

Essay

The right to read in a censored world: The position of young people, educators, and librarians in protecting intellectual freedom

Emma Hak-Kovacs¹¹ Department of Information Science, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the topics of intellectual freedom and censorship, particularly in the context of restricting access to ‘controversial’ books in libraries and classrooms. Although censorship exists in various forms, it always results in the suppression of information access and disproportionately targets works by LGBTQIA+ authors and authors of colour. This paper brings into focus the experiences of young people (who are often the most affected by censorship due to their caregivers/authority figures deeming material unsuitable), highlighting the importance of fostering their independence as readers and decision makers. Additionally, it explores the vital role of educators and librarians in protecting intellectual freedom, discussing possible constructive responses to censorship that foster inclusivity and access to information.

Keywords: censorship, reading, intellectual freedom, education

Introduction

Youth literature can be “a door or window to a world of relations rather than the room for or container of that world itself.” (Boldt & Leander, 2020, as cited in Dávila, 2022, p. 387)

A love for literature and reading should be nurtured in everyone. This, however, becomes increasingly complex in a world that is growing more and more sensitive to ‘risky’ topics, especially as adults and caregivers try to control what their children (and the children of others) should or should not be exposed to by censoring what books they have access to within classrooms and libraries.

In this paper, I will provide an introduction to foundational components of censorship, specifically in the form of restricting access to books, how individuals inside a classroom or library are most susceptible to the pressures of censorship, and explore the benefits that might be gained from censorship challenges and reading controversial books. Next, I will discuss intellectual freedom and the vitality of maintaining young people’s access to information, as well as highlighting a sample of their own responses to censorship. Lastly, I will examine the role that educators and librarians have in a censor-heavy world, followed by the positive ways they can respond to censorship. All of this will serve to create a cohesive picture of

how we can protect the intellectual freedom of young people (and why we should) through maintaining their right to access information.

A crash course on censorship

The American Library Association (ALA) defines censorship as “the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons — individuals, groups, or government officials — find objectionable or dangerous” (ALA, 2016; Oltmann & Reynolds, 2020).

Direct censorship vs. indirect censorship

Direct censorship occurs when an authority places official parameters on what materials can and cannot be used within a certain setting (i.e., a school board setting restrictions on what books can be used in the curriculum or be available in the school library; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2018). This typically is the response to a book being challenged by an individual or group (often parents or parents’ rights groups; Oltmann & Reynolds, 2020).

Even if originating from a well-intended source, any direct censorship effort is highly problematic because it involves an individual or group attempting to impose their own personal beliefs onto members of the general public (Hartz, 1961; The Learning Network [TLN], 2022). And, while a parent has the right to intervene in what books their own children consume (although the extent of this is also easily debated), they should never be given the opportunity to control what *all* children consume.

Indirect censorship (also ‘self-censorship’ and ‘pre-emptive censorship’), on the other hand, occurs when a trusted individual (in the context of this discussion, a teacher or librarian) chooses not to use specific materials that might be perceived as controversial, in an attempt to avoid facing backlash (Baillie, 2017; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018; NCTE, 2018). In other words, the use of a book is avoided because of the fear that it *could* be challenged (Lent, 2008). In libraries, this can take the form of redacting words or phrases, labelling materials, restricting access through barricading (a patron must ask to be given a book), shelving an item away from its correct place, or not purchasing a book at all (Downey, 2018; Oltmann & Reynolds, 2020).

Regardless of the specifics, self-censorship is an instance in which an authority figure takes “it upon themselves to decide which items are and are not appropriate for their patrons to access” (Whelan, 2009, as cited in Downey, 2018, p. 122). This makes self-censorship particularly concerning as it occurs without the knowledge of the public; readers miss out on materials they might not even be aware of.

Reasons for censorship

The ALA lists the three leading reasons for book challenges as: being sexually explicit, including offensive language, or being unsuitable for any age group (ALA, 2016). Other frequently cited reasons are when a book includes LGBTQIA+ content, EDI content (equity, diversity, justice), drug use, depictions of sexual abuse, or provides sexual education (ALA, 2023). Many attempts of direct censorship involve books being attacked by using misleading terms like ‘pornographic’, ‘inappropriate’, and divisive to make them appear controversial (Hartz, 1961; Perez, 2022, p. 35). *The Washington Post* used information tracked by PEN America, a group committed to literature and freedom of expression, to analyse 986 challenges (out of 1,065) that were filed in the 2021–2022 school year from across 37 states (Natanson, 2023). It was found that 43% of these complaints targeted books with LGBTQIA+ characters or themes, while 36% targeted books that dealt with issues of race and racism (Natanson, 2023). Further, censorship is on the rise: the ALA tracked 1,247 instances of censorship attempts targeting books, materials, and resources within libraries in 2023, which is a 65% increase from the previous year (ALA, n.d.).

Self-censorship is likely to occur for a number of reasons, but prominent themes include books being sexually explicit, having LGBTQIA+ themes, profanity, violence, suicide, and drug use (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018). In addition to these ‘risky’ topics, challenged books are often written by LGBTQIA+ authors and authors of colour, meaning that diverse books are being disproportionately targeted (Oltmann & Reynolds, 2020; Parker, 2023).

Reality is not censored

Reality is not censored or sanitised; reality is full of experiences dealing with these subjects, and we owe it to the coming generations to make them ready to process those experiences. (TLN, 2022)

When books are removed from a classroom or library, what is successfully achieved is the removal of books from a setting in which young people are allowed to safely interact with them. Instead of being stopped by censorship efforts, they might simply seek out other ways to access these materials (Parker, 2023). In Hartz (1961), Judge Crutis G. Bok states it is better for youth to “meet the facts of life and the literature of the world in [a] library [rather] than behind a neighbour’s barn” (p. 100). In trying to keep the real world hidden through censorship and keep children wrapped “in cotton wool”, supporters of censorship are only doing a disservice to young people by trying to make them believe that the world is simpler than it is (Coelho, 2022; Hartz, 1961, p. 100).

Furthermore, censorship has taken on new facets in the digital age (Perry, 2008; TLN, 2022). With the internet, the world has become much more open, permitting easier (but not necessarily safer) access to ‘off limits’ materials if one desires to find them. As technology becomes a larger part of life, younger generations are becoming more inherently adept at using it, being seen as “natives of the digital age” (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018, p. 337). As such, one could argue that efforts to restrict access to information and shield youth from the real world are in vain (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018).

It would be devastating if young people lost access to controversial, challenged, and banned books, the very sort of books that could be lifelines. (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018, p. 342)

In 2022, the ALA documented 1,269 challenges in a library setting (ALA, 2023). However, this number might be higher, since organizations only have the ability to keep a record of challenges if they are in written form (Baillie, 2017). For the documented challenges that occur, students themselves are responsible for less than 1% (Bellamy-Walker, 2022).

Books and stories are a powerful form of representation and provide important instances in which young people see themselves represented and have their identities validated (Scholastic, n.d.). Censorship is not just an attack against a physical book, but also an attack on diverse values, cultures, and identities. Since books that feature marginalized voices are more likely to be targeted, this not only creates an environment in which diverse materials become underused, but also sends the message that individuals with non-white, non-dominant identities themselves are not important (Perez, 2022). In both school and library settings, the disproportionate censorship of such materials reiterates the “disenfranchisement of already marginalised people” by creating an environment where they are under-represented and led to question their right to be present (Perez, 2022, p. 36).

As a consequence of the arguments that have been presented thus far, we can posit that, in any setting, censoring access to books serves to limit (not protect) young people and the information they consume (Green, 2022). It is against their will, or even without their knowledge, that they are being denied access to a diverse range of information and perspectives (NCTE, 2018). Further (even if losing access to a spe-

cific book does not equate with losing an important facet of representation), it does prevent youth from engaging in society as “fully literate, civic actors” (NCTE, 2018). The importance of fighting censorship, therefore, extends further than simply maintaining young people’s right to read, and has emerged as vital in protecting their intellectual freedom (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018).

Intellectual freedom and voices of young people

Intellectual freedom

Intellectual freedom is the “right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction” (ALA, 2022). Young people are at an age where they are experiencing major changes in all aspects of their lives (including socially and psychologically), during which their intellectual freedom can be fostered by permitting them to act as decision makers, becoming empowered in their independence as readers (Calkins, 2014; Coelho, 2022; Lent, 2008). With censorship, however, intellectual freedom is being reduced, one challenged material at a time (Jamison, 2020).

Books allow readers to experience a variety of cultures and worldviews, as well as topics that might otherwise be difficult to discuss or access. Censorship presents a sanitized version of the world, which is detrimental, as it impedes children and adolescents’ ability in knowing how to cope with their environment and it does not allow them to engage critically with an array of vital, relevant issues (Perry, 2008; TLN, 2022). For instance, *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier is a frequently challenged book due to its depictions of bullying (Lent, 2008). While, understandably, this can be a sensitive topic for some readers, having the book available in school or as part of the curriculum allows students to explore the “causes and consequences of bullying within the safety of a fictional account” (Lent, 2008, p. 62).

Alongside exposing young people to experiences they might not encounter in their day-to-day lives, books provide them with a rich learning experience that can help combat ignorance about the world (Griffiths, 2016). Referring again to Judge Bok who, when speaking of his own daughters, believed that “we should be willing to prefer [young people’s] deliberate and informed choices of decency rather than an innocence that continues to spring from ignorance...” (Hartz, 1961, p. 100). By nurturing a love for reading and access to books in young people, we are equipping them with the ability to recognize bias and inaccurate information more readily.

Youth perspectives

For who better to speak out on behalf of the freedom to read in schools than students themselves? Who better to express the desire to learn from whatever source they choose, to expose themselves to whatever writing and ideas they choose, than the ones doing the learning? (Griffiths, 2016, p. 17)

As mentioned above, the majority of censorship efforts originate directly from parents or indirectly from authority figures, not from young people themselves. As such, it is easy to overlook the active role of youth in these conversations, even though they are the most impacted by it. Young people have agency, and they should be allowed to decide what they want to read, as well as to speak up when this is taken away from them (Green, 2022). When given this opportunity to voice their opinions, we find that the overwhelming majority are opposed to books being censored (even if their specific reasons differ; TLN, 2022).

Griffiths (2016), an English teacher in Massachusetts at the time, asked their students (juniors at St. Johnsbury Academy) to choose and defend one book to save from censorship challenges if they could.

While a wide range of books was chosen, each student made their choice because of how they perceived the message that book promoted: each thought their book spoke of tolerance, acceptance, and understanding, all of which were messages they found important to be heard by society (Griffiths, 2016). Box 1 showcases some notable excerpts taken from Griffiths' students, who wrote letters in support of the organisers of Banned Books Week.

The fight to protect intellectual freedom

While it is young people who are prominently impacted by the censorship of books, it is educators and librarians who are particularly well positioned to make a difference in the war on intellectual freedom (Bucher & Manning, 2007; NCTE, 2018).

However, for both educators and librarians, the decision of selecting materials to be used in a classroom or stocked on library shelves is so routine that it blends into the background of everyday life (Dávila, 2022). When, in actuality, these daily decisions are foundational in determining the learning experiences of young people as they seek out books to read, deciding how inclusive and exclusive the perspectives they encounter will be (Dávila, 2022). While facing a unique set of responsibilities and challenges in this aspect, the role of both educators and librarians cannot be overlooked.

Role of the educator

The intellectual freedom of young people can be fostered within an academic environment, especially if educators are willing to create a setting in which students have access to diverse perspectives and experiences, and can feel safe to engage with them (NCTE, 2018). In order for this to be achieved, the main step is for diverse resources to be given permission to exist within the classroom, as opposed to content being censored due to fear of controversy. When this remains the priority for teachers, and an active effort is made to introduce students to a diverse range of materials, their intellectual freedom is not only being maintained but also promoted, allowing them to engage with materials in the safety of the classroom learning environment (NCTE, 2018).

An important way for educators to do this is by providing their students with sufficient tools to respond to a work that has 'risky' content or has been met with controversy. Teaching this to students will also help teachers be prepared to defend the importance of the book to anyone who might intend to challenge it. For instance, helping students to contextualize a work (whether in a cultural, historical, economic, or social context) will foster greater understanding and appreciation of the book's content (NCTE, 2018). Educators should also schedule a time for questions and discussion-based activities when using a book in their official curriculum, helping students to process and interpret the material through class-based conversations (NCTE, 2018).

Taking the time to write rationales for the books being used can help all actors understand *why* a book is valuable to the education of students, and acts as a protective factor if challenged (Bucher & Manning, 2007). This document can include explanations about the target audience, how the book will be used/how it supports the school curriculum, why it is appropriate for the intended audience, and what reviewers have said about it (Bucher & Manning, 2007). It is important for educators, students, and parents all to understand that consuming and discussing a specific book does not equate with endorsing or approving of that content (NCTE, 2018). Developing such rationales will help establish this perspective and support the understanding that reading about a wide range of experiences depicted in books helps individuals learn about the world, safely within the pages of a story and within a classroom where they are able to critically engage with it.

Box 1. Excerpts from Griffiths (2016): Letters from her students in support of Banned Books Weeks.

Books document the progress of society, whether it be incremental or exponential, and help people to learn from their mistakes. (Baylee Wagner via Griffiths, 2016, p. 20)

Protecting children from the difficult realities of the world is an exercise in futility. In a media-flooded world, information travels faster than any petition or town hall assembly. We are going to be exposed to controversy at one point or another, so we might as well learn something while we're at it. (Jackson Coyle via Griffiths, 2016, p. 18)

I have read some of the books that take place on the banned books list and they should not be there. Those books tell beautiful, thought provoking stories and those stories are being taken away from us. (Kylie Beausoleil via Griffiths, 2016, p. 18)

You can't change things if you don't acknowledge the real problem, and that problem is certainly not the books. ... We must cherish them and welcome their ideas and what they have to offer our society in terms of helping it grow. ... Banning books will not solve our problems, but reading them just might. (Elise Plonski via Griffiths, 2016, p. 19)

It is our duty as individuals, as a society, to pass the torch of unrestricted ideas and viewpoints to others, and to allow every work, disagreeable or not, to circulate, unrestricted, for all to learn. (Wesley Kane via Griffiths, 2016, p. 19)

Similarly, creating a more general written plan that educators are able to fall back on when a challenge does occur could be a helpful tool for educators. This plan can include a defence for "the right of young people to read developmentally appropriate literature of their choice," guidelines for selecting classroom materials, procedures, and resources to inform school faculty about the topic of intellectual freedom, as well as to train and support them on teaching controversial material (Bucher & Manning, 2007, p. 10).

Role of the librarian

In the ALA code of ethics, it is stated that "[librarians] uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources" (ALA, 2016). This protection of intellectual freedom is a core value of librarianship and takes the form of ensuring that patrons have the right to "hold, receive, and disseminate ideas" (ALA, 2017). As a space, a library's goal is to provide patrons with access to resources "that will enable them to pursue a variety of ideas and viewpoints that are of personal interest," as well as exposing them to diverse perspectives which advance their intellectual freedom (Jamison, 2020, p. 19). As such, librarians must actively work against all kinds of censorship, ensuring that all types of books, voices, and other materials have equal opportunity to be on the shelves.

However, the role of the librarian is a highly nuanced one, as it is also part of their job to "[know] what different ages want to read," and help patrons access materials that are of interest and appropriate for

them (Baillie, 2017). As such, it is vital for librarians to remain particularly conscious of self-censorship, as the line between their professional decision making and censorship easily blurs. Take the example of shelving books in libraries, where it is the norm to keep books intended for different audiences on separate shelves (and maybe floors). Librarians rely on the recommendations of publishing companies and similar resources to gauge who the intended audience for a book is, helping them decide if a book belongs in the children's chapter book section, the young adult section, or the adult section, and so on (Baillie, 2017). However, it is simple for a librarian to let their personal views on a book impact this decision, either unconsciously or consciously if believing they know what is best, and especially when under the impression that they are only performing their professional responsibilities (Baillie, 2017).

Downey (2018) notes that, while there is often a lack of formal training around these topics, there are resources available for librarians to utilize for guidance (such as the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom's *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, which offers practical insight on handling censorship attempts). Libraries can consider creating their own step-by-step manuals or training for their librarians that will help them know how to handle censorship issues (Downey, 2018). Oltnann and Reynolds (2020) recommend that libraries develop a Collection Development policy, which is to include a Selection Development policy and a Request for Reconsideration form that complainants can fill out when finding fault with a book. The latter is of particular value, as it would aid libraries in keeping track of challenges by having them in written form, providing insight into common themes of which books are being received as controversial and why.

The ethical responsibility for intellectual freedom, however, also includes hearing the opinions and concerns of those issuing the challenges. If a patron is upset, the librarian should be prepared to act professionally and appropriately by thanking the patron for approaching them with their concerns, and meet their comments with openness and curiosity (Downey, 2018). When responses to censorship efforts are met with an opportunity to collaborate and inform, the ignorance that is involved in attempts to censor are slowly being diminished (Perry, 2008).

A note

As stated previously, a parent holds the authority (to a certain extent) to control what their own child has access to but, in all circumstances, should never have the right to impose their beliefs on any other children (Oltnann & Reynolds, 2020). Educators and librarians should never find themselves approaching book selection and access with the perspective of a parent and should solely make decisions with their professional responsibilities in mind (Baillie, 2017). Responsibilities which, we must remember, include professional training in selecting appropriate and quality literature for a range of audiences "based on principles such as literary merit, appeal to children, and curricular value," not by how likely something is to cause offence (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018, p. 343). It is this training that serves to hold them accountable, not allowing the fear of offending someone to impede their professional judgement, especially if this fear impedes intellectual freedom (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018).

Final thoughts

The act of responding to censorship provides a valuable opportunity to promote intellectual freedom. When fighting both direct and indirect censorship efforts, educators and librarians can face their fear of backlash, instead embracing the chance to discuss the value of 'risky' books and the consequences of censorship.

Lent (2008) suggests the use of study groups that focus on the topic of censorship as a way to promote honest conversations and an understanding of the value of reading. Additionally, they explore the possibility of using community-wide forums to discuss issues of censorship, inviting teachers, parents, and

students to “reflect more deeply, consider diverse points of view, and collaboratively consider the nature of literacy” (Lent, 2008, p. 66). Further, schools and libraries can embrace programs like Banned Books Week (as well as create their own) to let their communities know about their commitment to protect intellectual freedom (Downey, 2018).

Conclusion

This paper has provided an introduction to censorship and the various forms it can take, as well as common reasons for why books might be perceived as controversial. The value of ‘risky’ books was discussed in relation to protecting and maintaining intellectual freedom, followed by the position of young people, educators, and librarians in speaking out against censorship and maintaining the right to access diverse information (see Box 2 for additional resources).

The meaning and value of a text depends on how the reader interprets it which, in turn, is based on a reader’s own beliefs and life experiences (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018). When engaging in censorship, either directly or indirectly, the censor is doing so based on their own experiences, attempting to impose their own values and ideas about a text onto everyone else. No matter what, the intellectual freedom of young people should be given priority over the personal ideals of others (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018). Educators and librarians, as well as other authority figures, play an important role in ensuring that young people have access to a diverse range of perspectives and works, and should strive to help them learn from the materials instead of seeking to impose restrictions (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018).

All in all, the conversations around censorship and intellectual freedom echo the opening of this paper in that there is great value in encouraging a love for literature and reading within young people — value that, if not appreciated, can quickly become a casualty in the war between censorship and intellectual freedom. To quote Kimmel and Hartsfield (2018): “if the children of today are not reading and thinking about a variety of ideas and perspectives, then we picture a passive and uncritical society of tomorrow” (p. 342).

Box 2. Additional resources.

Censorship by the numbers

Data compiled by the ALA about book censorship throughout 2022.

<https://www.ala.org/bbooks/censorship-numbers>

Intellectual freedom: Issues and resources

A variety of resources to learn about intellectual freedom compiled by the ALA.

<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom>

Banned books reading list: Stand for the right to read freely

A reading list compiled by the New York Public Library, featuring works that have been targets of book bans and challenges over the years. <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2023/09/25/banned-books-week-reading-list>

Banned Books Week

A research guide with a rich selection of resources relevant to Banned Books Week, censorship, and intellectual freedom. <https://mesacc.libguides.com/c.php?g=255820&p=1706927>

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