Self-Censorship In The Public School Libraries

'The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame' by Oscar Wilde (Hielsberg, 1994). The librarian has a book and has become anxious about it because it contains sensitive material that may possibly be controversial. The librarian fears that someone may complain about it and now he or she must choose. Does it remain, or does it go? Should the librarian put it on a restricted rack or require parental permission? This is a junction that many school librarians face. When the weight to self-censor occurs, does the librarian allow fear to enter into the decision?

This article will discuss the meaning and types of self-censorship and the reasons why some librarians use self-censoring to prevent a book to be on the school library shelf or refusing to purchase for their collections. Hot-button issues tend to be the reason behind self-censorship. Several case studies have been conducted to search for the reasons why librarians self-censor and how many times it is done. One study tells of how librarians were monitored to determine if they were using self-censorship using the OPAC system. A formal graduate student recalls a time when intellectual freedoms collided causing one to determine if censoring is a form of intellectual freedom. School librarians are faced with tough decisions about the books that are chosen for their collections. They tend to gear toward using self-censorship to prevent backlash from parents, teachers, and the school board.

Our democratic system allows all citizens the right to express themselves without restrictions. This is called intellectual freedom. Librarians that use self-censorship are also expressing their opinions and critiques. Therefore, “in making their criticisms known, people who object to certain ideas are exercising the same rights as those who created and disseminated the material to which they object. Their rights to voice opinions and try to persuade others to adopt those opinions is protected only if the rights of persons to express ideas they despise are also protected. The rights of both sides must be protected, or neither will survive” ('Intellectual Freedom and Censorship Q & A', 2007).

The ALA which is the governing body for all libraries use the First Amendment to establish the freedom to read statement. This statement speaks of allowing publishers and librarians to make accessible the most comprehensive variety of perspectives and articulations. Librarians do not have to embrace each thought or presentation they make accessible. It is in opposition to the public to bar access to compositions based on the individual history or political affiliations of the creator. There is no spot in our society for endeavors to pressure the opinions of others, to limit adults to the reading material deemed reasonable for youths, or to repress the endeavors of journalists to accomplish aesthetic expression. It is the duty of librarians to challenge infringements upon that freedom by people or groups looking to force their own principles or tastes upon the network everywhere ('The Freedom to Read Statement,' 2006).

A standout amongst the most critical obligations of a librarian is to make a balanced collection that will give data to a different network of clients. Collection development can likewise be a dreary errand, but it is a most important task for a librarian. There are a wide range of expert instruments to enable librarians to adjust collections, however, many use self-censorship to make their choices (Intellectual Freedom Blog, 2019). There are security nets that can be

instituted to help conquer self-censorship. The hardest is understanding that the library serves all patrons. Librarians tend to think the library belongs to them and, thus, can self-censor. Librarians must dismiss this ideology and realize that there is no, “my library” but “the library” (Intellectual Freedom Blog, 2019).

Many public schools in the United States are identified as Title 1 schools. This means that the school receives federally funded money that is to be spent in certain departments of the school such as after-school tutoring, subject area programs, technology, and the library collection. With these funds, the librarian is responsible to choose a selection of books to add to his or her current collection. The list will then go through an approval process from the principal to the Title I personnel and finally, the school board. Many librarians make decisions on titles by getting feedback from the students and teachers, adding to a book series such as Dork Diaries or I Survived, and new titles that are geared towards specific grade levels. Librarians also consider titles that may correlate with reading programs such as Accelerated Reader and Read 180. Some titles will not get approved by the school board and although that is a form of censorship; librarians are to adhere to the district’s decision.

The essential role of a school library is to provide resources and materials in the help of the curricular mission of the school district. It gives access to data that can be transferred to the students by means of books, music, art, magazines, newspapers, software, videos, audio collections, and internet access. Since the school library is an imperative supplement to the school classroom, it is important that these assets speak to a wide scope of thoughts and data. School librarians apply explicit criteria, analyze proficient audits, and survey readers level of reasonableness of substance in collection development. These criteria help decide what to include, what to access through asset sharing, and what to remove (Rickman, 2007).

In making these critical decisions, some school librarians have conformed to using self-censorship. To fully understand self-censorship, one must first know the meaning of censorship. The ALA defines censorship as “the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons — individuals, groups, or government officials — find objectionable or dangerous” (“First Amendment and Censorship,” 2008). Censorship is also in violation of the First Amendment Rights which state that 'Congress shall make no law ...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press…” (LII Staff, 2017). Censors attempt to force their perspective on what is honest and suitable, or hostile and questionable, on every other person. Censors pressure public and school libraries to smother and evacuate data they judge improper or unsafe from a community, with the goal that nobody else gets the opportunity to peruse or see the material and make up their very own opinions about it (“First Amendment and Censorship,” 2008).

“Self-censorship is when librarians choose to censor their own library collections. It occurs when a librarian chooses not to purchase an item because it contains controversial material, or when a librarian chooses to label or restrict access to an item. It can happen in any kind of library and impacts patrons of all ages” (Baillie, 2017). It is an infringement of the ALA's Code of Ethics, section II which state “We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” ('Professional Ethics', 2017). “Worst of all, it diminishes the value of the work done by librarians to fight censorship” (Baillie, 2017). There are several categories of self-censorship. The first is internal-self where a librarian uses his or her own belief system. The second is external-school which comes from within the school system and this can be the principal, district office personnel and the school board. The third is external-community which come from the local community such as parents or businesses (Rickman,

2007).

It is crucial for a librarian to have self-awareness. Librarians must know themselves and their predisposition. This quality can impact the choices they make while using their own beliefs on issues such as abortion, the death penalty, sex, or drug abuse. These issues can affect everything from the materials that are selected to the subjects used as precedents (“Information Access & Delivery: Issues,” n.d.). Regardless of whether educators are relegating ventures on social issues or students are making decisions about recreational reading, hot-button issues will continue to rise.

Notwithstanding biases regarding hot-button issues, a librarian needs to think about his or her own interests as well. If a librarian does not have a specific enthusiasm for romance, fantasy, science fiction, or humor, the librarian may neglect great materials that may interest some youthful readers. For example, graphic novels are prevalent with young adults; however, they might be something a librarian has never experienced. Now and again, librarians will develop prejudice based on very little proof. For instance, a few people will say they do not care for e-readers, but it is possible that they have never tried using one (“Information Access & Delivery: Issues,” n.d.). In the 21st century with the boom of technology around us, how is it possible to actually self-censor a book, movie, music, or even the internet? Some librarians have challenged the decision of the districts and have used self-censorship to prevent the purchase of books they deem inappropriate.

Libraries offer a wide variety of interesting, yet, sometimes offensive materials. However, what one individual finds offensive another might find entertaining. Some observe the swear words in books and expel them as we do with the graffiti on buildings or overpasses (Taylor, 2011).

Self-censorship is usually triggered by hot-button issues. Hot-button issues are points that get individuals talking, examining, and some of the time hollering and can include gay and lesbian rights, immigration, violence, political viewpoints, human sexuality, witchcraft, and the occult. If a librarian feels awkward when confronting a hot-button issue, at that point he or she will most likely have a solid individual viewpoint. Librarians should know about those things that trigger this response. For certain individuals, it could be the offensive language in a novel such as in The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas. For others, it's the violence found in Hate List by Jennifer Brown. It could also be the stand on gun control such as found in The Last Gun: How Changes in the Gun Industry Are Killing Americans and What It Will Take to Stop It by Tom Diaz that affects the librarian’s determination or absence of choice identified with specific titles (“Information Access & Delivery: Issues,” n.d.).

What do librarians do when these topics are in novels and nonfiction texts? A librarian’s personal beliefs or viewpoints cannot be integrated into the decisions of having books such as these on the shelves (“Information Access & Delivery: Issues,” n.d.). The author of this article interviewed a local middle school student who was a part of the LGBTQ community. The student, who wishes to remain anonymous, was asked if on the off chance he or she had ever had the opportunity to read a book that identified with LGBTQ. The student stated that these types of books were elusive and if given the chance, would read one. Despite strong religious convictions, passing judgment on the student is just as much a violation as self-censoring a book that contained content identifying with the LGBTQ community. The content may be a sensitive subject to some, but all students merit the privilege to read a book that reflects his or her way of life (Anonymous, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Self-censorship tends to hinder intellectual freedom. An example comes from Amy Hielsberg, a former graduate student of the University of Wisconsin/Madison library school. Hielsberg speaks of an encounter during her class on intellectual freedom. As per the requirement for the course, she had to present her paper orally. She decided to read a passage from a book and warned her other classmates that the passage will have graphic content. During her oral reading, a student spoke out stating that Hielsberg was verbally abusing her. Other students voiced their opinion as well as stating that a more detailed warning would have been better (Hielsberg, 1994). But by offering any warning, labeling of the book would result. Labeling is a violation of the ALA Library Bill of Rights. The ALA opposes labeling as “a means of predisposing people’s attitudes toward library resources' ('Labeling and Rating Systems,” 2006). One student in the class had later told Hielsberg that her presentation “was the first time we really had to face our own feelings about disturbing material and try to reconcile them with the principles of intellectual freedom” (Hielsberg, 1994).

Practicing intellectual freedom requires more than combining the Library Bill of Rights to a collection improvement approach. It is an action that can have its risks and is maybe what is most honorable about librarianship. As people, librarians are as defenseless to the pull of social causes as some other group. It is as inescapable that we will bumble into self-censorship every so often just as take up arms against outside complaints. Librarians must be continually watchful against giving their own convictions a chance to compromise the network's opportunity to read (Hielsberg, 1994).

How can anyone know if a librarian is using self-censorship to not purchase a title for the school’s collection or refusing to put a title on the shelf? No one is checking. No one is gathering details. There is no open exchange and no need to admit to it. Author and former librarian Susan Patton states, “In a way, self–censorship is more frightening than outright banning and removal of challenged material” (Whelan, 2009). For what reason do a few librarians dismiss books with edgy substance? The SLJ conducted a survey in 2008 on self-censorship in public schools. It uncovered that school librarians are most at fault with regards to this sort of self-censoring. Results show that some school librarians admitted to self-censorship. Out of 653 school librarians, many demonstrated an inclination to dodge books with 'sexual substance (87%), language (61%), brutality (51%), homosexuality (47%), prejudice (34%), and religion (16%) in light of the fact that they fear parental backfire' (Jamison, 2018). Although the reaction from guardians may appear to be to some degree harmless, there are numerous reasons concerning why librarians may self-censor (2018).

Genres that are frequently singled out are street-lit (urban literature), classics such as The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, horror, fantasy, and LGBTQ (Whelan, 2009). YA writer David Levithan stated that librarians frequently let “fear, not principle, guide their choices, which is deeply unfair to the teens they serve” (2009). Other apprehensions and concerns include discrepancies in deciding age appropriateness, relentless assaults by parents, and pressure from publishers. The pressure from publishers can make writers consider self-censorship. For instance, Lauren Myracle was compelled to change the name of her book from The Bitches to Rhymes with Witches (2009).

Can self-censorship be monitored? An examination was conducted to address the issue of self-censorship in school libraries. A collection of YA books, which contained a substance that could be challenged were used. These books were screened based on a few criteria that together would describe the things as works that ought to be found in secondary school library

accumulations. One hundred Texas high schools of different sizes were arbitrarily picked, and the OPAC of each library was checked to determine whether in truth the titles in this examination were accessible to students and personnel. For the purpose of this examination, self-censorship is characterized as the procedure by which a librarian decides not to buy a given book due to the book's potential for being challenged. School libraries were checked to see if at least one of the targeted books on the list were included in the school library's OPAC system. To make sure that self-censorship is not being practiced, a school library had to possess somewhere around fifty percent of the YA books.

The information demonstrated that the book frequently claimed by a school was one of the titles in the Harry Potter series. Fifty-nine schools had no less than one duplicate. This is not astounding considering the notoriety of these books. The next most frequently gathered work was Walter Dean Myers' Monster, with forty-four duplicates among the one hundred schools. The book least prone to be in one of the libraries was Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth, edited by Michael Cart. One reason for this could be because the book had just recently been published. Another title that was of the least chosen was Adam Mastoon's The Shared Heart: Portraits and Stories Observing Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young People. No one school owned all of the selected titles; the largest collection was seventeen in one school library (Coley, 2002).

Does this study accurately show self-censorship in our school libraries? There can be no exact data that shows which librarians are using self-censorship. There is little to no accountability among librarians when selecting books for their collections. Self-censorship is the most confounded, yet the least comprehended type of control and studies have shown that modern day self-censorship is on the ascent. Such examinations regularly question if current practices are really self-censorship, or a vital response to the developing measures of brutality, sex, and swearing in children's and YA literature.

Something else librarians can do to maintain integrity in the collection development process is examine the statistical data that shows titles that are frequently checked out, books within a series, titles that work well with the school curriculum, and using student and teacher surveys to satisfy their needs and desires. Many school libraries use vendors such as Perma Bound and Follet to order books for their collections. These companies offer classics as well as the most up-to-date titles. They allow the librarian to make choices on titles for specific grade level, reading level, and price. When the library is its own element as opposed to something belonging to the librarian, a collection development turns out to be progressively vigorous and rich with a wide range of titles to enjoy (Intellectual Freedom Blog, 2019).

Even though self-censorship impacts all patrons, its potential effect on youth and young adult services is of specific significance. As with anything in this world, there are consequences. When a book is removed from a shelf or not chosen for purchase because of hostile or explicit content; a dangerous precedent is occurring because that decision is stating that the librarian's perspectives are above the perspectives of the patrons (Clark, 2018). When librarians self-censor; they are taking away the opportunity for students to explore other avenues that they may not ever experience.

The world needs more librarians who are dedicated to finding just the right book to put in the individual's lap, not librarians who figure they can dismiss what's 'inappropriate' and what's not based on their own preferences. Most school librarians can attest to the rush of blending

students with the ideal book, acquainting adolescents with characters that will rouse, solace, challenge, and energize them just as well as help them to move past their restricted encounters. Hot-button issues are the key reasons librarians self-censor. Studies have shown that librarians do use these issues as the reason for self-censorship. While there are legitimate and justifiable concerns, librarians are bound by professional ethics to incorporate materials for all patrons. Dismissing books claiming their substance may cause issues abuses these ethics and is known as self-censoring.