Controversial Materials in the School Media Center

Policies and Management of Controversial Materials

There are many different views on how to manage controversial materials in public school libraries. Some people think that if a book is challenged by parents it should be removed from the school library. Some think that the school board should control what happens to challenged materials. Some think that the community should have a say. There may not be a right answer, but the courts have tried to make decisions that are appropriate based on our laws and the rights of parents and children as citizens.

Every school library should have a collection development policy that is clearly written out and states exactly what the head librarian or media coordinator should do in the event of a complaint about the appropriateness of a book. Most policies will assign responsibility for decision making to the school board for their district or to the principal of the school who will then go to the school board. The school board must then decide whether the complaint is valid or not. The school media coordinator must then comply with their decision. The school board may decide to get rid of the book completely, sequester the book, create age or grade restrictions, or possibly require parental permission for use (Adams, 2008).

However, school boards must follow the law when dealing with questionable material and, with all the court cases regarding censorship in school libraries, there is plenty of confusion. Courts have come to the conclusion that school boards should not ban books simply because the ideas that they contain go against the community’s values. They cannot try to force orthodox views on issues like religion and politics by excluding materials (Brennan, 1982).

Opposing Viewpoints

In 2005, a woman name Laurie Taylor found herself in the middle of a huge dispute over censorship in Fayetteville, Arkansas’s public school libraries. Taylor did not ask for removal of the books that she deemed inappropriate for her own children, she suggested that questionable books require parental permission either through the use of permission slips or through email (Bauder, 2007). The issue that I see with this idea is that children and teenagers are very smart when they want something. I can imagine a student wanting to read Judy Blume’s Forever and, knowing that their own parents would refuse, they would ask a friend,
whose parents are more liberal, to check the book out for them. I can also see how damaging the practice of parental permission might be for children and teens who are struggling with issues of sexuality or who are simply curious. How would a teenage boy’s parents react if he asked them for permission to check out a book about homosexuality? He may not be ready to have everyone know that he is confused or he may simply be curious and looking for information. This practice could also result in lower use of the library for entertainment purposes. If a child or teenager cannot get a book from their school library without permission from their parents there are many other ways to get it.

Chris Crutcher is an author of many young adult novels one of which, *Whale Talk*, was banned from some school libraries. In 2005, on his website, Crutcher wrote to the students of the Limestone School District where his book had been banned. He talked about the reason for banning the book, which seems to be that there are a few passages that involve curse words and racist language. First, Crutcher defended his use of that kind of language. The problematic passages include a four-year-old bi-racial girl screaming obscenities and racial slurs because that is what is directed at her from her step-father on a regular basis. Crutcher explained to his readers that when he was working at a mental health facility he worked with a little girl who he based his character on and that is what she really did in real life. Crutcher defended his writing as realistic. Crutcher went on to say that he was saddened by the fact that parents and school officials do not trust their children to make good choices and understand realism. He told the students that he would not mind if they began reading the book and stopped after finding it too much for them as long as they gave it a chance. Crutcher felt that his book was not given a fair chance and that the people who found it inappropriate only saw the “bad” passages and did not understand the point that was being made with that language (Bauder, 2007). There are many other people, like Crutcher, who feel that children can make their own decisions about what they read. Most of these people do think that there should be age restrictions; I doubt that anyone would suggest that a child in middle school should read Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* or that an elementary aged child should read Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

**What’s Controversial?**

Books have the ability to serve many purposes. Many of us read purely for entertainment, letting our imaginations soar and completely getting lost in a book. Other times we read to gain information. Whether it is a college textbook we are reading or a “how-to” book, there are times when our main goal is to increase our knowledge of a particular subject. Books also have the unique ability to provoke strong emotions and opinions, thus being able to offend and create controversy. Books such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Flowers in the Attic* are just a few examples of books that have created quite a stir in the school system, and in some cases have even been banned. This has been an issue for many years in the school system, and as long as new books are written, will continue to be for many years to come.
The American Library Association defines a "challenged book" as one that has received a formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school. The complaint on a challenged book includes a request that a book be removed from the shelf, or placed in a special section, usually available only to adults (Dahir, 2005). So, one may wonder what exactly makes a book controversial enough for it to be challenged? A book becomes controversial when people feel strongly about it, specifically when they have strong points of view about the book that conflict with other people's strong viewpoints about it. Some topics that frequently create controversy are homosexuality, sexuality, religion, race, and violence.

**Homosexuality**

Books that contain homosexual themes have always been at the center of book banning and censorship in the school system. One such example is the young adult novel *I’ll Get There: It Better be Worth the Trip*. This book is characterized as the first novel for young adult readers that contain a scene describing a homoerotic encounter between boys (Whittingham & Rickman, 2007). Other examples in young adult literature that created a stir in school systems include *Geography Club, Rainbow Boys*, and *Boy Meets Boy*. Not to anyone’s surprise, the individuals who believe that these books should stay, and those who think they should be banned have very differing opinions.

Those who want these books to stay in the library believe that one of the basic principles of education is to meet the needs of all children. Being that they believe that the diminished status of homosexual books in the library is a form of discrimination, one way to meet this need includes education about discrimination (Whittingham & Rickman, 2007). So, what better way to address this issue of discrimination than with books with homosexual themes or characters?

Another argument made for keeping these books on the shelves is that they can demonstrate to teens that they are not the only ones who experience confusion when it comes to their sexuality (Whittingham & Rickman, 2007). They also believe that young adult literature that focuses on homosexuality provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine other ways of understanding the world and social relations (Whittingham & Rickman, 2007). As with any topic that is controversial, there is always an opposing viewpoint.

Religious beliefs are most often behind the challenges and the attempted banning of homosexual literature in the school library (Dahir, 2005). Most parents do not want their children coming into contact with books that depict homosexual characters or scenes. They argue that they want their children protected from adult material, and that the best way to do this is to pull the books from the shelves.

Another favorite of censors, *Daddy’s Roommate*, is a children’s book about gay parenting. In the book, a young boy’s dad divorces his mom and goes to live with his homosexual “roommate,” Frank. Those that believe that the book should stay on the shelf point
out that the point of this book is to help children understand homosexuality and that being gay is just one more kind of love (“Sarah Palin, ‘Daddy’s Roommate’ and the Left’s Hypocrisy on ‘Book Banning,’” 2008). Others who would like to see the book taken out of the library argue that the book, especially its illustrations, are offensive. Parents also argue that they do not want their innocent, impressionable children taught about other types of love, that being homosexuality (“Sarah Palin, ‘Daddy’s Roommate’ and the Left’s Hypocrisy on ‘Book Banning,’” 2008).

**Sexuality**

Sexuality is another common reason that school systems seek to ban books. Literature created specifically for young adults has historically created controversy. Judy Blume is probably one of the most censored writers in history, banned from school libraries for her portrayal of issues that concern adolescents. The popular teen novel *Forever* created quite the controversy because of its depiction of a teenage romance, where both partners discuss birth control and sexually transmitted diseases. Some argue that the reason that this book should not be banned is because it helps teens *not* do things they are considering. There was even one case where a teenage girl wrote Blume, saying that she wished she had read *Forever* sooner, because maybe she would have held off on having sex (Vanderkam, 2003). However, those who still think that this book should be banned cannot get beyond the fact that the two teens in the book engage in sex (Clark, 2007).

Another book that was removed from the high-school library was *Flowers in the Attic* for discussing incest between an adolescent brother and sister. Like other books that contain sexuality, parents wanted it gone because they thought that the passages concerning incest and sexual content were offensive. As always, there is the opposing viewpoint that believes that you should never reject or ban a book because of its subject.

**Religion**

The *Harry Potter* series has sparked one of the largest religious debates over a book in many years. The *Harry Potter* series is the story of an orphaned boy who discovers he is a wizard with magical powers. The series became wildly popular due to the fact that Harry is a likable boy whose character speaks to children who feel like they do not fit in. However, due to the fact that the books contain witchcraft, they have created much controversy in the Christian community. Christians are concerned that the books are targeting young children who do not yet have a solid understanding of the Bible, and the dangers of practicing witchcraft. They also believe that the Harry Potter stories make it seem “cool” for children to study the occult, without being aware of its satanic origins (LaFond, 2009). Another concern is that children will think that the only way to fight evil is through “good” magic rather than through the power of God (LaFond, 2009).
On the other hand, there are those who see nothing wrong with the *Harry Potter* series. They believe that because of all the fun and fascinating magic and gadgetry in the books that it is getting children to enjoy reading and using their imaginations. Those who take this position think that it is a harmless “make-believe” world where good wins out over evil (LaFond, 2009).

**Race**

Few books have been kicked off the school library shelves as often as Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The frequent use of the “n” word was the cause for the removal of the book from many school reading lists. Many found the use of this word very offensive and did not want their children to be subjected to it. However, those who think that the novel should stay on the shelves believe that those who think it should go missed the point of the book. They argue that since the novel is profoundly antislavery, that there is nothing wrong with it, and that Twain’s frequent use of the “n” word was just his attempt to capture the sounds of vernacular speech during that era (Carter, 2008).

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe is another novel that faced the same controversy. This antislavery novel, written in 1852, focused attention on the life of the slave. The book fueled the fires of abolitionists, as slavery became a major issue dividing the North and the South. Because of its antislavery theme, many saw nothing wrong with the novel. However, others attacked the novel, saying that Stowe stereotyped the characters, thus revealing her own racism. Also, because of the novel, the name “Uncle Tom” came to imply a black person who catered to racist white power structures (“Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 2009). Those who take this few found the novel offensive and wanted it gone out of the school library.

**Violence**

Two books that have received a lot of attention because of the amount of violence they contain are *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, and *The Knife that Killed Me*. Both are aimed at the pre-teen and teen market and contain graphic passages describing a murder. Parents worry about their children being subjected to such violent books, and think that something should be done about it. Parents would like to see a warning label on books like these that let you know that they contain “adult material.” Others believe that the last thing these parents need to be worrying about is books. They argue that children are subjected to violence through film, television, and video games every day (Harris, 2008) and that this has no effect on the child such as making them more violent or increasing the probability that he/she will commit a violent crime later on in life (Freedman, 2002). Therefore they believe that if film, television, and video games have no effect on children, that books will not either.

**Supreme Court Protects Controversial Books Under The 1st Amendment**

In 1982, the United States Supreme Court ruled that “Local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in
those books…” (Mullally, 2009). The six-year long court case of the Board of Education, Island Tree School District v. Pico was the result of the Parents of New York United group challenging several books that were to be found in the school library. While the school board had a policy in place to remove the books only after they were deemed inappropriate by a review committee (Mullally, 2009), the books were being unofficially deselected from the shelves before a public commission could be formed. Student Steven Pico argued that these actions violated his first amendment rights and took the school board to court. The case went back and forth through the courts with both sides appealing the decisions until the case landed before the Supreme Court. However, it should be noted that the lines between the choice of the school and of parents was a fine one:

Judge William Brennan noted that the “special characteristics of the school library make that environment especially appropriate for the recognition of the First Amendment rights of students.” Nevertheless, he emphasized that his decision was a narrow one, limited to the removal of books from a school library, and not extending to the acquisition of books or their use in the school curriculum (Mullally, 2009).

Kevin Saunders, author of *Saving Our Children from the First Amendment*, argues that the first amendment should be used to limit “negative effects on children” (Saunders, 2003). He writes that there should be a distinct for materials aimed at children that would not apply to adults. In the school library, this means preventing students from accessing materials that may have controversial themes. However, Saunders does not specify what materials are considered inappropriate for children or where the age line between child and adult lies (Saunders, 2003). His views are similar to the usual concerns regarding controversial material: creating an ageist system that does not factor in individual maturity. While it is a reasonable to not put erotic imagery in an elementary school, outside forces should not dictate what subject matter older children may be educated about due to one’s own narrow belief system. Efforts to police reading materials creates an interest in a topic that may have otherwise been overlooked if access had been freely available and no mobs been called upon to control children’s reading materials.

### 11th Circuit Court of Appeals Allows Book Ban

The First Amendment rights recognized by the Supreme Court however may be challenged in lower courts as in February 2009, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals case between American Civil Liberties Union v. Miami-Dade School Board. The Court ruled that in that the school board could pull *Vamos a Cuba* from the shelves “due to ‘factual inaccuracies’” (Kay, 2009). The Court’s decision was because the belief that the book provided too rosy of a picture of Cuban life under Fidel Castro’s reign. The spokesman of the ACLU, Brendan Hensler said, "This is the first case where a book was banned for what it doesn't say. People recognize that
book banning is not the solution -- that we shouldn't take books away but add more” (Kay, 2009).

**How Parents Fight Against Controversial Books**

Parents are the main voice of dissent against books found in school libraries. In Wilmington, NC in 2008, the parents of one student removed their child from the school over the book, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, citing sex, violence and drugs as their objections (Parents take son out of school over controversial book, 2008). In this case, however, the class was offered to read an alternative book, but this student was absent the day and was unaware of his choice. His parents met with the principal and the English teacher before ultimately deciding to withdraw their student from the school. They were not able to reach a compromise.

In 2005 at Norwood High School in Colorado, parents objected over paganism and profanity in the novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*. After parents contacted Superintendent Bob Conder, he had the books removed and then allowed the parents to burn the copies. Conder did not inform the School Board of his decision, breaking policy as the books were not reviewed by a committee, but he defended his decision as, “I can’t dictate morality, but my job is to protect the kids. The books should have never been purchased, and were not properly disclosed for approval” (Roberts, 2005).

**Promoting Challenged Books**

To off-set the effects of parents, community organizers, and other adults in challenging books, Banned Book Week is an annual event to raise awareness of this always contemporary issues in local schools. The American Library Association (ALA) encourages their affiliated libraries to celebrate banned books the last week of September each year (Banned Books Week: Celebrating the Freedom to Read, 2009). This usually involves a display of books that have been challenged with explanations of why these books were targeted. In affiliation with the ALA, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) tracks book challengers throughout the United States. Their website includes an interactive map highlighting recent challenges and the promotion of Banned Book Week (Banned Books Week, 2009). The NCAC’s website also lists the other supporters as the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, the Association of American Publishers, the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and the National Association of College Stores. Banned Books Week is also endorsed by the Center for the Book of the Library of Congress. These organizations are fighting back against censorship in our schools and in the public domain for freedom of speech in literature. The importance of the ALA and other national groups’ involvement with promoting books that have been challenged is that there is a ready resource available for schools to use to prevent unjustified censorship.

One of the most prominent authors in the battle against censorship is children’s author, Judy Blume. Her website has a section devoted to the topic after she began fighting censorship
after publishing her book, *Forever*. Blume became a vocal supporter of the rights of author’s to freedom in their work through interviews and articles she has written (Judy Blume Talks About Censorship, 2007). She also participates in the NCAC’s Kids’ Right to Read Project (The Kids' Right to Read Project, 2009). The project’s goals are to assist teachers, students, and communities in protecting their students from censorship. The NCAC’s website includes a toolbox for teachers and schools when a book is challenged in their school.

**In Conclusion**

The outspoken minority members of a community will continue to play the concerned citizen/parent in trying to limit or prohibit people’s access to materials they finally personally inappropriate. Their drive for controversy is loudest in the schools where the rallying cry of “we must protect the children!” tries to pull books from shelves. As discussed in this paper, there may be genuine concern on the parts of those who wish to censor, however, the Constitution and the Supreme Court have decided that materials may not be removed due to personal likes and dislikes. The library professional in school libraries must be ready to face these challenges level-headed and straight on by having a strategy in place to deal with controversial materials. By doing so, the library, the school board, and everyone involved is not only protected by having a clear plan in place but also able to protect their readers from outside voices that may wish to keep them uninformed about the realities of life. A book, as often lovingly spoken of, is a way to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. That view may not be pretty, but the learning involved is worth protecting.
References


