

Think of the Children!: Minors' Access to Adult Collections in Public Libraries

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The scenario selected is regarding a 13-year-old girl requesting books about the Holocaust, stating she has already read everything the juvenile section offers. The librarian's dilemma is whether to show the girl the books in the adult collection, as the librarian feels those items contain 'graphic' photographs and descriptions of violence. The librarian is placing value on the patron's age, and using that to determine if the items in the adult collection are appropriate. The American Library Association (ALA, 2021) states that an ethical dilemma occurs when there is a conflict of values, which is occurring here.

Principles one, two, seven, and nine of the ALA's Code of Ethics (2021) are in conflict in this scenario. If the librarian denies the patron access to the adult collection, the librarian is not providing her with equitable access. Providing equitable access means allowing a patron to access resources regardless of age (Bright, 2022). Furthermore, the librarian would be engaging in censorship, allowing their personal values to interfere with their job duties, and directly violating the patron's First Amendment rights (ALA, 2021).

There are multiple factors to consider when evaluating this ethical dilemma. A power differential inherently exists between the librarian, who is seen as the keeper of knowledge, and the patron. The level of access the patron has to information is determined by the librarian (Oltmann et al., 2021), and in this case the librarian may choose to limit the patron's access. Access to information is considered the "core" of librarianship (Oltmann et al., 2021, p. 1), and denying or limiting access violates the patron's First Amendment rights (Membiela, 2021, 2022).

The librarian is not blatantly engaging in censorship, as they are not altering the items in the library's collection or removing them completely. However, the librarian is considering engaging in something that may be more insidious and sinister: a form of soft- or self-censorship

(Cooke & Harris, 2023). Restricting access to information based on personal values is prohibited by the First Amendment (Membiela, 2022). Being a minor, the patron still has First Amendment rights (Deutsch, 2022), and those need to be respected by the librarian.

The librarian is attempting to act *In Loco Parentis*, or in place of the parent, by imposing their values about what is appropriate on the patron. This responsibility does not fall on the public library or the librarian, and legally is left to the minor patron's parents (Membiela, 2021, 2022). The librarian may be concerned about the patron's parents becoming upset by the librarian potentially exposing the patron to items containing sexual themes. Public librarians in Michigan are legally protected from exposing children to items with sexual themes in the course of their work (Membiela, 2022).

The librarian is imposing their values of what may be considered obscene upon the patron. Obscenity is a legal designation in the United States, and is determined using criteria from *Miller v. California* (1972). It is *highly* unlikely that anything in a public library's collection is legally considered obscene (Membiela, 2022). Furthermore, what is considered offensive by one person may be celebrated by another (Cooke & Harris, 2023), and that decision is not to be made by an individual librarian (Cooke & Harris, 2023; Membiela, 2021, 2022).

The librarian's actions may lead to the patron experiencing information poverty (Oltmann et al., 2021), and at its core is an attempt to erase history, intentional or not. The librarian is trying to present the patron with a watered-down version of history, and is implying that the information contained in the adult collection is not valuable or worthy of being honored (Deutsch, 2022). The librarian owes it to the patron to provide her with access to the information she requested. Giving the patron access respects her autonomy, her First Amendment rights, and can lead to better outcomes for the patron (Deutsch, 2022; Oltmann et al., 2021).

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