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The Fear of Retaliation: Proactive Censorship by Public School Librarians

by Carolyn Carlson, Ph.D.



Carolyn Carlson, Ph.D.

Books are challenged and/or banned from public school libraries across the country on a regular basis. However, as noted in the Library Bill of Rights, it is the duty of all libraries to provide materials and information presenting all points of view and those materials should not be removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval (American Library Association, 2019). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school library to provide students with access to books that some might consider controversial; thus, banning books is in direct opposition to the mission of the library. More specifically, it is the responsibility of the school librarian to be an advocate against censorship to ensure access to these texts. However, librarians are often faced with the decision of whether to engage in proactive censorship by choosing to simply not include a book in the library's circulation to avoid any potential challenge to the text.

Background

Censorship is defined by the American Library Association (2017a) as the “suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups, or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous” (p. 2). When a person deems a book's content to be objectionable or dangerous, pressure is put on libraries to suppress and remove that information from public access “so that no one else has the chance to read or view the material and make up their own minds

about it” (American Library Association, 2017a, p. 2). Despite the pressures put on libraries to censor material, Article 3 of the Library Bill of Rights notes that “libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment” (American Library Association, 2019, Article 3).

All students need to see themselves in literature; sometimes those “controversial” texts are the ones that students can relate to the most and removing them also removes the chance for a student to connect with a text. In these cases, the book acts as a “mirror” (Bishop, 1990). In addition to giving students the opportunity to see themselves in literature, other students (not necessarily those with the same characteristics as the ones found in the text) can learn from reading these types of texts to develop an understanding and an appreciation of the diversity that exists in their school, town, state, country, and the world. Providing texts that provide students with a “window” to people and places that are different than their own can help break biases that can exist (Bishop, 1990).

Most recently there has been an increased number of books with diverse characters banned from public schools (Begley, 2016). Books that focus on people of different races, religious minorities, people with

disabilities, LGBTQ people, etcetera, have pushed out books with offensive language, drug use, and sex on the American Library Association's lists of the most banned/challenged books. Begley (2016) notes that the shift "seems to be linked to demographic changes in the country—and the political fear-mongering that can accompany those changes" (p. 1).

In recent years, multiple challenges (some proving successful) were made to books in various parts of the country for various reasons. Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) was removed from a high-school supplemental reading list after parents complained that it was "anti-Christian" (American Library Association, 2014a). Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005) was challenged, but retained, at a high school because it was labeled "too racy to read" (American Library Association, 2014b). In 2018, Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017) was banned from districts in Texas and South Carolina because it addressed police brutality. In 2017, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) was removed from the school district in Biloxi, Mississippi because it made people "uncomfortable" (Gomez, 2017). In 2019, Gino's *George* (2015) was removed from district libraries in Kansas and other schools around the country because its transgendered main character was "causing confusion" (American Library Association, 2018). In addition, despite a message of anti-bullying and acceptance, *I Am Jazz* (2014) was the American Library Association's third most challenged book of 2015 (American Library Association, 2016) and the fourth most challenged book of 2016 (American Library Association, 2017b). Further, in 2015, a group of parents in Florida requested the removal of *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* (2005) from the schools. This award-winning book about the true story of a librarian who saved 30,000 books from the Basra library's collection before the building was burned in a fire was challenged by parents in the district who found it "inappropriate for promoting another religion that is not Christianity" even though it does not mention any religion at all (American Library Association, 2015b; Thompson, 2015). In addition, in 2019, a parent in Virginia complained about the use of *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* (2018) as a part

of the district's anti-bullying curriculum and to explore civil rights and fighting against bigotry. Further, one of the most challenged books in 2014 and 2016 (American Library Association, 2015a; American Library Association, 2017b) was *Drama* (Telgemeier, 2012). The story, contains a scene in which a male student has to take over the role of the female lead in the school play at the last minute, resulting in an onstage kiss with another male. As a result, the book was banned from a junior high in Texas due to its "socially offensive" nature.

Students should be prepared to understand the world around them as well as appreciate and value the differences that exist among people. This is not achieved by isolating students from the diversity that exists in the world, but rather, by providing students with opportunities to learn, understand, and appreciate the differences found in their school, city, state, region, country, and the world. These opportunities can be given to students through access to books depicting characters and events that they can relate to and characters and events that they can learn from. In today's society, school libraries should strive to give students opportunities to learn about the world around them.

Despite the need for access, public school librarians are continually faced with providing access to books despite objections from individuals who do not want certain books housed in the school library. Librarians are asked to remove books from the library shelves, relocate books to different parts of the library to prevent ease of access, restrict books from being checked out without parental permission, and/or redact parts of books that some individuals find offensive. Removing, relocating, restricting, and redacting are all forms of censorship that public school librarians must face in order to fulfill their obligation to providing access to books to students.

When faced with the possibility of being required to remove, relocate, restrict, and/or redact books from the school library, librarians may choose another option: proactive censorship. This type of censorship can occur when "librarians, teachers, or administrators choose

not to order or teach certain materials because they fear engendering controversy in their communities” (Knox, 2015, p. 4). Many librarians choose to self-censor by choosing not to purchase books for the library’s collection based solely upon the threat of a potential challenges in the future (Jacobson, 2016). Simply by not stocking the library shelves with controversial material, librarians are quietly able to avoid a possible conflict the book may create. *The Higher Power of Lucky* by Patron (2006) (which was the winner of the Newbery Medal in 2007) and *Boy Toy* by Lyga (2007) are both examples of books that were not stocked in school libraries across the country because of their potential controversial content; librarians practiced proactive censorship and refused to purchase the books (Whelan, 2009).

While librarians may believe in their duty to provide access to books, the reality of doing so can put them in the difficult position of having to possibly face backlash by including a book in the library’s collection. Whelan notes that “the fear of retaliation ... is very real” (2009, p. 29). Not surprisingly, the practice of proactive censorship increases once a librarian has been involved in a formal book challenge because he/she may be intimidated by the potential consequences of including books in the library’s collection that may be controversial (Jacobson, 2016). As a result, more than 90% of elementary and middle school librarians have passed on purchasing a book because it may contain controversial material (Jacobson, 2016).

Therefore, this study sought to examine librarians’ experiences with proactive censorship, and, if they have engaged in proactive censorship, what factors influenced those decisions.

Research Design

In this study, 446 current public school librarians were surveyed to determine their experiences with book censorship. The 446 participants represent 34 states in the United States plus the District of Columbia and Canada and various types of school districts (rural, suburban, and urban). The participants served as librarians at various grade levels. Of the 446 participants, 126

worked as the librarian at the elementary level, 146 worked at the middle-school level, and 174 worked at the secondary level. Further, the participants had various lengths of experience as public school librarians, ranging from one year to over 20 years.

The participants were asked to anonymously answer questions about their experiences with censorship including specific instances of censorship, how they approach book selection, how their administration/district support their position, etcetera. In addition, participants were able to leave additional comments regarding their experiences with censorship in the public school library. Specific questions included in the survey are found in Figure 1.

Data Analysis and Findings

Descriptive statistics were calculated using absolute numbers and simple percentages. In addition, the open-ended responses made by participants were examined. Survey statements were categorized into two areas: statements regarding the participants’ experiences with proactive censorship, including factors influencing their decisions regarding proactive censorship, and statements regarding the participants’ experiences with book challenges. These statements were then analyzed using the open coding method of Grounded Theory analysis which is the “process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Open coding allows the data to be analyzed for commonalities that can reflect themes and characteristics.

Experience with Proactive Censorship

Participants were asked to indicate their experiences with proactive censorship. Results indicate that 83.9% of respondents indicated that they have decided not to purchase a book for the school library based upon its content, thus participating in proactive censorship.

Those respondents were asked to indicate specific reasons for not purchasing a book for the school library. Among those respondents, 70.5% indicated they chose not to purchase a book for the school library based upon its sexual content and 17.6% of respondents

Survey Questions

Have you ever chosen NOT to purchase a book for your school library based upon its content?

Which of the following topics have led you to pass on purchasing a book for your school library?

Sexual content

Drug use

Profanity

Suicide or self-harm

LGBTQ content

Religious references

Violence

Racial content

Other

None (I have never declined to purchase a book for the school library because of its content.)

Which of the following reasons has influenced your decision to pass on purchasing a book for your school library? (Select all that apply.)

Non age-appropriate content

Possible reaction from students

School guidelines

Your personal views/beliefs

Possible reaction from parents

Previous involvement in a book challenge

Possible reaction from administration

To avoid professional setback

Possible reaction from the community

To avoid embarrassment/attention

Other

None (I have never declined to purchase a book for the school library because of its content.)

Do you find yourself weighing the effect of controversial subject matter more often now than you did 2-3 years ago?

If you find yourself weighing the effect of controversial subject matter more often now than you did 2-3 years ago, please describe what is influencing that change.

How do you determine if a book should or should not be purchased for inclusion in the school library?

Do you restrict students from accessing certain books in the school library?

There is a restricted section in the library.

Students are not restricted from any books, but the books are shelved by age appropriateness (for example, a "teen interest" section).

All books are shelved together.

Other:

If students are restricted from accessing books, please describe the types of books restricted and how a student can access them.

Does your school/district have a formal book challenge procedure?

If your school has a formal book challenge procedure, please describe the process (how a challenge can be brought, who reviews the challenge, etc.).

Have you ever directly experienced a book challenge?

If you have directly experienced a book challenge, please describe that experience (the book, who challenged it and why, your position, the personnel involved, and the outcome).

Figure 1. Survey questions about librarians' experiences with censorship.

indicated they chose not to purchase a book for the school library based upon its LGBTQ content.

As noted by Begley (2016), a shift has occurred in the past few years regarding the political climate. Therefore, participants were asked to reflect upon any changes in recent years in their approach to including books in their school library. In the past three years, 26% of respondents indicated that they have more carefully considered the effect of including books with controversial subject matter than they had previously.

Participants were asked to reflect further upon their approach/experience to proactive censorship in the past three years. Responses included:

I don't really think of myself as censoring by not having some of the more controversial topics in the collection because I do have several databases where students can find information about these types of topics for research purposes.

I worry that...I'll get challenged/sued over it. I also worry that if I don't put books on the shelf that I will get challenged/sued over it.

Last year, there was a minor "issue" that came up with a freshman who read *Looking for Alaska*. I still have the book in the library collection, but it's in my office because I'm not sure what to do about it.

Radical right-wing conservatism has me concerned about anything concerning sex, homosexuality, civil rights, and the environment. I have wide variety of books on those topics now, but worry about the new climate.

Participants were very willing to reflect upon their experiences with proactive censorship, particularly in the past three years. Almost all of the participants answered this open-ended question of the survey.

Factors Influencing Proactive Censorship

Participants that indicated that they had engaged in proactive censorship were asked to consider what

experiences led them to the decision to do so. Participants repeatedly responded with "experiencing my first book challenge" and "going through a challenge" and "involvement in a book challenge" and similar comments as their main reason for engaging in proactive censorship. In addition, one participant provided community reaction and her position with her school as her reasons for engaging in proactive censorship:

I am concerned about the community's reaction to certain books, because we live in such politically divisive times. Unfortunately, I worry about my professional standing in my school and local community being affected by an inclusion of certain books in my library.

However, despite only 16.3% of participants indicating they did not engage in any form of proactive censorship, those respondents were adamantly opposed to this form of censorship and many sought to specifically include materials in their school library that other librarians might not. Responses indicative of this trend included:

I am making sure that I am including content that may be controversial because our students have the right to see their lives reflected in the literature around them.

I find myself more prone to buy a book that IS considered "controversial."

I am more actively purchasing books and databases that provide different perspectives on current controversial subjects, to ensure my students and staff have access to all sides of any given argument.

It's crucial to rip off the blinders and study an issue from an opposing point of view.

I find my district MORE willing to address social issues via book content than 2-3 years ago.

Our rural community is not accepting of the LGBTQ movement. I purchase books and hold my

breath. The students are far more accepting than the parents.

If anything, I have worked harder to provide an inclusive collection in the past 2-3 years because the political climate indicates we would benefit from more empathy in the world.

I firmly believe that books are the safest way for children (and adults, quite frankly) to confront controversial issues and ideas. I also don't believe that a book can result in negative actions, but I do believe that not having access to a wide variety of books can negatively impact a developing mind.

More than ever we need to discuss controversial issues with our students, children, friends, family, and those we disagree with. The strength of our nation is built upon debate, discussion, logic, research, reason, and compromise.

Even though there was only a small number of participants who had *not* engaged in proactive censorship, they were passionate and revealing in their responses to this open-ended question.

Discussion

Experience with Proactive Censorship

Results indicate that 83.9% of respondents had decided not to purchase a book for the school library based upon its content, thus participating in proactive censorship. Opponents of censorship should be alarmed at the number of librarians that have engaged in this type of censorship.

Despite the significant number of librarians that engaged in proactive censorship, the two main reasons related to the content of the book that resulted in their decision were sexual content (70.5% indicated they chose not to purchase a book for the school library based upon its sexual content) and inclusion of LGBTQ content (17.6% of respondents indicated they chose not to purchase a book for the school library based upon its LGBTQ content). Sexual content has

consistently been a reason for censoring books in public schools, so the significant number of librarians choosing not to purchase a book based upon this factor is not surprising. While LGBTQ topics have also been a significant source of censorship in public schools, it is worthwhile to note that only 17.6% of respondents made the decision to proactively censor a book with this topic. However, with more LGBTQ issues being discussed in society, access to books that include these types of characters or themes is essential, and even 17% of libraries not including these books in their collection is too much. These findings indicate that there is a need for schools (administrators, teachers, and librarians) to evaluate their view on the role that the library plays in the education of its students. If the library is deemed a place where students can access information to controversial topics (such as books with LGBTQ characters/scenarios), as noted in the Library Bill of Rights (American Library Association, 2019), then the book collection should reflect that stance.

Librarians were asked to reflect upon the past three years to note any differences in their approaches to including books in their school library. Research has indicated a shift in recent years in the types of books challenged/banned in public schools (Begley, 2016). As a result, this question focused on recent challenges/bans to explore Begley's (2016) indication of a recent shift in censorship. In the past three years, 26% of respondents indicated that they have more carefully considered the effect of including books with controversial subject matter than they had previously. As noted by the participants, the current climate in the country is one of divisiveness which is in contrast to the mission of inclusion of a library. These results indicate that Begley's (2016) finding of the shift in book challenges/bans linked to demographic changes in the country is still current.

Further, many provided revealing insight into their censorship practices. One librarian noted that she does not believe she is censoring content by not including books on the shelf because students can access information via database searches. However, access to information should not be available only by focused searching for research purposes; students should not have to con-

sciously decide that they want to read about an issue (such as LGBTQ or drug use issues), but rather, should be able to read a book that includes that information within the context of the story. Asserting that there is no censorship taking place because students have access to a research database is inaccurate. The definition of censorship and the various ways it can occur should be examined by schools to ensure that all parties are aware of what constitutes a form of censorship.

While some librarians may not realize that they are truly censoring content, others face the harsh reality of censorship. One librarian noted the double-edged sword she faces: “I worry that...I’ll get challenged/sued over it. I also worry that if I don’t put books on the shelf that I will get challenged/sued over it.” Another librarian noted that “radical right-wing conservatism has me concerned about anything concerning sex, homosexuality, civil rights, and the environment...” These librarians, like others, must consider the political environment outside of the school walls and how it may impact the reaction to a book in the school library. Librarians regularly face the possibility of having to defend the decision to include a book or exclude a book, because either choice can cause a reaction among parents, community members, etcetera. Therefore, support of the administration is vital to librarians’ being able to fulfill their duty to provide access to information to students.

Factors Influencing Proactive Censorship

Participants that indicated that they had engaged in proactive censorship were asked to consider what experiences led them to the decision to do so. Multiple respondents noted that experiencing a book challenge made them more likely to pause before buying a book for the school library to consider how likely another challenge may be. This fear of retaliation can be the deciding factor on a book’s fate in the library.

However, despite only 16.3% of participants indicating they did not engage in any form of proactive censorship, those respondents were adamantly opposed to this form of censorship. Many sought to specifically include materials in their school library that other

librarians might not. Perhaps these librarians have not yet experienced a formal book challenge that has made other librarians hesitant. Or, perhaps these librarians have a supportive administration and school board that is knowledgeable in censorship issues. Alternatively, perhaps these librarians work in districts with very clear policies for dealing with book challenges, giving support and protection to the librarian through thorough procedures.

Recommendations

In order to protect the access of books by students and reduce the need for proactive censorship by librarians, we provide the following recommendations:

1. **Advocate for Access.** It is the responsibility of a library to serve everyone (Jacobson, 2016). Teachers, librarians, administrators, and school specialists should be encouraged to support the inclusion of books about a variety of topics in school libraries. This does not necessarily mean these books should be required reading; rather, these books should simply be made available to students in the school library so that they have the opportunity to read them if they choose to do so. Many students may not live near a public library and many may not have internet access at home, so school libraries can be a main resource for students to learn about their environment and the environment around them. Therefore, the library should be supported in its duty to provide access to books containing various points of view. By vocalizing a position that students need to have access to books that depict people like themselves and people unlike themselves, challenges based on a misunderstanding of the importance of this may lessen and librarians may feel less pressure to censor the books in the library’s collection.
2. **Empower Librarians.** Librarians play a powerful role in all forms of censorship in public schools. As indicated by the results of this study and others, once a librarian has been involved in a formal book challenge, there is a greater likelihood that proactive censorship will occur. Districts should empower

librarians by implementing clear policies regarding determining a book's inclusion in the library and support librarians in the case of book challenges. If a district does not have a detailed policy for handling book challenges, administrators, teachers, and librarians should seek to create one. If librarians are supported by their school administrators and districts both before and during a challenge, the need for proactive censorship may lessen.

3. Educate Administrators and Teachers. School board members, administrators, and classroom teachers should understand the legal rights of students, the types of censorship frequently occurring, the arguments for and against banning books from school libraries, the various policies that may be in place, and ways to support the library's duty to provide access to books. If the district and administrators in the school create a community of advocating for access to books, the librarian may feel more empowered to include those "controversial" texts that the students need access to in the library's collection.

The American Library Association (www.ala.org) offers free resources, including infographics, templates, and webinars discussing why some popular titles have been banned, different ways a book can be censored, and how to advocate against censorship. These resources are designed for librarians, teachers, administrators, and even students to help support the library in fulfilling its mission to provide access to books. In addition, the Banned Books Week Coalition (www.banned-booksweek.org/coalition) is an international group of organizations committed to increasing awareness about book banning through education, advocacy, and the creation of programs related to book censorship. Like the American Library Association, the Banned Books Week Coalition offers resources to support the inclusion of books in public schools, including events (both virtual and on the ground), kits with practical information, and social media tools. These resources can be used year-round and by various groups involved in education and advocacy related to supporting the mission of the library.

Summary

Librarians play a crucial role in a school's duty to provide students with access to information, including books that some individuals might consider controversial. However, the possibility of a challenge to materials in a library's collection results in librarians facing the choice of stocking the books or avoiding those materials. The environment of the school, district, and community can play an important role in the librarian's decision whether or not to engage in proactive censorship. An administration that understands the role of the library to serve all students and supports the librarian with clear policies, as well as a community that defends the right of students to access books, can empower librarians to include "controversial" books in the library's collection rather than simply not purchasing the books for the collection. By creating an environment that advocates for access, librarians may be less likely to choose to engage in proactive censorship.

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