

Infosheet on censorship, book challenges, and the importance of 2SLGBTQ+ materials in libraries

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With the recent surge in censorship efforts and book challenges seeking to ban books in libraries and schools in Canada and the United States, this infosheet is intended to provide an introduction and entry points into research related to censorship, the rationale for book challenges, and libraries' role in supporting access to information; specifically, this infosheet was developed with 2SLGBTQ+ youth/students and school libraries in mind.

Censorship efforts can take different forms but ultimately aim to prevent, restrict, or otherwise control access to texts and other cultural productions and materials (Knox, 2014, 2015). In more extreme cases, censorship may take the form of burning books, physically removing or stealing books from libraries, or threatening library staff with repercussions in allowing access (Yorio, 2022). More commonly, book challenges—requests to remove or restrict access to certain books—are a specific form of censorship that seek to remove, relocate, or restrict access to certain texts within public institutions (Knox, 2015). Importantly, censorship efforts do not solely involve outright bans of specific texts but may also involve a range of strategies that attempt to restrict access to information, such as requiring parental permission for youth or students to access certain books or topics, relocating books outside of general circulation, or having search filters on computers that prevent access to certain topics (Knapp, 2022; Knox, 2015).

One of the central issues in conversations about censorship and book challenges is intellectual freedom. Court cases and legal challenges about book bans often focus on this key issue—that is, rights related to intellectual freedom, or freedom of speech/expression, and determinations about what is appropriate educational content—and seek to adjudicate between claims to determine whether there exists a reasonable limit to freedom of expression. For instance, in a 2002 ruling, the Supreme Court of Canada rendered its decision on *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36*, a case that focused on elementary teacher James Chamberlain seeking permission to use three books in his kindergarten and grade 1 class that included same-sex parented families (*Asha's Mums* by Rosamund Elwin, *Belinda's Bouquet* by Lesléa Newman, and *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* by Johnny Valentine); the school board voted to deny the request and Chamberlain contested their decision. The case proceeded through the courts (with multiple intervenors participating), eventually arriving before the Supreme Court, which found that the school board could not impose religious values by refusing to permit the use of books that included same-sex parented families, and that use of these books promoted “tolerance” for diversity: “Learning about tolerance is therefore learning that other people’s entitlement to respect from us does not depend on whether their views accord with our own... Tolerance is always age-appropriate” (Justice McLaughlin in *Chamberlain*). (See Peavoy, 2004, for discussion of legal framework and freedom of expression rights.)

Another aspect of censorship contestations involves recognizing the role of the library and its professional mandate to facilitate access to information. Libraries exist to serve diverse populations and to facilitate access to information for every individual in the community; libraries need to build collections that represent all types of people and the diversity of their patrons (Cooper, 2010). Furthermore, they have a professional responsibility to protect and promote intellectual freedom and to oppose censorship—not only for the current diverse population that accesses materials but in preserving intellectual resources from destruction and maintaining historical perspective beyond

current social or political understandings (Byrne, 2004; Cooper, 2010; Schrader, 1997). Unless libraries neglect their professional responsibility, Schrader (1997) argues, there is no practical way to avoid controversy, book challenges, or attempts at censorship; rather, book challenges are inevitable because of the scope of materials libraries gather for their collections, and public libraries need to prepare to deal effectively with these challenges and adopt strategies to respond to or proactively address them when they occur—such as establishing community rapport, developing positions and maintaining proactive policies, ensuring staff know the library’s position on issues, and engaging staff and community regularly in workshops about intellectual freedom and the role of the library (Cooper, 2010; Greathouse et al., 2020; Knapp, 2022; Schrader, 1997; Stepp, 2018).

Knox (2015) argues that censorship efforts centrally focus on the relationship between knowledge and power to control access to certain information or material; she argues that understanding discourses of censorship and the justification that people use to argue for the removal or restriction of books is important to helping information professionals be better prepared to respond to challenges regarding texts or materials in their collections (see also Affelt, 2022; Albanese, 2023; Knox, 2014, 2019, 2020). These discourses often invoke simplistic or inaccurate understandings about protecting childhood innocence, parents’ right to limit their children’s access to information, assumed neutrality of curriculum, and the bounds of intellectual freedom (Burmester & Howard, 2022; Knox, 2015, 2019, 2020; Rumberger, 2019). Efforts to censor curriculum, via book banning or other policies, do not create a neutral curriculum; rather, banning books or restricting access to information “privileges White, unidimensional perspectives on language, culture, and curricular topics” (Burmester & Howard, 2022, p. 373).

At their core, book challenges are not random. They often target specific ideas or topics that some adults consider inappropriate, want to block access to or suppress, or deem “controversial” (Spilka, 2019). Maxwell and Berman (1997) even suggest that censorship practices “often seek to ensure conformity of ideas by eliminating controversial texts” (p. 92). As a result, book challenges have an inherently political aspect (Albanese, 2023; Knox, 2015), and they target texts by authors from minoritized groups or texts that represent issues that challenge dominant social norms, such as sexuality, gender identity, and racial issues (Burmester & Howard, 2022; Rumberger, 2019; Teel, 2023; Vissing & Juchniewicz, 2023). Spilka (2019) points out that these “controversial” issues are, in fact, real issues that students experience or are topics about which they are seeking information, including topics related to sexual orientation, gender identity, racial discrimination, substance use, and mental health; blocking access to information about these topics can have a range of negative educational and personal effects, not least of which is denying students the ability to learn about these issues and experiences to better prepare them to face them in their own lives and to learn about how they impact others.

Several researchers have specifically investigated the significance of libraries as sources of information and questioned how censorship in school and public libraries impacts 2SLGBTQ+ youth. For instance, Betts-Green (2020) describes the strong connection many members of the LGBTQ community have to libraries as safe spaces and primary sources of LGBTQ identity building; these effects can be particularly important for people in socially conservative or rural areas where other supports are limited (e.g., Day, 2013). Hughes-Hassell and colleagues (2013) describe the school library as an important source of information for LGBTQ youth, providing self-affirmation and characters with whom to identify, decreasing feelings of alienation, and providing resources to learn about what it means to be LGBTQ, connect with LGBTQ community, affirm their normalcy, and even find role models; conversely, the absence of LGBTQ literature and characters contributes to the marginalization and invisibility of the community, and it denies students access to crucial resources

that relate to their own lives and personal experiences (see also Altobelli, 2017; Spilka, 2019; Suzuki & Fiehn, 2016). Further, 2SLGBTQ+ materials provide resources not just to 2SLGBTQ+ students but to all students in developing the foundation for good citizenship, fostering respect for diversity, building coping skills and socialization strategies, and better understandings of oneself and relationship to others (Brand & Maasch, 2017).

Libraries can also help to support 2SLGBTQ+ students, curricular content, and teachers by developing collections that include 2SLGBTQ+ materials, working to ensure libraries are 2SLGBTQ+ friendly spaces, and facilitating easy access to 2SLGBTQ+ content. School libraries can support 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive curricular content delivered in the classroom by seeking to develop inclusive collections, assisting teachers in identifying relevant new titles and providing alternative 2SLGBTQ+-themed options for existing curriculum topics, supporting students in finding 2SLGBTQ+ resources for student assignments, working to ensure the library is a 2SLGBTQ+ friendly space, and keeping current on book challenges and censorship conversations in the field (Bannister, 2020; Gartley, 2015; Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020; Knapp, 2022; Stepp, 2018). Libraries can also directly support teachers by helping to develop knowledge about specific texts and in supporting lesson planning—including knowing what they are teaching and why they are teaching it (i.e., identifying the rationale and specific learning outcomes addressed by texts), knowing relevant policies, developing plans to handle “sensitive” material and challenging conversations, and helping connect with professional networks or collective resources (Greathouse et al., 2020; Lent, 2008).

One final way in which libraries can be proactive in supporting 2SLGBTQ+ people is by engaging in critical work about the collection itself and its accessibility. Developing robust collections, creating policies on book challenges, and holding events to support 2SLGBTQ+ people are important, but libraries should also consider how their catalogue is organized, where books are located, and how displays increase visibility. For example, library staff might also consider the potential limitations of accessing 2SLGBTQ+ materials posed by library subject classifications and organization systems, how knowledge domains structure access, how filing systems may inadvertently stigmatize 2SLGBTQ+ identity or otherwise pose challenges to finding 2SLGBTQ+ content, or how searchable the catalogue is for queer, non-binary, and trans topics (Edge, 2018; Drabinski, 2013; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013; Johnson, 2010; Lyttan & Laloo, 2020; McAuliffe, 2021; Robinson, 2016). Creating displays of 2SLGBTQ+ content or placing rainbow stickers on individual books may help identify 2SLGBTQ+ materials, but they may also create inadvertent barriers for 2SLGBTQ+ people who may not be out or may not want to be seen perusing certain topics (Betts-Green, 2020). The overall goal is to reduce the variety of barriers to accessing materials, and this may involve multiple strategies, such as creating subject guides, ensuring internet accessibility to 2SLGBTQ+ topics, having inclusive keyword searches, visibility in signage, and integrating content throughout the collection (Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020; Knapp, 2022).

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