

Sleeping with the elephant: Canada deals with the scourge of censorship sweeping across America

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Snapshot

Anita Brooks Kirkland clearly argues the role of school libraries in championing student access to a diverse and representative library collection. Brooks Kirkland explores recent cases of book challenging in Canada placing her observations within the context of regional developments and arguing for our ongoing vigilance.

No, books in Chilliwack school libraries aren't child pornography, RCMP says. How's that for a headline to take your breath away?

Chilliwack is a small city in British Columbia, and the centre of a recent controversy about the books held in its school library collections. The Chilliwack School District had been bombarded with complaints that their libraries contained illegal pornography, to the point where the local detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was called in. 'This is a serious allegation and one that caused many parents great concern in our community', the RCMP stated in its news release about the investigation, where the serious crimes unit confirmed that the books in question were not pornographic (Little, S., February 22, 2023).

As teacher-librarians, we are always aware of the potential for challenges to library materials, but I doubt that any of you have lived in fear of the police investigating what you have selected for your students. If our school districts have done their job, they have established professional guidelines for the selection of materials, and associated reconsideration procedures for challenges to specific resources. We are also as prepared as we can be for situations where these procedures are not observed, and book challenges become more of a public spectacle. But speaking for myself, I have never experienced anywhere near the extreme of the Chilliwack situation. And this is in Canada! In my more optimistic moments, I comfort myself by noting that despite its drama, this is still an extremely rare situation in our country, which I believe is a model for defending diversity and freedom of expression. But pride in my country cannot blind me to the hard truth, that this sub-culture of intolerance undeniably exists in Canadian society. Are we suffering through a perfect post-pandemic storm of intolerance and conspiracy theories? Or is this part of the age-old reality of living next to the United States, and sharing the longest undefended border in the world? Likely a bit of both, as I will now endeavour to explain.

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Sleeping with the elephant

Let's start with that undefended border. A sub-theme of all of my contributions to Synergy has been the parallels between Australia and Canada. We have much in common, but perhaps the greatest difference is your status as not only a country, but a continent, completely separated from your nearest geographic neighbours. While Canada borders three oceans, ninety percent of Canadians live within 150 kilometers of the border with the United States.

Canada reaps the benefits of living next to the United States, our closest ally and largest trading partner, but we also suffer the consequences. As former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau put it in a meeting with then President Richard Nixon in 1969, 'Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast,

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if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.' Trudeau's son and current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has certainly lived his father's epic metaphor, particularly during the Trump years, when relations between the two countries were extremely strained. (CBC Radio, June 15, 2018). And now in 2023 the sleeping giant of intolerance and censorship that has reached epidemic proportions in the United States is seeping across the border into Canada.

Over the past two years, there has been an explosion of book challenges in the United States. Citing 'parental rights', challengers have organized into groups, sharing tactics and resources. The largest of these, Moms for Liberty, has found common cause with the other groups in seeking control to limit what kinds of books are available in schools. While most groups cite parental rights or religious or conservative views to be their focus, some also make explicit calls for the exclusion of materials that touch on race or LGBTQ+ themes (PEN America, 2022).

The vast majority of the books targeted by these groups feature LGBTQ+ characters or characters of colour, and/or tell the story of racism in American history. Groups share lists of books to challenge, and they employ similar tactics, including flooding school districts with complaints and disrupting board meetings. In some extreme cases, groups have targeted individual educators and librarians, harassing them online, and accusing them of peddling pornography and 'grooming' children.

There is an associated chill of self-censorship amongst publishers, booksellers, and librarians facing this new context. 'In the face of those pressures, publishers have adopted a defensive crouch, taking pre-emptive measures to avoid controversy and criticism.' (Paul, 2022). That is not to say that there is no resistance. PEN America has led the charge with its report, [***Banned in the USA: The growing movement to censor books in schools***](#). Although it is likely that the majority of Americans do not support the extremist views behind this insidious censorship movement, it has quickly become a vocal and influential part of the political and social polarization of the United States today. Many school districts and states understand this as a clear attack on students'

rights. As [Patricia Sarles explains in her detailed article in a recent issue of *Synergy*](#) about the wave of book bans in the US,

‘Students have a constitutional right to access information. They have a constitutional right to read, and read what they wish. They have a constitutional right to access information... It is a sad state of affairs that we are going through this right now in the United States, but thankfully, as a school librarian, I work for a school system that recognizes, supports, and upholds the rights of its students to read and read what they wish.’ (Sarles, 2022).

Age appropriateness as code for intolerance and bigotry

Age-appropriateness is a familiar reason given for challenges to library resources. But claims of resources being inappropriate based on age almost always mask other concerns. Analysis of the themes of recently-banned books by PEN America (2022) reveal some harsh truths. Almost equally represented in the two most predominant categories are books with themes related to sexual orientation or gender identity and books where the main characters are people of colour.

Of particular concern is the emergence of challenges based on Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory is an academic framework for studying systemic racism. Its meaning has been subverted by the radical right, who describe it as just a way to label white people as oppressors and racial minorities as the oppressed. Challenges to books that tell the story of the Black experience in America are often disguised as concerns about other issues like being sexually explicit for example, based on sections or portions that may be taken out of context.



Analysis of book challenges in the United States in 2021 by the American Library Association reveal some harsh truths. (Image in the public domain.)

Censorship has been institutionalized in several US jurisdictions, including Florida. The Parental Rights in Education act, which prohibits classroom instruction or discussion about sexual orientation and gender identity in Kindergarten through Grade 3, was signed into law in March 2022. Frequently referred to as the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ law, it was updated in April 2023 by a unanimous vote in the state legislature to extend all restrictions to all grades, Kindergarten to Grade 12. This development is causing extreme alarm in America, despite the overwhelming support that presidential hopeful Governor Ron DeSantis has in his own state.

Under the influence: Book challenges in Canada

Canada has not been immune to populist censorship tactics. Several months ago, educators across the country started receiving 'notices of personal liability' which erroneously accused recipients of exposing minors to sexually explicit materials. The notices were, in fact, a form letter produced by Action4Canada, a group similar to censorship groups in the US. The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA-FCAB) issued a memo (2022) about how to deal with the inflammatory notice, stating that it has no legal value with regards to its claims of the recipient is breaking the law, and that it does not replace processes that the library already has in place to facilitate challenges to library materials.

In my own backyard in Ontario, the Waterloo Region District School Board, where I served as Consultant for K-12 Libraries prior to my retirement, has been under attack for 'exposing students to pornography' in its library collections, as well as for its practice of collecting statistics to better serve the needs of its diverse student population. While not claiming to represent the group, a parent delegate at a board meeting used tactics direct from the Action4Canada website, and accused the board and its employees of child abuse. The board responded with an open letter refuting the claims.

'Simply because a parent or caregiver disagrees with Ministry of Education and Ontario Human Rights Commission directions does not give them the right to make false claims of pandering or facilitating child abuse or pedophilia,' the letter reads. 'This behaviour is egregious, although it is a tried and tested method to attack public education in an effort to reverse human rights and equity protections of marginalized groups.' (Williams, 2023).

A motion sympathetic to this parent's concerns was subsequently brought before the board proposing to restrict access to the library's eBook collection based on 'age-appropriateness'. I appeared at the board meeting considering this motion as a delegate representing Canadian School Libraries, speaking specifically about the role of the library in developing reading literacy, addressing the meaning of 'age-appropriateness' and how the term has been co-opted by those wishing to censor materials, and placing the motion within the context of the current plague of challenges to library materials taking place across North America. Although it was evident that the majority of trustees would not likely support the motion, the meeting was adjourned before it came to a vote. Thankfully the board rejected the motion at a subsequent meeting, and so WRDSB students retain access to the full eBook collection, no matter their age or grade.

And of course there's the Chilliwack situation, described earlier in this article. As it turns out, the founder of the group Action4Canada was behind that complaint. Calling in the RCMP to investigate library books is an extreme that we hope remains an isolated incident in Canada. Canada has its share of bigots and racists, and certainly our colonial history is rife with examples of associated injustices. There is still huge work to be done to confront these injustices and move forward in achieving equity in our diverse society.

Canadian School Libraries for its part has developed the [CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit](#), which I told you about in the [July 2022 issue of Synergy](#).

‘Canadians are realizing that if we are to live up to the ideals of our country, enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, we need to not only be receptive to the truths now being revealed, but we must actively work to make and to sustain positive change for an equitable and inclusive society. There is a strong will in Canada to improve things, particularly in education.’

Patricia Sarles (2022) reminds us that the US Supreme Court has established precedence in case law, saying that the removal of books from school libraries by school boards is unconstitutional and that students and school libraries have constitutional protections.

There is similar precedence in case law in Canada for protecting students’ freedom to read. In 2002 a Kindergarten teacher applied to the Surrey School District in British Columbia for permission to use three picture books depicting same-sex couples. Permission was refused, and so began a legal challenge that ended up at the Supreme Court of Canada. The court found that the school trustees had acted unreasonably when they banned the books. ‘Tolerance is always age-appropriate’, commented the chief justice.

Buoyed by these court decisions and strengthened by our common purpose of supporting our students, we all need to prepare ourselves with solid information in the event that our libraries are the next target of organized censorship movements.

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Defending freedom of expression is our responsibility

Part of being a teacher-librarian is defending our students’ freedom of expression, including their freedom to read. This is at the core of the ethics of school librarianship, as expressed in the [International Federation of Library Association’s School Library Guidelines \(2015\)](#). ‘Everyone who works in the school library, including volunteers, should endeavour to embody the core values of librarianship: stewardship, service, intellectual freedom, rationalism, literacy and learning, equity of access to recorded knowledge and information, privacy, and democracy. The core values of equity of access to recorded knowledge and information and intellectual freedom are embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the values of IFLA.’

Our School Library Learning Commons: Diverse Collections and Equity-Informed Selection

The collection follows our school district’s selection guidelines.

Strong selection criteria ensure that the collection:

- Enriches the curriculum and engages readers
- Serves students’ varied interests, abilities, and learning styles
- Stimulates personal growth and growth in critical thinking
- Provides a rich information environment to support inquiry
- Represents a variety of perspectives, including about controversial issues
- Promotes cross-curricular, holistic, and inquiry-based approaches to learning

Additionally, the library collection represents:

- The diversity of Canada’s religious, ethnic, and cultural groups and their contributions to our heritage
- Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing
- Experiences and perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds, lifestyles, sexual orientation and gender identity expression, and people of varying abilities
- Gender, cultural, and racial inclusiveness

Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada

www.canadianschoollibraries.ca/collection-diversity-toolkit/

The CSL Collection Diversity Toolkit provides a model for the principles of selection.

What rights do parents actually have?

Educators, parents and society all have the welfare of children top of mind. Of course parents have the right to guide their own child's selection of reading materials. But they do not have the right to restrict access to resources for other people's children. 'Parental rights', when used in the context of these challenges to library resources, has become code for handing over control of professional educational decisions to a group of parents with a particular agenda. An attack on the library collection is not only an attack on students' right to freedom of expression, it is an attack on the professional competencies and responsibilities of the teacher-librarian.

Decoding 'age appropriateness'

That a resource is not 'age appropriate' is almost universally mentioned when school library resources are challenged. It is very important to understand what this actually means, and how its meaning has frequently been distorted. Library collections must be appropriate to meet the needs of all kinds of readers of all ages. The resource collection provides the foundation

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for student success in the library. In the library, students are encouraged to select reading materials for their own enjoyment. The collection must, therefore, support a broad range of readers, at all levels, from emergent to proficient, regardless of age or grade level. The entry point to reading in the library is interest, not level.

Selection is based on reason and principle, not personal opinion or bias. Selecting or deselecting materials based on personal beliefs is a serious breach of the ethics of librarianship. Canadian School Libraries provides a model for principles of selection. These principles support learning, and also ensure representation and diversity. Resources cannot be rejected because they represent diverse peoples and communities. All Canadians are guaranteed the right to representation and to freedom of expression, regardless of age. These representations are protected and enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in provincial human rights codes. Trained library professionals make selections based on reason and principle

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rather than on personal opinion and bias. They also defend students' right to resources that promote open inquiry, critical thinking, diversity in thought and expression, and respect for others.

That takes us then, to how the term age appropriateness is frequently co-opted by censors. Representation of diverse peoples or seeking understanding of potentially difficult topics is not restricted by the age of the reader. Award-winning Canadian and Cree author David Robertson explains this eloquently.

'People who want to attack LGBTQIA+ rights will always see the attack of books as a shortcut to getting the attention that they want. So they keep doing it, even though they nearly always fail in preventing the books from getting into the hands that need them.'
(David Levithan, 2021)

'We don't teach primary students calculus, but we lay the foundation for that learning by teaching them simple addition, he says. 'That's how I approached *When We Were Alone*, a children's book about the residential school system. I didn't have to address everything. I couldn't, and shouldn't, address everything for young readers. What I had to do was build a foundation. Simple addition.'

Canadian and Australian school librarians share the common purpose of defending our students' freedom to read. While you are perhaps more removed from the influence of the wave of organized censorship in the United States than we are here in Canada, we cannot underestimate the scourge of its reach internationally.

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