

A Tolerant Selection Policy

J. Yamane
LIS 610-Wertheimer

Summary of Issue

School library media specialists face a lot of challenges when selecting material for their libraries. As librarians, they need to acknowledge that “as the first library that many children and young adults are introduced to and use on a continuing basis, school library media programs play a vital role in promoting intellectual freedom”(Hopkins). However, as professionals in an educational setting, their focus is “mainly instructional and there is a sense that they are shaping minds that are impressionable”(Leong). The conflict between providing free access to information while taking into consideration the effect that this information may have on young children presents a dilemma for all school library media specialists. The majority of school librarians defend the *Library Bill of Rights* unconditionally, but some would argue that it does not address the specific circumstances of a library in an educational setting. Material with racial stereotypes would be protected under the *Library Bill of Rights* but should school librarians have the freedom to *not* select these materials in order to support their educational mission of promoting tolerance?

Responses to Issue

School librarians are confronted with conflicting messages about their role in selecting materials for their libraries. *Information Power* suggests that the “school library media specialist provide ready access to resources, programs, and services...that are free of constraints resulting from personal, partisan, or doctrinal disapproval” (American Association of School Librarians [AASL] and Association for Educational

Communications and Technology [AECT] 92). School librarians are supposed to remain neutral in their selection and provision of materials and services. However, *Information Power* also refers to the AECT Code of Ethics that states that members should “seek to avoid content that reinforces or promotes gender, ethnic, racial, or religious stereotypes” (AASL & AECT 167). In Hawaii, even the official *Materials Selection Policy for School Libraries* cites “freedom from stereotyping, e.g., sexism, racism, etc.” (Department of Education, State of Hawaii 2), as one of the criteria for the evaluation and selection of school library instructional materials. School librarians that try to create their own selection policy according to all of these guidelines may have a difficult time finding a “middle ground” that satisfies these opposing perspectives. Critics also argue that “a partisan political philosophy is being expressed in either case; approval of a racial stereotype is ‘partisan’ and rejection of a racial stereotype is ‘partisan’” (MacCann 88). School library media specialists who try to remain neutral seem to have no choice in their selection of material but are expected to also avoid the promotion of stereotyping. Should the negative effects of stereotyping guide the selection of materials in a school library?

The Council on Interracial Books for Children, an organization dedicated towards identifying bias-free books, defines stereotypes as an “over-simplified generalization about a particular group, race or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications” (Council on Interracial Books for Children). Most educators would agree that racial stereotypes should not be promoted in a classroom but should be discussed critically with students. School libraries that carry literature with racial stereotypes are also not promoting racial stereotypes but cannot ensure that literature with racial

stereotypes is being addressed critically by the students who are borrowing these books independently. Critics argue that “certain books-because of their illustrations, themes, characterizations, and language-perpetuate stereotypes and result in psychological damage or discomfort for children”(Norton 457), so is it the responsibility of the school library media specialist to ensure that children are educated about the negative aspects of stereotypes? Educators such as Dr. Violet Harada cite Frances Dowd’s claim that “at a very early age, it is crucial to avoid stereotypes during the developmental stage when clearer concepts of self and others are being formed”(Harada 137). Professionals in an educational setting have a responsibility to meet the developmental needs of their students so this responsibility may also extend to the school library. School library media specialists may feel torn between upholding their beliefs in the freedom to read and the responsibility of educating students of diverse backgrounds in a tolerant environment. “According to statistics kept at the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, books by or about people or color amount to only 6 percent of the current overall whole”(Kruse 1), so school librarians feel pressured to address the needs of this group of marginalized people. Although the avoidance of literature with racial stereotypes seems to promote racial tolerance, school library media specialists would need to address the difficulty of identifying stereotypical material.

Although “educators and other concerned adults strongly criticize stereotypical views of both race and sex”(Norton 95), there are different degrees at which they will object to material as stereotypes. School library media specialists who attempt to limit their selection to non-stereotypical material will have to create their own definition of what constitutes a stereotype. The popular children’s book, *The Five Chinese Brothers* by

Claire Bishop is extremely popular in Hawaii's school libraries while books such as "Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* have been pulled from most school library shelves" (Leong). Although both books could be viewed as examples of racial stereotypes, only one of the books was subjected to censorship. School library media specialists fear that books with racial stereotypes will perpetuate stereotypes and that "if all that children see...is stereotype, that stereotype will become their reality" (Lum McCunn 51). However, Lester Asheim suggests that the "best solution to the problem of access is to add positively to the store of ideas, not negatively to reduce it" (Asheim 184). School library media specialists that limit their collections to non-stereotypical materials should instead be expanding their collections to include an increasing diversity of materials for comparison. The *ALA Library Bill of Rights* also supports this policy and suggests that "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues" (AASL & AECT 152). Limiting a school library collection will not protect children from racial stereotypes because they are constantly bombarded with stereotypes in other media and in their personal experiences. The effect of negative stereotypes seems to be outweighed by the need to expand the "tolerance of racial differences to tolerance of ideas" ("Teachers, Not Censors, Are Answer to Prejudice"). School library media specialists who are trying to address an educational mission of promoting racial tolerance need to realize that limiting material supports a policy of intolerance of ideas. As negative as these stereotypes may be, "any effort to restrict free expression and the free flow of information aids the oppressor...fighting oppression with censorship is self-defeating" (American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom). Groups who

were previously marginalized and “designated outsiders can, when invited into the mainstream, engage in the same behaviors against which they fought” (Harris 151). bell hooks’ idea about marginalized groups helps school library media specialists recognize that perhaps their actions can be viewed as hypocritical. Limiting one idea in place of another repeats the pattern of intolerance that school librarians are trying to defeat.

Personal Philosophy

I had an extremely difficult time writing this paper because I identify strongly with both perspectives of this issue. As a teacher I can understand the school library media specialist’s role as an educator who is trying to promote tolerance among their students. However, as a future librarian I can also recognize the difficulty of trying to limit material that promotes racial stereotypes because it would be an act of censorship. I would like to find a “middle ground” between these two opposing viewpoints but am not sure if this is possible. There are many different perspectives about how to deal with racial stereotypes in literature and I agree with Asheim’s statement that ideas are often “not a clash between right and wrong, but among many rights” (Asheim 184).

ALA and the *Library Bill of Rights* are supported by the First Amendment’s protection of free speech. Literature with racial stereotypes would be protected by these beliefs and therefore any attempt to limit material with racial stereotypes would be considered a violation of the First Amendment and free speech. All speech needs to be protected, whether it is racist or sexist. If all speech is not protected, free speech would be meaningless. However, I can also understand critics who argue that “the

'absolutism' that professionals attach to the First Amendment's free speech clause needs to be considered in the light of another phenomenon that borders on the absolute—namely, the destructiveness of racism and sexism" (MacCann 118). Children who encounter stereotypes in literature may perpetuate these stereotypes if they are not educated about how to read critically. School library media specialists that are bound to uphold the freedom to read and cannot limit material with racial stereotypes can instead focus on educating students about how to recognize racial stereotypes while they are reading. The promotion of tolerance in an educational setting can be achieved by promoting the recognition of intolerance.

School library media specialists who want to be socially responsible and protect children from the negative stereotypes in literature may need to share this responsibility with parents. Limiting material with stereotypes will not solve the problem but if parents discuss literature with their children then perhaps children will understand the meaning behind these stereotypes instead of blindly believing in them. I feel that authors should also share some of this responsibility. Authors write as a reflection of their identity and the world in which they are living, so perhaps an increased consciousness of the negative effects of stereotypes in today's society will have an effect on the literature that is produced in the future.

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