

Intellectual Freedom: The Elephant in the Library

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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I have a job for you. The character traits needed to be successful in this job are: “. . . enthusiasm, honesty, courage, persistence, and the mental toughness to persevere in response to resistance, conflict, and personal attacks” (Adams, 2010, p. 43). What is the job? You might think of military or law enforcement, maybe even a professional athlete or a politician, but these are the character traits described by former library media specialist and past president of the American Association of School Libraries, Helen R. Adams, as necessary for those who are leaders in school libraries. These are the character traits teacher-librarians need if they are to promote and to protect the intellectual freedom of their students.

What is Intellectual Freedom?

If you asked me prior to my recent study what I thought intellectual freedom was, my answer would have been pretty narrow. It probably would have included something about the freedom to read and the freedom to speak and to express one’s self—a narrow definition. The position statement of the Canadian Library Association (1985) on intellectual freedom begins:

All persons in Canada have the fundamental right, as embodied in the nation's Bill of Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to have access to all expressions of knowledge, creativity and intellectual activity, and to express their thoughts publicly. This right to intellectual freedom, under the law, is essential to the health and development of Canadian society. (n.p.)

I think I understood this. In fact, I would have said I was an advocate for intellectual freedom and did not engage in practices that were in any way contrary to the protection of a student’s intellectual freedom. That is where I would have been wrong. Truthfully, I have unwittingly violated the intellectual freedom of students. In fact, the more I read and learn about the depth of intellectual freedom, the more I realize my lack of knowledge about the myriad of issues included in this concept. It became clear the waters of intellectual freedom were deep and sometimes muddy, but all students, even those in kindergarten, have a right to those freedoms and a teacher-librarian has the responsibility to protect them.

Previously, my thoughts about intellectual freedom would have centered on the purchase of books for the library and on students' rights to read those books. I have always believed any student should be able to find himself or herself on the shelves of the school library. In my previous position as teacher-librarian of a Grades 7-12 school, I did not shy away from choosing books that may have been seen as controversial. I purchased books that provided a variety of viewpoints, that were engaging to students, and that met not only curricular themes and guidelines but also discussed issues to which students could relate. This past year, I became the teacher-librarian of a Grades K-5 school and suddenly I am trouncing on students' intellectual freedoms like I am stepping on ants at a picnic. My philosophy and commitment to a student's right to information did not change, but my lack of knowledge and understanding about all of the many ways in which intellectual freedoms could be violated resulted in some big mistakes. The fact that I was working with younger students made me feel more protective and as if they were too young to understand, and thereby deserve, intellectual freedom.

Practices That Hinder Intellectual Freedom in the Library

The first of my mistakes is one I inherited and blithely continued. I kept the elephant. Yes, I have an elephant in my library. It is a handmade, wooden bookshelf in the shape of an elephant. When I began my new role as elementary school teacher-librarian, I was told that students in Kindergarten, Grade 1 and, for the first few months, Grade 2 were to choose their books from the elephant and only from the elephant. I do not believe its inclusion into the library was to deliberately stifle the intellectual freedoms of students, but rather to make both shelving and keeping order on the shelves manageable in an understaffed and very busy library. As I begin to further my understanding of the issue of intellectual freedom, I read with interest the guidelines of American Library Association (ALA) (2006):

The "right to use a library" includes free access to, and unrestricted use of, all the services, materials, and facilities the library has to offer. Every restriction on access to, and use of, library resources, based solely on the chronological age, educational level, literacy skills, or legal emancipation of users violates Article V. (p 78)

Yes, quite clearly the elephant restricts the use of many materials undoubtedly of interest to the students, based solely on their education level or chronological age. While I understand how and why the elephant came to be, I also know the tyrannical reign of the elephant must come to an end.

Another practice I inherited and never questioned is the rule to only allow two books per child to be signed out and no books taken out if a student has overdue books. Kindergarten students are only allowed one book. Adams (2010) asserted “The school library media specialist also is dedicated to changing school policy that prohibits students with overdue books, fines, or unpaid lost resource fees from checking out materials” (p. 53). I did question this policy early in the school year and was told if I wanted to allow the kindergarten students to borrow more books out when they had not returned the last one, I must be prepared to lose more books. I assumed the practice came into place because of lost books and forgot any objection I had entertained; after all, I must protect the budget, right? In fact, this is not a school policy that is written anywhere, but rather it is a tradition staff and students have come to expect and to accept. I realize like many of the policies or practices currently in place, it is there to make things easier for staff and not to benefit students. This is one of those gray areas. How do I justify the loss of books? How do I encourage students to return books so others can borrow them? What would happen to the collection if students could borrow unlimited numbers of books? Some books are very popular and everyone wants them. If I say students may only borrow one edition of *Guinness World Records* at a time, am I infringing on their intellectual freedom?

I love buying books and sharing them with students. I am always looking for particularly interesting, funny, beautiful, thoughtful, and adventurous stories. I do know some students will overlook these books for a book about Barbie, SpongeBob, or Star Wars, and I cannot help but cringe when I see the same students borrow the same kinds of books week after week. I secretly rejoice when I have to discard one of those books because it is worn or damaged. Trying to help students broaden their reading interests to include higher quality literature is a challenge. I am ashamed to admit, however, that I have committed what is probably the number one sin with respect to intellectual freedom, not to mention a practice I personally abhor. Instead of accepting the challenge, I stopped purchasing these books, or I purchased only one or two copies, knowing that the demand would be great, but thinking if fewer pop culture books were available, the students would borrow (and love) a better quality picture book. I, who had never shied away from purchasing a

controversial title, was self-censoring, and until it was pointed out to me, I did not grasp the gravity of this practice. Honestly, I tried to find a way to justify my actions, but the truth is it is no different than any other self-censoring act, such as not purchasing a book because someone might object to its contents or its point of view. Wrestling with this aspect of intellectual freedom led me again into some very gray territory. I had many excuses for not purchasing those books: they were low quality, there were few funds left in the budget and they should be used for better choices, these books didn't directly relate to curriculum, and so on. Pat Scales (2009) explained self-censorship as follows:

Some may argue that librarians are merely selecting what they feel are the best books for kids and that it's not censorship. But the key factor is one's intent. A trained media specialist is expected to choose a range of titles that best suits the curriculum and meets the reading needs of students—and that involves making judgment calls. But if you reject a book just because of its subject matter or if you think that it would cause you some problems, then that's self-censorship. And that's going against professional ethics. (as cited in Whelan, 2009, p. 28)

I had no choice but to recognize the truth of what I had done and resolve to correct it. I was not acting as a selector of books, but a censor. Bishop (2007) explained the difference lies in a selector who “. . . strives to give each item fair consideration and makes a concerted effort to suppress personal biases” (p. 169) while a censor attempts “. . . to impose certain values on others by limiting the availability of one or more items” (p. 169). I was looking for a way to exclude titles from the library. Often censors are trying to protect children, and I had this experience this year in my own library. A Grade 1 child had borrowed the book *Jasper's Day* by Marjorie Blain Parker. This is a story about a boy whose dog dies. It is a very sad story. The parent of the Grade 1 child asked me to shelve this book in another part of the library because it was too sad for a young child. This parent was trying to shelter her child. Although she has the right to do this for her child, she does not have the right to make that decision for other children. Symons and Harmon (1995) stated:

Librarians and governing bodies should maintain that parents—and only parents—have the right and responsibility to restrict the access of their children—and only their children—to library resources. Parents or legal guardians who do not want their children to have access to certain library services, materials or

facilities, should so advise their children. Librarians and governing bodies cannot assume the role of parents or the functions of parental authority in the private relationship between parent and child (p. 60).

Not only may the parent not restrict access to other children but also the teacher-librarian should not restrict access for that parent's child. It would not be right to say to that child, "That's a sad book, and I know your mom will not want you to read it. You may not take that book." Teacher-librarians must focus always on allowing access to materials and not on restricting access. A child must learn what books are acceptable for him or her to borrow and to choose those books. In fact, Symons and Harmon (1995) stated all library policy or procedure manuals should include a statement that says, "The library accepts no responsibility for enforcing what a parent may not want a child to see, read, or view while in the library" (p. 60).

Even I would hope that I would be done listing my transgressions, but no such luck. Article III of The Code of Ethics of the American Library Association (2007) explains "We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired, or transmitted" (as cited in Adams, 2010, p. 59). In fact, the American Association of School Librarians' Position Statement on the Confidentiality of Library Records (n.d.) declares "The library community recognizes that children and youth have the same rights to privacy as adults" (as cited in Adams, 2010, p. 59). How does this impact the teacher-librarian and her students? Think overdue notices. *I used to print off each classroom's overdue list and post it on the classroom door. I have also printed lists and given them to the teacher. Both of these practices are violations of student privacy and intellectual freedom.* Again, with young children, this concept is difficult to accept. A young student may not remember the name of a book he or she has borrowed. A parent needs the name to find it. Is it a violation of privacy to provide the name of the borrowed material to the parent? The simple answer is yes. Where children are concerned, I think many parents would be surprised to have a teacher-librarian refuse a request to provide a list of materials borrowed or books currently on loan based on privacy rights and intellectual freedom. I know I would feel uncomfortable stating that I could not provide that information to a parent, but I also feel that in the case of a Kindergarten student who cannot find his or her library book, it would benefit no one to refuse. Bishop (2007) discussed Moshman's (1986) book wherein the intellectual and moral rights of children are addressed. In "Distinction of Child from Adult

II—Restrictions on children’s intellectual rights should be based on the individual child’s circumstances and intellectual limitations” (p. 163). With this in mind, I would feel confident in revealing the name of a missing library book to a parent.

I could hardly ignore the issue of intellectual freedom and Internet. This is an area where, in my own school division, I have little control, although it is an issue for which I do advocate on the behalf of staff and students. In my division, the decisions about Internet filtering are controlled by the information technology (IT) department, but web access is at the discretion of the principal. Filtering programs often deny access to websites that are perfectly acceptable, and if that happens, our IT department is usually flexible about unblocking the site as long as they can confirm the site is harmless. However, in the case of sites such as YouTube, the decision to provide access lies with the principal. This means access in our division varies from school to school, depending upon the knowledge, understanding, and personal opinions of the principal. Sometimes permission is denied because of a desire to protect students from unsavory influences. Sometimes permission is denied because it is easier than dealing with problems that arise from its inappropriate use.

Access to the Internet and the resources and information it contains is as important as access to the physical library, books, and other media. Computer access and filtering is common across Canada. Alexander Heard (1995) said “there is no use trying to make ideas safe for students; you have to make the students safe for ideas” (p. 62). We can accomplish this by educating students and by giving them opportunities to think critically, teaching them to be responsible and helping them to understand acceptable use policies.

I am overwhelmed by the numerous barriers to access and the many options for violating intellectual freedom. It is not just the books we purchase for our collections, the restriction of certain areas of the library or of particular materials, the restriction of loans, and the privacy of access to materials or to websites, but also it includes the design of software (typically designed for boys), socioeconomic differences that give advantages to the wealthy, lack of access to materials and technology for differently-abled students, fixed scheduling, lack of appropriate staffing in school

libraries, and insufficient budgets (Bishop, 2007, p. 164). Not fully understanding the full range of issues within intellectual freedom, I was not even aware of the many ways in which intellectual freedoms could be threatened.

Practices That Support Intellectual Freedom in the Library

The key to protecting intellectual freedom in school libraries is a sound selection policy which includes a procedure for challenges. Adams (2010) discussed the importance of this policy as “. . . the legal bases for selection and reconsideration of all instructional and library materials and establishes that all resources are acquired under a standard set of criteria” (p. 44). This is not a document that can be created in isolation. As with any worthwhile policy, all stakeholders should be at the table when such a document is developed. Adams (2010) correctly asserted “The most effective selection policy is developed with input from a broad representation of members of the school community, including school library professionals, teachers, administrators, students, and parent and board of education representatives” (p. 44). The many benefits are obvious. There would be more ownership when everyone involved is included in the development and implementation. Most issues that would arise would be thought through in the development of the policy and further, administrators and board members would be onside with the spirit of the policy later on, when challenges arise. This document is essential to help teacher-librarians refrain from self-censorship, to help ensure proper channels are followed should there be a challenge, and to make clear the role of the teacher-librarian and the school library.

As discussed in Bishop (2007), When one denies an adult access to diverse ideas, one is restricting available input; when one denies such access to a child, however, one is also restricting development of the ability to consider differing views. When one denies an adult free expression, one is denying the opportunity to communicate; when one denies free expression to a child, however, one is also restricting development of the ability to form one’s own ideas. (p. 163)

We must provide children with the opportunities to develop their abilities—the abilities they need to communicate, to form ideas, and to consider differing views. This makes clear the importance of the teacher-librarian’s role to protect intellectual freedoms and to advocate for them, regardless of the age of the student. We must abandon thinking like a protector and assuming we know “. . . what will harm them, what information they need, and how their needs should be met” (Bishop, 2007, p. 164). Instead, as Bishop (2007) noted, we must embrace the role of advocate and “. . . assume an open stance, perceiving children as capable of defining both their information needs and their resource needs” (p. 164).

The important question now becomes: How do I best protect the intellectual freedom of my students? With enthusiasm, I must learn as much about intellectual freedom as I can. I must choose materials and resources with honesty and keep personal bias out of the equation. With courage, persistence and mental toughness, I should meet challenges and should defend the rights of my students, even from those who mean well. Finally, I need to address the elephant in the room with administration, staff, colleagues, and community. Discussing intellectual freedom issues is important if we are to manage those same issues with diligence and integrity, and protect the intellectual freedom of our students.

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