some of the pages on a larger website; a distinction needed to be made, at least in those cases, between the parent website and the specific page within the website to see if both were accessible. Eleven of the websites are national organizations. The other six websites are localized in that they are meant for an audience within North Carolina, though several of them are local arms of national organizations.

Table 1: Websites included in the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>About</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gay, Lesbian &amp; Straight Education Network (GLSEN)</td>
<td>A leading national organization focused on making schools safe for every student through respect and acceptance, sponsors Day of Silence, and works with GSAs across the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.glsen.org">http://www.glsen.org</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLSEN Sports Project – <a href="http://sports.glsen.org">http://sports.glsen.org</a></td>
<td>A division of GLSEN that focuses on LGBT issues in K-12 school-based athletic and PE programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Campaign (HRC) – <a href="http://www.hrc.org">http://www.hrc.org</a></td>
<td>A large national civil rights organization working to achieve equality for LGBTQ Americans that boasts 1.5 million members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope For Teens – <a href="http://www.hopeforteens.info">http://www.hopeforteens.info</a></td>
<td>A support system for teens that feel bullied, cyber-bullied, or outcast that provides a non-judgmental atmosphere for students to speak honestly and openly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>About</td>
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<td>---------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trevor Project <a href="http://www.thetrevorproject.org">http://www.thetrevorproject.org</a></td>
<td>A national organization that provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services and resources to LGBTQ youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocates for Youth <a href="http://www.advocatesforyouth.org">http://www.advocatesforyouth.org</a></td>
<td>A national organization with the sole focus of helping young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Resource <a href="http://www.youthresource.org">http://www.youthresource.org</a></td>
<td>A website hosted by Advocates for Youth created specifically by and for LGBTQ youth that provides information and offers support through online interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It Gets Better Project <a href="http://www.itgetsbetter.org">http://www.itgetsbetter.org</a></td>
<td>A project whose mission is to communicate support to LGBTQ youth around the world and work toward changes to make things better for those youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Straight Alliance Network <a href="http://www.gsanetwork.org">http://www.gsanetwork.org</a></td>
<td>The national version of school-based GSAs that works to connect SGAs to each other, to provide resources through peer support, leadership development, and training, and help students to start, strengthen, and sustain GSAs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIERCE <a href="http://www.fiercenyc.org">http://www.fiercenyc.org</a></td>
<td>An organization for LGBTQ youth of color in New York City working to create that next generation of leaders dedicating to fighting oppression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLAGE <a href="http://www.colage.org">http://www.colage.org</a></td>
<td>A national organization that unites people with LGBTQ parents and provides a network of support to build empowerment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) <a href="http://www.pflagtriangle.org">http://www.pflagtriangle.org</a></td>
<td>The Raleigh area branch of an ally organization with divisions around the country aimed at unifying people and allies and advancing equality through support, education, and advocacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Center of Raleigh <a href="http://www.lgbtcenterofraleigh.com">http://www.lgbtcenterofraleigh.com</a></td>
<td>A non-profit corporation aimed with a number of missions, including strengthening individual and community development through social and educational activities and identify needs and advocate for resources for LGBTQ people and their allies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Center of Raleigh’s Youth Programs <a href="http://www.lgbtcenterofraleigh.com/programs/youth-programs.html">http://www.lgbtcenterofraleigh.com/programs/youth-programs.html</a></td>
<td>The specific site for the LGBT Center of Raleigh’s youth programs, such as ASPYRE Youth Leadership Camp and the Youth Coffee House.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Out <a href="http://www.insideout180.org">http://www.insideout180.org</a></td>
<td>A youth-founded, youth-led organization that provides leadership opportunities and safe spaces for NC’s LGBTQ youth, both in and out of schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Schools NC <a href="http://www.safeschoolsnc.com">http://www.safeschoolsnc.com</a></td>
<td>A non-profit dedicating to creating a safe and positive learning environment for students and educators in NC with an emphasis on sexual orientation or gender identity.</td>
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</table>
Limitations and Weaknesses

A number of limitations exist within this study. The essence of most of these weaknesses comes from the fact that I could not drive to each school system to gain access to computers behind each school system’s firewall and protections, and there is no way to access that information virtually like there could be with an online catalog. Therefore, I had to rely on asking people working within the education systems themselves to access the websites for me and tell me that they either could or could not access each specific site. I am unable to verify the validity of the responses received in this manner.

Furthermore, a weakness exists in that I was forced to ask educators, rather than students, to attempt access to these websites. In many cases, students, teachers, and anyone using a school computer must log in before gaining access to any programs on the computer. In some but not all of those cases, teachers, librarians, and other faculty have different accessibility, like administrative rights, under their login information than do students. It is possible for any number of the responses to my survey to have come from an administrative login key, and that the web resources were available behind that login but would not be available under a student login key. I have no way of determining which responses those might be, so I assume that these results will apply for student access. Moreover, while many school systems apply the same filters to student logins district wide, I cannot verify whether a specific district does that or not. The few responses I received from middle and elementary schools may or may not be valid for the high schools in the same district, though I make the assumption that they are.
I also have no way of completely covering each school system in the state through this style of researching. I am subject to the limitations of the listserv I used to send out my survey, which is not a mandatory listserv for school librarians, the reliability of the colleagues whom I reached out to for help, and word of mouth. Similarly, I cannot extend the results of this study to other school systems because it is not known whether or not each uses the same company for filtering, or whether that company extends any changes in blocking policy to other schools it also filters internet access for. My assumption, based on my experience and research, that each school system uses the same filter, rather than each individual school picking its own filter, could also be false, causing misleading in my choice. It is possible that not all school districts apply the same filters to each high school.

There is also a minor possibility that the data from my survey was skewed because the survey takers could simply click on the link to the websites in the survey, rather than having to type in the URL or searching for it. This is highly unlikely, as filters are sophisticated enough to block such an easy work-around, but is possible that an old filter that hasn’t quite caught up to the relatively new capabilities of the internet is still in use in one or more of these school systems. Finally, there is such a thing as a “smart” filter which adapts as the internet is used. A website that is available on one day may not be available the next day, after the first hit on the website has triggered the smart filter to scan the website and choose to restrict access or not. There is at least one school system in this state employing the use of a smart filter, according to the survey respondent from that district. An ever-changing and adapting blocking system makes it difficult to gauge what websites might remain accessible and what will not.
Results

Table 2 shows the overall accessibility results for each individual website. Fifteen of the schools or school systems did not block any of the websites. Of those fifteen, twelve were public schools, two were independent schools, and one was a charter school. The Trevor Project was the least blocked website as it was blocked by none of the school systems; Advocates for Youth was blocked the most, by seven schools. One of the independent schools had access to only one of the websites, the Trevor Project, and blocked the other fifteen.

Table 2: Number of Blocks by Website – All Schools and School Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Number of Schools/Systems Blocked</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GLSEN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLSEN Sports Project</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Campaign</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope For Teens</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trevor Project</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocates for Youth</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Resource</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It Gets Better Project</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Straight Alliance Network</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIERCE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLAGE</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Center of Raleigh</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Center of Raleigh’s Youth Programs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Out</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Schools NC</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows the same information as Table 2 with each of the charter and independent schools removed from the results, thus providing a clearer picture of accessibility in the public schools. Advocates for Youth remained the most blocked resource. Twelve of the public school systems allowed access to all of the websites.

Table 3: Number of Blocks by Website – Public School Systems Only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Number of Schools/Systems Blocked n=22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GLSEN</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLSEN Sports Project</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Campaign</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope For Teens</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trevor Project</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocates for Youth</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Resource</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It Gets Better Project</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Straight Alliance Network</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIERCE</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLAGE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Center of Raleigh</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Center of Raleigh’s Youth Programs</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Out</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Schools NC</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The results of this study suggest that great strides have been made in allowing high school students to access LGBTQ-themed web resources through school computers. While there is little prior research on how much blocking should have been expected, based on the results of the 2002 Kaiser Family Foundation study and Karyn Storts-Brinks’ experience, I expected the schools to block access to the majority, if not all, of the websites.

There are a number of possibilities to explain the accessibility noted in this study. While I hope that the change has occurred due to schools’ recognition of LGBTQ student needs, it is also possible the websites included in this study were accessible because adults are unaware of their existence and have not included them in the list of blocked websites.

It is also important to note that while the websites could be accessed, this does not mean they would be found by teens. This study asked participants to enter an exact URL to access a website. In order for students to do this same thing, they would have to know the websites exist, and know the URL addresses. It is much more likely that student looking for information would conduct a search rather than already knowing exactly where to go for that information. Using key words and language such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual” to search for a useful web resource
could cause a filter to automatically block the whole search, thereby blocking websites that may be accessible when you input the URL rather than search.

While it appears that many LGBTQ-themed websites are available on school computers, there is room for improvement. First, there is no reason for the web resources included in this study to be blocked in any high school. The assumption can be made that the websites that were blocked were done so solely on the basis of their content and focus and the desire to block the positive information and activism they provide for LGBTQ students. Some reasons for blocking these websites may include fear of or actual backlash from the school and/or community and individual educators’ personal feelings toward LGBTQ issues. This is unacceptable. Rauch states, “even if you or others in your community do not agree with a particular lifestyle, the materials about that lifestyle cannot be excluded from the library’s collection” (2010, 217). Rauch was speaking of the book collection at the time, but the sentiment can be broadly applied to web resources as a part of the library’s collection. Second, the general availability of these resources is not enough; students need to be made aware that these web resources exist. School librarians should be proactive about meeting the developmental needs of all teenagers, including LGBTQ teens, by including links to websites such as these on their library website in much the same way the public library websites do.

No major trends could be identified in these results. Of the eight school systems that blocked any of the sixteen websites, three are considered rural districts. All of the others surround major metropolitan areas with parts of the counties considered urban and other parts rural, and several are home to major universities. One system blocked seven of the websites; this school system is located in a mixed rural and metropolitan county
that borders the largest city in the state. Generally, if a website was blocked in one school system, it was likely to be blocked in others as well. The websites that were blocked by more than one school system shared no immediately discernible attributes or qualities to link them aside from their general focus on LGBTQ issues. The outlier that was identified was an independent school, subject to its own rules and possible religious affiliations, so while that information was interesting to note, it had no effect on the results for the public school systems.

**Further Research**

Further research is needed to fully understand the scope of blocking LGBTQ-themed web resources in high schools. Aspects such as what filtering systems or products are used in these schools, the specific reasons given for blocking those websites, and the role librarian should and do play in the inclusion of these websites were not included in this study but would help to build a more extensive picture of the state of LGBTQ-themed web resources in public high schools. Given more time and resources, I would conduct this study by contacting school personnel, like librarians, personally to ask for their participation anonymously. Relying on library staff to volunteer information did not provide a complete picture of the accessibility of LGBTQ web resources for students in the state as a whole. A repeat of this study should also look at the filter’s reactions to search terms and searches in general to account for one of the different ways that students may try to find and access a website.
Conclusions

While it seems that vast improvements have been made to the availability of LGBTQ-themed web resources behind blocking systems in public schools, there is still much room for growth in this area as many of the positive, appropriate, and reliable web resources included in this study are blocked by more than one school system in this state, thereby removing access to resources for a group of students who are consistently discriminated against, marginalized, and bullied. Providing positive resources does not affect just LGBTQ teens, however. Finding a lens through which students can see other people who are “…like his/her classmates or friends can help a teen reader be more empathetic and understanding…” (Rauch 2010, 217). Creating an environment of understanding and empathy among all students can lead to increased sensitivity and decrease the amount of bullying and harassment.

The school librarian must consider the web resources available to his/her students as a part of the library’s collection and fight for their availability behind the school’s blocking systems. The American Library Association interprets the Library Bill of Rights for media programs to mean that “school library media specialists assume a leadership role in promoting the principles of intellectual freedom within the school by providing resources and services that sustain an atmosphere of free inquiry” (ALA 2008a, p#). A 1991 article blamed a “conspiracy of silence” for hiding
or censoring certain materials from students, stating “...too many educators are partners in a conspiracy of silence in which sexual knowledge is what is salvaged after the scissors-and-paste philosophy of religious ... or anti-homosexual activists are applied” (Sears, 55). These philosophies do not have a place in our schools, and the research proves that forcing LGBTQ students to exist behind a wall of silence is harmful to their psychological and physical wellbeing.

Immeasurable obstacles to providing LGBTQ-themed resources to teenage students exist, but librarians have to act in defense of those and all students. Schrader puts it best:

Librarians have the power to act as catalysts for social change. They have the potential to build inclusive library policies, collections, and services within a framework of human rights and social justice, reflecting core values of access and intellectual freedom, inclusivity, diversity and equality, and, particularly in the school library context, duty of care and safety. Ultimately, librarians have the power to enhance the social climate and everyday life experiences of sexual minority young people so they become more resilient and thereby lead more meaningful lives as members of communities and citizens. (2009, 107)

It is time for school librarians to be an ally to LGBTQ students, willing to fight for the inclusion of all positive, appropriate, and reliable LGBTQ-themed web resources in the school library’s collection, not just some of those websites, or enough of those websites. One blocked website could mean the difference between a good day and a bad day for an LGBTQ teenager.
Works Cited


Appendix A - Cover letter to explain the topic to participants

My name is Laina Stapleton, and I am a second-year Masters student at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. As part of my degree requirements, I am conducting a research study on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) themed web resources for students and their availability to high school students behind school system’s filters. This subject hits close to home for me, after teaching in a high school in North Carolina for six years. This study will be paired with another recently completed study by my advisor of LGBTQ-themed print resources available in high school libraries to convey a comprehensive view of LGBTQ resources in high schools.

Please note: this study is 100% anonymous; schools, schools systems, districts, etc. will not be named in the study.

After consulting other studies, professional journals, and educational resources, I have compiled a list of a variety of positive, appropriate, and vetted LGBTQ-themed web resources for high school aged students. I would like to find out simply if those websites are accessible on school computers or if they are blocked by the school system’s filtering system.

To accomplish this, I need the help of high school librarians and teachers around the state. All you have to do is respond to the survey you can find here. I understand this is a highly controversial subject, and your willingness to help is completely optional. But please consider the needs of the many diverse students in your high school. For more information about LGBTQ-themed resources and why high school libraries can and should be collecting in that area, please read the introduction of the study I linked in the first paragraph.

The survey lists the web resources I’ve decided to include based on my research, asks you to try to access them, and then just click “Yes, I could access this website” or “No, I could not access this website.” Because I am studying the accessibility of these websites from behind the school’s filter system, you will need to access the websites from a computer at your high school. The survey is designed to take no more than 10-12 minutes. Your response will be returned to me completely anonymously.

Here is the link to the survey again: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1AJ11GwS35COUorTXeTsjJzz3esFYpYjEPt01gkA/viewform

Thank you so much in advance for your time and participation! Please feel free to email me at lstaple [at] live [dot] unc [dot] edu if you have any questions or comments.
Appendix B - Survey used for gathering results – Online version can be seen at
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1A-1NJH1GwS3COUorTXeTsJzz3esFYpYjEPft01gkA/viewform>

LGBTQ Web Resources Survey

My name is Laina Stapleton, and I am a second-year Masters student at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. As part of my degree requirements, I am conducting a research study on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) themed web resources for students and their availability behind school system’s filters in high schools. This subject hits close to home for me, after teaching in a high school in North Carolina for six years. This study will be paired with another recently completed study of LGBTQ-themed print resources available in high school libraries to convey a comprehensive view of LGBTQ resources in high schools.

After consulting other studies, professional journals, and educational resources, I have compiled a list of a variety of positive, appropriate, and vetted LGBTQ-themed web resources. I would like to find out simply if those websites are accessible on school computers or if they are blocked by the school system’s filtering system.

To accomplish this, I need the help of librarians and teachers around the state. All you have to do is respond to the survey you can find here. I understand this is a highly controversial subject, and your willingness to help is completely optional. But please consider the needs of the many diverse students in your school. For more information about LGBTQ-themed resources and why high school libraries can and should be collecting in that area, please read the introduction of the study I linked in the first paragraph.

Please note: this study is 100% anonymous; schools, schools systems, districts, etc. will not be named in the study. Not even the state we are in will be identified.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at lstaple [at] live [dot] unc [dot] edu.

Please tell me the school you work in.

This information will not be shared during this research. It will simply be used for my own purposes of keeping track of which schools, school system, and regions I have information from as I try to cover the whole state.

Web Resources Section
For each "question" in this section, you will try to access each of the positive LGBTQ web resources listed while behind your school's filter system. This survey will need to be completed FROM A COMPUTER AT YOUR SCHOOL. If you are able to access the website, please check "yes" as your answer. If you are unable to access the website, please check "no."

http://www.glSEN.org

Are you able to access this website?

- Yes
- No

http://sports.glSEN.org/

Are you able to access this website?

- Yes
- No

http://www.hrc.org

Are you able to access this website?

- Yes
- No

http://www.hopeforteens.info

Are you able to access this website?

- Yes
- No

http://www.thetrevorproject.org

Are you able to access this website?

- Yes
- No

http://www.advocatesforyouth.org

Are you able to access this website?

- Yes
- No

http://www.youthresource.org

Are you able to access this website?
http://www.itgetsbetter.org
Are you able to access this website?
  - Yes
  - No

http://gsanetwork.org/
Are you able to access this website?
  - Yes
  - No

http://www.fiercenyc.org
Are you able to access this website?
  - Yes
  - No

http://www.colage.org/
Are you able to access this website?
  - Yes
  - No

http://www.pflagtriangle.org
Are you able to access this website?
  - Yes
  - No

http://www.lgbtcenterofraleigh.com
Are you able to access this website?
  - Yes
  - No

http://www.lgbtcenterofraleigh.com/programs/youth-programs.html
Are you able to access this website?
  - Yes
  - No

http://www.insideout180.org
Are you able to access this website?

  o  Yes
  o  No

http://www.safeschoolsnc.com

Are you able to access this website?

  o  Yes
  o  No

Thank you so much for your anonymous participation in this study! Your response has been recorded. Please help this study be as fully researched as possible by forwarding the link to the survey or the original message with the link as you see fit. Again, thank you so much!