



# It's O.K. to Have This Book in Your Public School Library!

**Kim Tadei**

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In synthesizing the McDowell research presented at the 2000 Learning from Practice conference, Angela Ward noted that gay and lesbian concerns are not yet on our research agenda and they should be. This remark struck a chord in Prince Albert teacher-librarian, Kim Tadei, who began to think about the absence of materials related to sexual orientation in school libraries.

*I realized that, as a teacher-librarian for the past fourteen years, I had never put a book in my school libraries dealing with gay/lesbian topics!*

*On the drive home, I reflected on my practices – Why would I not put a book in our school libraries? I was scared! I was scared to face those parents who would demand the removal of the books. I believed that many teachers are afraid to confront these issues.*

Tadei recognized that sexual orientation is a controversial topic that many teachers, administrators and school boards prefer to avoid. Most often teacher-librarians choose not to buy books, videos and resource materials with gay and lesbian themes for placement in school libraries because they fear repercussions from parents and others. Nevertheless, Tadei concluded that more teacher-librarians might take this risk if they had access to information and materials that supported their professional

decision. With the assistance of a research grant from the McDowell Foundation, she began her adventure – “trying to find support and books for dealing with gay and lesbian topics!”

## **Support for Gay and Lesbian Themes in School Libraries**

Tadei's report to the McDowell Foundation documents the importance given by the Saskatchewan's educational partners to supporting equity in K-12 schools. These organizational partners include Saskatchewan Learning, the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, and the League of Educational Administrators, Directors of Education and Superintendents. In response to inquiries from Tadei, each organization cited the policy framework document, *Our Children, Our Communities, Our Future*, which outlines their joint commitment to promoting equity in education. Also, each organization stated clearly that local school boards must have in place a policy regarding the placement of books or curriculum materials in the school library. Tadei therefore advises teacher-librarians to discuss these school board policies with their principals and superintendents. She also advises them that the Supreme Court of Canada recently heard a case that is expected to end with the court ruling for or against the placement in schools of books

with gay or lesbian themes (Chamberlain et al. versus the Board of Trustees of School District #46, Surrey, B.C.).\*

## **Materials on Gay or Lesbian Themes for School Libraries**

The second part of the report researched and compiled by Tadei contains an annotated bibliography of books with a gay/lesbian theme that can be purchased in Saskatchewan. The annotations describe each book's content and provide the information required to order it for a school library (title, author, publisher, copyright date and ISBN number). In addition, suggestions are given as to the target audience for each book and the section of the library in which it may be placed.

Tadei's report includes a section that addresses why other teacher-librarians should embark on this adventure. She gives the statistics that indicate there is a significant number of gay or lesbian teachers, students and

parents in every school community. She describes the homophobic attitudes encountered by most gays and lesbians and the fear in which they live. She notes that 30% of adolescents who kill themselves are homosexual, and she makes a passionate plea to fellow teacher-librarians:

*Teacher-librarians can make a difference to a student who is dealing with gay and lesbian issues. By having resources available to your students in your public school library, you may save a life, physically or emotionally. Your students who are living with gay or lesbian parents will see that you accept their family members for who they are. Your students who are struggling with their sexual identity will be able to read books that help them to understand the meaning of sexual orientation. Your students who are gay or lesbian will be able to read novels depicting gay and lesbian characters in a positive light. And you, as a teacher-librarian, will have “Broken the Silence” for gay and lesbian students in your school.*

\* In December 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in this case that the Board had violated a requirement in provincial legislation that the public school system be strictly secular and non-sectarian. It did not rule on whether or not the ban on books with gay or lesbian themes in Surrey schools violated the constitutional rights of gays and lesbians. However, the books may now be used as learning resources in Surrey Schools.