

## Readstricted: Censorship in Public School Libraries

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### Introduction

For as long as texts have been printed, they have also been subjected to censorship. Each year, books are challenged and/or banned from public school libraries. Removing books from school libraries restricts students' abilities to read and reflect upon these texts. Further, all students (students in kindergarten, students in high school, students with disabilities, students in rural settings, students with diverse backgrounds, etc.) 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 addition to giving students the opportunity to “see themselves” in literature, other students (not those necessarily 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. While there has always been censorship, a shift has taken place in the type of books typically banned/challenged. This shift creates an even greater need for classroom teachers, librarians, and administrators to examine the topic of banned books.

### Background

In 1982, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Board of Education, Island Trees v. Pico* (1982) which addressed the removal of certain books from a public school library by the Board of Education members who felt the books were “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Sem[i]tic, and just plain filthy” (*Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico*, 1979). In its decision, the Supreme Court stated that a balance must be struck between the school’s role as an educator and the students’ rights of access to materials. However, the Court ruled that local school boards may not remove books from the library shelves “simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books” (*Board of Education, Island Trees v. Pico*, 1982). The Supreme Court’s ruling in 1982, however, did not cease the challenges made to books in public school libraries. Typically, in a school setting, a book is “challenged” by a parent, community member, administrator, etc. and then that challenge is reviewed (typically by the district school board) and either denied (leaving the book in place) or approved (resulting in a “ban” of the book).

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* (2006) was challenged, but retained, at a high school because it was labeled "too racy to read" (American Library Association, 2014b). In 2014, Harris' *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex & Sexual Health* (2009) was challenged at a middle school library because of its depiction of cartoon nudity (American Library Association, 2014a). Each of these incidents represents the continual controversy in our society over what is appropriate literature in public schools.

Despite the continued assertion that some books should not be included in school libraries, recent research has indicated that the type of books that are challenged and/or banned has shifted. While twenty years ago books that depicted drug use, sex, or offensive language were most often included on the American Library Association's list of the most banned/challenged books, more recently it has become books containing diversity as a theme that have begun repeatedly being banned/challenged. Books that focus on different races, religious minorities, people with disabilities, LGBT, etc. have pushed out books with offensive language, drug use, and sex on the 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). According to the American Library Association (2016), the most challenged books in 2015 included two books about transgendered people, two books containing homosexuality, and two books featuring Muslim characters.

## Recommendations

As long as books are continued to be printed, they will continue to be challenged. However, it is imperative that students have access to texts depicting all types of ideas and people – including people like themselves and those unlike themselves. Through knowledge of the difference among people, students can learn about themselves and others, leading to a more informed citizenry.

In order to protect the access of books to students, the following five recommendations are made:

1. **Advocate for Access.** It is the responsibility of a library to serve everyone (Jacobson, 2016). Teachers, librarians, administrators, school specialists, parents, and community members 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 the school library becomes one of the main resources for students to learn about their environment and the environment around them. If there are multiple voices opposing banning books and advocating for access, individuals challenging books may gain new information regarding the importance of their inclusion. 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.

2. Avoid “Restricted” Sections. In order to accommodate the concerns of individuals who find books inappropriate, some school districts have implemented “restricted” sections where “controversial” books are kept and can only be checked out by students with parent/guardian permission. This only encourages the belief that the content within those texts is “wrong” or “forbidden.” For example, if a school library shelves a book about a family with same-sex parents in its “restricted” section, a student with a similar family dynamic is taught that a family like that is so different, abnormal, and unacceptable that special written permission must first be obtained before he can read the book. Further, it conveys to other students the same message – that book about families such as those are so offensive that they cannot be kept on the same shelf as books about “acceptable” families. This can create a further divide among students – from those students feeling like their lifestyle is inadequate to possibly reinforcing that notion to other students who see that books containing that content do not deserve a place on the “regular” shelf in the library. While designating sections as “Young Adult” or “Older Readers” is acceptable, restricting access to books is not. Making texts available to all students (without the stigma of being “restricted”) might provide students with a sense of being “accepted” and might send the message to others that differences are valued.
3. Require Reading and Discussion. According to the School Library Journal’s Controversial Books Survey (2016), the majority of challenges originate from parents, especially in elementary schools. More specifically, 92% of challenges in elementary schools and 80% of challenges in high schools are made by parents (Jacobson, 2016). In order to have an informative, productive conversation about the challenged book, the challenger (most often a parent) should be required to read and discuss the book with a group

- of other parents, librarians, teachers, students, etc. Some challenges may be made without the challenger having read the entire book, but just having read a paragraph. Without full knowledge of the entire text, the challenger cannot have an informed opinion about it. Further, a discussion about the book's content will give the challenger an opportunity to hear how the book may be a positive resource for students – perhaps in ways the challenger had not thought of before. Listening to teachers, librarians, and in particular, other students, discuss the text may provide an opportunity for an eye-opening discussion that may result in the dismissal of the challenge. Even if the challenge still stays in place, a thorough reading of the book as well as a respectful discussion about the book should occur.
4. Empower Librarians. Librarians play a powerful role in censorship. Unfortunately, once a librarian has been involved in a formal book challenge, she may be intimidated by books that may be controversial (Jacobson, 2016). As a result, many librarians choose to self-censor by choosing to not purchase a book for the library's collection based upon the threat of a potential challenge in the future (Jacobson, 2016). More than 90% of elementary and middle school librarians have passed on purchasing a book because it may contain controversial material (Jacobson, 2016). Further, many districts have either cut or “deprofessionalized” the position of the librarian – leaving more room for challenges because there is no professional in a position to defend a book. Begley (2016) notes that there are fewer librarians with the knowledge to use the language of intellectual freedom. Librarians should be the school experts on censorship, should have a clear policy in place, and should understand the rights of students and the responsibilities of the library.
  5. Educate Teachers and Administrators. During training to become teachers or administrators, the topic of censorship should be examined. Teachers and administrators 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 their own beliefs/position on book banning. If teachers and administrators are armed with this type of knowledge before entering their positions, they will be more prepared to react informatively to a censorship challenge if one arises. Rather than simply reacting to a challenge, they can proactively prepare for one. While a teacher or administrator may not encounter a challenge during his or her career, censorship in public school libraries is too important of a topic not to be prepared for

## Summary

Students have a right to access books depicting characters and events that they can relate to and characters and events that they can learn from. Denying students the opportunity to access information encourages and reinforces ideas that certain topics are wrong and unacceptable. In today's society, schools should strive to give students opportunities to learn about the world around them. By advocating for access and eliminating barriers to books, public school libraries can fulfill their responsibility to serve all students.

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