Censorship Issues in School Libraries

By Shannon Mills.

The Information Policy Committee and students at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, The iSchool at The University of British Columbia, have partnered to provide a valuable resource to information professionals.

The BCLA Browser and the IPC are pleased to feature work researched and written by students participating in the iSchool's Information Policy course. The students created entries on a variety of current information policy issues for posting on a private class wiki. Students then had the opportunity to have their complete entries posted on the IPC blog and synopses published in the BCLA Browser.

Read Shannon's full article here.

Introduction

The CLA Statement on Intellectual Freedom claims it "is the responsibility of libraries to guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity" (Canadian Library Association, 1985). Librarians often face book and other material challenges from concerned patrons or coworkers who desire to have material they find offensive removed from the collection.

We need to continually educate ourselves on intellectual freedom issues in order to be able to recognize and respond to censorship in all forms. 139 challenges to materials were reported in Canadian libraries in 2009 (Schrader, 2010); however, it is estimated that as many as 85% of challenges go unreported (Doyle, 2012).

This article discusses some of the unique challenges associated with a school library setting, the issue of self-censorship, and censorship through internet access. Best practices are introduced for school librarians or staff to reference when facing a challenge, and additional resources for further education are highlighted.

In a School Library

The school library setting is unique. Teachers are expected to act in loco parentis in regards to the health and safety of children (Shirley), yet many mistakenly assume this responsibility extends to the selection of a child's reading materials.

In an alarming trend, teaching assistants accounted for 1/3 of all material challenges in Canadian libraries in 2009 (Schrader, 2010). Part of the reason for this increase in challenges among teaching staff is likely the de-professionalization of the school librarian position and the lack of knowledge about censorship in school settings.

Canadian school libraries are being managed by fewer professionals with minimal training in intellectual freedom issues and professional selection tools (Klausen, 2007). It is important for librarians, teachers, paraprofessionals, and those working in schools to educate themselves and create conversation with others on intellectual freedom issues.

Self-Censorship and Internet Access

Librarians can often be tempted to censor by selection. Books can be rejected based on budget, lack of demand, literary quality, limited shelf space, content, relevance to the community, and poor reviews. It is difficult to know when these criteria are used as legitimate selection tools or as an "excuse for self-censorship" (Coley, 2002). Ultimately, fear of a challenge should not be used as a selection principle (Dickenson, 2007).

Another form of censorship that is incredibly prevalent today is the use of internet filters to limit websites, search engines, and collaborative tools students have access to at schools. What teacher librarians and educators are missing when they take a defensive stance towards social media is the chance to leverage tools that students are familiar with and enjoy using as "informal learning networks" (Watkins, 2012).

Best Practices

School librarians can rely on several best practice techniques when facing a challenge or educating others on intellectual freedom. Communicate your library's selection policy and digital access policy to staff and administration. Celebrate Freedom to Read week to increase awareness of the history of challenged books. Have a materials review form and review process established. Most importantly, strive to create a community among parents, students,

teachers, and administration that welcomes discussion and debate about your collection.

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