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A Comparative Study of the Views of Parents, Teachers and School Librarians on Censorship of Children's Books

RESEARCH REPORT BY **DONALD D. POTTORFF AND JULIE L. COOK**

Abstract

This study compares and contrasts the views of 264 parents, 268 teachers and 61 school librarians on the issue of censorship of children's books. Results of the investigation found that there were more similarities among the three groups than differences. The majority of respondents favored occasional censoring, with "offensive sexual content" being the greatest reason for censoring. They also agreed that censorship decisions should be made by a representative committee of parents and educators and that a single individual or small group should not be allowed to impose views through censorship on a school. Difference of views were found in the age when students should be allowed to select their own books and whether there are books which are appropriate for use at home but should not be allowed in the classroom. In addition, far more parents were in favor of censoring than teachers or librarians.

The controversy of censorship is a complex and complicated issue which evokes strong feelings from all sides. It is also a very serious problem for today's publishers and writers (Zuckerman, 1986) as well as for public school systems in America (Delfattore, 1992). All indications are that censorship is again on the rise (Noble, 1990; Pottorff & Olthof, 1993), and as Harrington-Lueker (1991) writes, "The fires aren't likely to die down soon" (p.18).

Today's censors tend to come from three different groups. The first group is

variously referred to as the "Left" (Pincus, 1985), the "Progressive Left" (Sheerin, 1991) or the "Radical Left" (Thomas, 1983). This group is dedicated to the separation of church and state. It seeks to maintain a neutrality between the two by campaigning to remove materials from children's books dealing with religious beliefs and religious values.

The second, and currently the most vocal group of censors, is known as the "Religious Right" (Cain, 1985; Simmons, 1991). The focus of this group is on removing materials which contain offensive language, materials which are anti-Christian in nature and materials which undermine traditional family values.

The third group is really a composition of groups who are concerned with social issues and have a common goal of eliminating bias from children's books. They are most often concerned with sexism, racism, stereotyping, sensitivity and fair treatment of the handicapped and other similar social issues (Council of Interracial Books for Children, 1980; Noble, 1990).

Although censors can be relatively well identified in terms of philosophical orientations, individual motivations for wanting to censor are not always as clear. First of all, most censors are parents (Booth, 1992) who are genuinely concerned about the welfare and education of their children. Sometimes though it appears that their motivation involves a power struggle to determine who is in control of the public schools (Thompson, 1991). At other times it may be as Zuckerman (1986) believes, "the more the world falls apart around us, the more

some of us need to pretend that childhood is a time of innocence and purity" (p. 629). Florence (1990) suggests that many censorship attempts are a way to "lash out at the ills of today's society," (p. 109) and that the real issues often involve social concerns such as child abuse, sexual harassment, racism, violence and a perception that moral and cultural values are being lost.

Whatever the reason, the effect of censorship on a school community can be devastating. It often leads to polarization which deteriorates into community warfare pitting parents against parents and parents against teachers and school administrators. The disruption that ensues can nearly paralyze a school district, impede learning, demoralize educators and seriously undermine the kind of partnership necessary to adequately educate students.

Although it is not the intent of this study to propose solutions to the multitude of problems that separate the various groups on the issue of censorship, it is helpful to attempt to understand their positions. Booth (1992) states, "The secret of the future of print in North America lies in the partnerships among parents, teachers, authors, publishers, libraries and readers" (p. 1). Certainly schools cannot go about educating students alone, neither can they afford to function as adversaries with parents and communities. It takes all three entities working as a partnership to adequately educate our young.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to compare and contrast the views of parents, teachers and school librarians on issues of censorship pertaining to children's books. More specifically, individual members of these three groups were asked to respond to the following questions and were invited to make written comments:

- 1) Do you favor censorship of students' books?
- 2) What characteristic of a book would you find offensive enough to cause you to want to censor it?
- 3) At what age should a student make his/her own decision about what to read?
- 4) Are there books you would allow your own children to read but would consider inappropriate for school?
- 5) Who should ultimately decide if a book is to be removed from a school library?
- 6) Should one individual or a small group of individuals (either parents or educators) be able to impose their values through censorship on others?
- 7) Have you ever approached a school requesting that a book be removed? If you have, were you treated fairly?

On a related issue, participants were asked:

- 8) Does your school have a written policy on censorship?

Method

Subjects — Subjects for the study included 593 participants who represented thirty-four districts in West-Central Michigan, twenty-seven of which were public and eight private. The sample included 264 parents, 268 teachers and 61 school librarians.

Design — For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was developed to solicit information from participants on their views of censorship. Collection of the data was made through personal contacts with parents of school-aged children and teachers and librarians who were currently employed by a school system. Parents accounted for 45% of the participants in the study, teachers 45% and school librarians 10%.

Results

1) *To Censor or Not to Censor*

In response to the first question querying participants as to whether they favor censorship, the optional choices of "yes," "occasionally," or "never" were possible. The most frequent response to this question from all three groups was "occasionally." This response was given by 59% of parents, 67% of teachers and 71% of librarians. There was more disagreement, however, when it came to the responses of "yes" to censor, or "never" to censor on this question. Parents were much more in favor of censoring than teachers and librarians. Thirty-four percent of parents responded "yes" to censor, compared with 18% of teachers and 13% of librarians.

Response to the question revealed that the majority of respondents were moderate in their beliefs and support only an occasional act of censorship. However, participants, particularly parents, who favored censorship tended to be strong in their beliefs. One parent commented, "Movies are rated, why can't books be rated also?" Other parents were even more vociferous. A second parent remarked, "Check your definition of censorship. Simply not allowing certain books in a public school is not censorship, it's good judgement. A school chooses various guest speakers for assemblies throughout the year. Those who don't get selected aren't being censored, they just weren't chosen!" Yet another parent wrote, "When our child brings home a book that we feel is inappropriate, we simply throw the book away!"

The question seemed to cause a number of teachers and librarians to reflect on their own behaviors. One teacher wrote that she purposely omits profanity or any part of a book dealing with sex when she is reading aloud to her students. She asks, "Is this a type of censorship as well?"

All too often librarians in the survey felt that in order to avoid controversy, it is better "just not to order certain books." One librarian commented, "As a librarian, I am continually asking myself as I select and purchase books, am I in fact really censoring?"

Responses to this question led to the conclusion that there is apparently little consensus about what constitutes censorship. The American Library Association (1989) defines censorship as any act that either overtly or covertly denies access of a book to students. Many would disagree, using words like "wise selection," "selective editing," "common-sense removal" and "age appropriateness" to justify restricting a book. This kind of censorship can be subtle. Recently a West Michigan school district, after receiving complaints from parents on Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988), decided to allow the book to remain in the school library, but not to allow teachers to read it aloud in the classroom. The school board president was quoted as saying, "What we did was way down the road from censorship. Reading the book aloud forces it on those who may not approve of its content" (Spencer, 1993).

2) *Offensive Topics for Censorship*

With this question, participants were asked to select from eight issues which have been recognized nationally as common reasons for attempted censorings. They included profanity, family values, religious issues, offensive sexual content, violence, racism, sex stereotyping and race stereotyping (Pottorff & Olthof, 1993). A ninth category, "other," was also listed to provide an opportunity for additional responses. Participants were then asked to rank in numerical order the three issues which they found to be most offensive.

All three groups were very consistent in their views with the choice of "offen-

Table 1

Topics Offensive Enough to Censor

Parents	Order of Responses From:	
	Teachers	Librarians
62% offensive sexual content	62% offensive sexual content	59% offensive sexual content
15% profanity	10% profanity	16% racism
13% racism	9% racism	15% violence
8% violence	8% violence	8% profanity

sive sexual content." This category was chosen by 62% of parents, 62% of teachers and 59% of librarians. Overall, the four top categories of offensive sexual content, profanity, racism and violence were identical for the three groups with librarians slightly shifting the order. (See Table 1.)

Comments from both parents and teachers indicated a special concern about reproductive health books with regard to sexually offensive materials. Several stated that they do not want any "reproductive health type" books in their school library at all. Parents were also especially concerned about books that mention any aspect of homosexual activity. Surprisingly, only one book in the survey was listed by title as containing sexually offensive material. Gary Paulsen's *The Voyage of the Frog* (1989) was mentioned by a teacher who said, "When I read the book aloud to my class, I had to omit some parts where the main character discovers some passages about sex in his deceased uncle's diary."

With regard to profanity, parents were slightly more concerned with the issue than teachers or librarians. Several librarians commented that they do not mind an author's use of profanity if it seems appropriate for a character's personality or the setting of the story.

Surprisingly, racism, though one of four top choices, received essentially no written comments from participants.

Many comments, on the other hand, were made about violence with Stephen King's novels being singled out as examples of the violence and gore they would not want in their school library.

3) Age and Book Selection

In response to the question, "At what age should a

student make his/her own decision about what to read?" there was little consensus. Senior high was the leading response of parents with 35%, while teachers were equally divided with 27% listing senior high and another 27% listing primary grades. In contrast, 31% of librarians felt that children should be able to make their own selection in the primary grades, while another 25% were unsure. Table 2 provides a complete listing of responses.

Comments from many of the parents indicated that they wanted more control over books that their children select than do teachers and librarians. Teachers and librarians tended more often to write that beginning in the primary grades we need to teach children to be critical and independent thinkers and to begin to select their own reading material. Some survey participants expressed concern that labeling a book "inappropriate" can have an opposite than desired effect, causing "all the students to want to get their hands on it." This seems to be the view held by children's author Madeleine L'Engle (1982) who wrote, "If kids find out for example that *A Wind in the Door* (L'Engle, 1973), has been labeled porno, you can bet that my sales will go up" (p. 335).

Though a relatively small percentage, it was surprising to find that thirty-four respondents felt that students ought *not* to be able to freely choose their own

Table 2

Age When Students Should Be Allowed to Select Their Own Books

Parents	Order of Responses From:	
	Teachers	Librarians
35% senior high	27% senior high	31% primary grades
17% junior high	27% primary grades	25% unsure
16% unsure	18% unsure	16% junior high
15% primary grades	17% junior high	15% intermediate grades
9% intermediate grades	7% intermediate grades	10% senior high
8% beyond high school	4% beyond high school	2% beyond high school

reading material until after they have graduated from high school. No suggestions were given as how best to manage that, however. Zuckerman (1986) in addressing this issue writes, "Why do we believe that at eighteen a magic transformation takes place and that all the terrible things a person was too young to handle the year before can be suddenly taken in stride?"

4) Books Appropriate for Home, but Not for School

When asked if there were books that you would allow your own children to read but wouldn't consider appropriate for school, varying results were found. Teacher responses were evenly divided on the issue with 48% responding "yes" and 52% responding "no." The opinions of parents and librarians were much more congruent. Thirty-six percent of parents and 40% of librarians responded "yes," while 64% of parents and 60% of librarians answered "no." The most common contents mentioned by the "yes" respondents were books dealing with sexuality and religion.

Reasons for "yes" responses varied significantly among parents, compared with teachers and librarians. Many parents reported that they would be more liberal at home with what their children read or what they read to their children

because at home you can discuss your family's morals and values. Teachers and librarians, however seemed to be far more concerned at what Weiss (1988) refers to as the "What if I get in trouble, syn-

drome." This attitude was very apparent in the survey. Several commented that they try to play it safe and avoid controversy. A number of educators used the example of Judy Blume's books when suggesting that they would have no problem with their own children reading her books, but would avoid a potential problem at school by not selecting them to be read aloud.

5) Who Should Ultimately Decide?

When the three groups of subjects were asked, "Who should ultimately decide if a book is to be removed from a school library?" 69% of parents, 76% of teachers and 70% of librarians agreed that it should be done by a committee composed of parents, teachers, librarians, administrators and school board members. Many expressed the opinion that the decision should not be made by a single person. The remainder of the responses from all three groups were evenly distributed among the choices of parents only, teachers only, the school librarian, the school principal, a parent team and school board members.

Clearly the results show that a majority of parents and educators favor a committee approach to censorship decisions, however this does not appear to be what is happening. Simmons (1991) reports that as often as 56% of the time,

books that are challenged by parents and other citizens are simply removed by the building principal without even consulting with the teacher involved. In addition, school librarians make decisions about removing books, limiting their access or not ordering them. One reason for this practice could be due to the fact that as many as 40% of school districts may not have a developed censorship policy (Pottorff & Olthof, 1993). Noble (1990) reports, however, that even when a school district does have a process for reviewing a challenged book, that often it does not adhere to it.

6) Individual or Small Group Values

Parents, teachers and librarians were all in agreement when asked if one individual or a small group of individuals should be able to impose personal values through censorship on others. "No" was the indicated response for 60% of parents, 66% of teachers and 70% of librarians. Many respondents were adamant on this issue with statements such as, "Our free country demands free choice, so no one should impose their values on anyone else," and "Who is to say whose values are right or better?" One parent in the study went so far as to say, "One small group of individuals should impose their values through censorship on others only if they have the same kind of values which I have."

Whose values does a school system use then when selecting or censoring books? This would seem to be a controversy that is far from being settled. Clark (1986) writes, "When is someone permitted to place his or her personal value system into a library policy? Where does it stop? The repression of knowledge sets a dangerous precedent (p. 96)."

Of particular interest to the researchers was how the participants who answered "yes" to the first question indicating they were in favor of censor-

ing children's books responded to this question. Analysis of the results indicated that the preponderance of these individuals were parents and that they were divided evenly with 51% (73 of 144) in favor of the issue of one or a small group being able to impose their values.

Typical responses from this group were, "individuals have the right to be represented in the schools too," and "since there are so many wonderful books from which to choose, why should anyone's values be violated?" The other 49% favoring censorship were opposed to one person or a small group making such decisions and tended to favor larger committees representing both the school and community.

7) Requests for Book Removal

When asked whether they had ever approached a school requesting that a book be removed, 5.9% of all respondents stated that they had. This group included seventeen parents, twelve teachers and six librarians. When asked if they had been treated fairly by the school system, fifteen of the seventeen parents and all of the teachers and librarians answered that they had.

The sizeable number of individuals who admitted challenging a book in this survey was unexpected. If in fact, this percentage is representative of the nation at large, it is not surprising that censorship and censorship attempts are on the rise in the United States.

8) Written Censorship Policies

In a related issue, participants were asked if their respective school systems have written censorship policies. Rather surprisingly, many did not know. "Unsure" was the response of 79% of parents, 62% of teachers and 23% of school librarians.

It seems inconceivable that so many educators who make day-to-day curricular decisions about books in their libraries and classrooms would not

know if their school systems have or do not have a censorship policy. With the recent increase in censorship attempts, a school system can hardly afford to be without policies for both the selection and challenge of books. Harrington-Lueker (1991) writes, "Good policies make it impossible for one person to act unilaterally." Everyone then, including parents, educators and community members at large, needs to be made aware of these policies, and the policies should be readily available for all to review.

Conclusions

The study revealed that there were far more similarities among parents, teachers and school librarians on issues of censorship than there were differences. The majority of respondents in all three groups favored occasional censoring of children's books. They agreed that "offensive sexual content" would characterize the greatest reason to censor and felt that a representative committee of parents and educators should ultimately make decisions about censorship. They did not feel that one individual or a small group of individuals should be allowed to impose personal values on others through censorship. The study also indicated that a similar percentage of respondents from all three groups had approached a school requesting a book be removed and that most felt that they were treated fairly.

Differences in views were also found. They were as follows:

- Far more parents were in favor of censoring books than either teachers or librarians. This ratio remained at approximately two to one.
- There was little agreement on an age when students should be allowed to select their own books. The leading response for parents was senior high while librarians felt that students were mature enough

in the primary grades. Teachers were evenly divided between senior high and the primary grades.

- More teachers felt that there were books they would allow their own children to read at home but would not use in the classroom. The most frequent reason given was to "avoid controversy."

Finally, the study revealed that significant numbers of all respondents were unsure if their school system had a censorship policy. The percentages were highest for parents at 79%, followed by teachers at 62% and librarians at 23%.

Discussion

An examination of the diverse views of these groups leaves educators wondering whether it will ever be possible to bridge the gap and find a common ground. The results of this study would indicate that there is hope. However, if it is to happen, certainly several issues need to be resolved. For example, schools will need to convince the public that they are using common sense in decisions about age appropriate materials for students. Parents will need to buy into the proposition that children can be taught to select books wisely and then be allowed to do so. Individuals and groups with diverse views on censorship will need to examine their political and ideological perspectives with the goal of providing the best education for children while "avoiding the temptation to erode the freedom that we all believe in" (Patterson, 1989, p. 7). Otherwise we run the risk of becoming what Jorstad (1988) refers to as "increasingly more tribalized and warring sects" (p. 370). Public schools must become more sensitive to the communities around them and develop strong policies for both the selection of new books and the critiquing of books that are challenged. Finally, parents and members of the community must be included on committees dealing with

policy making, the selection of major instructional materials and books that have been challenged.

Reading children's books is an important way for young people to find out about the world and their place in it (Zuckerman, 1986). Censorship in effect limits the diversity of ideas, opinions and points of view to which young people should be exposed (Davis, 1988). If we remove from schools all materials which might offend any group, what will be left (Paterson, 1989)? There must be a better way.

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