

Banned LGBTQ+ Books and the Benefits of Access for Children and Adolescents

Emma K. Tallman

College of Computing and Informatics, Drexel University

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Professor Alex H. Poole

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One of the core values of the American Library Association is the Freedom to Read, which states that the availability and accessibility of all literature, even those that some may not agree with, is key to preserving democracy (The Freedom to Read Statement, 2020). Although the ALA acknowledges that this access to all literature is important, historically different groups have pushed for books to be banned from institutions such as schools and libraries, especially when related to children. When a group or person, such as a parent, teacher, or politician thinks a book should not be available to the public in a library or school setting, they must first challenge the book to get it reviewed and potentially removed from the catalog (Bickford & Lawson, 2020). If the challenge is successful in removing the book, the book is then banned from the school or library (Bickford & Lawson, 2020). Throughout the history of banning books, patterns have been recognized about the content of books often prohibited (Bickford & Lawson, 2020). Each year the American Library Association and the Office of Intellectual Freedom compile all of the banned books into a report (Bickford & Lawson, 2020). These patterns in the subject matter of banned books include literature pertaining to the topics of “Diverse themes – which OIF and ALA articulated as people of color and various sexualities, identities, physical and cognitive abilities, religiosities, and localities” (Bickford & Lawson, 2020, p.17). As mentioned above, one of the primary categories of banned literature is LGBTQ+ books. The banning of LGBTQ+ books within schools and public libraries is detrimental to children and adolescents, and unethical, therefore librarians should work to continue expanding access for children to diverse literature such as banned LGBTQ+ books.

Historically, LGBTQ+ books are one of the categories of books that have often been challenged or banned. Often times the challenges to books comes from a place of

“heteronormative, white, Christian normalcy” which leads to the banning of many books that have diverse topics and characters, and in turn hurts young readers (Bickford & Lawson, 2020, p.28). Because of these frequent challenges, LGBTQ+ literature is among some of the most frequently banned topics. A large amount of the books that are banned are children’s books that feature LGBTQ+ themes and characters, also due to homophobia and discrimination (Steele, 2022). Specifically, picture books featuring LGBTQ+ families, and characters are some of the most frequently banned books within schools and libraries (Steele, 2022). To even further censor LGBTQ+ information, in some school libraries filters are placed on computers which prevent students from accessing information with topics related to the LGBTQ+ community (Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020). In addition to banning LGBTQ+ books and materials through legislative routes within library and school systems, due to internal prejudices or fear of pushback from parents or outside parties, many librarians “self-censor” their collections, especially in schools (Garry, 2015, p.2). This creates even less diverse library catalogs, with less options for students to find books about LGBTQ+ topics, even if they have not been formally banned by the school board, or community. Across libraries in the United States, there are huge discrepancies in the quantity and types of books featuring LGBTQ+ characters and subject matter, due to both the banning of books, and access and catalog curation in general within libraries, which causes large differences in access for children and young adults (Spence, 2000). Currently, there is still a large amount of discrimination within legislation and different groups in the United States against LGBTQ+ people, and this also applies to censorship and banning of books within schools and libraries (Altobelli & Lambert, 2022).

The banning of LGBTQ+ books is detrimental children and adolescents in many different ways. The lack of LGBTQ+ literature in many classrooms and school libraries makes

heterosexual relationships the norm in student's minds, whether consciously or unconsciously, and this can have a negative effect on all students (Burke & Greenfield, 2016). This not only impedes critical thinking, and removes a whole subset of books from student's collections, but also does not prepare them for future education or life where heterosexual relationships are not the only option. In *Challenging Heteronormativity: Raising LGBTQ Awareness in a High School English Language Arts Classroom* Burke and Greenfield (2016) state that "when compared to high schools, universities are far more proactive and tolerant" (p.46). It is amazing progress that universities are providing more access to diverse books, however this showcases one of many drawbacks that children and young adults have because of LGBTQ+ book censorship. By not having the exposure to these works of literature, or ideas, before university, students would be at a potential disadvantage. Another serious issue caused by the banning of LGBTQ+ books is the lack of support that students in the LGBTQ+ community feel (Curwood et. al, 2009). Many LGBTQ+ children and young adults don't feel supported or safe within schools, or family and social settings, and look for support externally for how they are feeling. For these children, having access to books or resources with LGBTQ+ themes or information often makes a large difference in their lives (Altobelli & Lambert, 2022). Additionally, a library collection that lacks many LGBTQ+ banned books does not foster an environment of acceptance for students within a school, or patrons within a library (Garry, 2015). The banning of LGBTQ+ books within school and public libraries causes many problems for all students and users of the library collection.

Providing children and adolescents with access to banned books is valuable for their learning experiences within schools and libraries. For some schools, teachers, and librarians the concept of providing students with banned books is a complicated and potentially stressful issue due to the passion that some groups have for keeping banned books out of literature curriculums

and library collections (Gallo, 2008 ; Graff, 2013). Regardless of external pressures, or perhaps in spite of them, it is important for these works of literature to be accessible to students and library patrons. In *On Reading and Sharing Banned Books*, Jennifer Graff (2013) describes how access to these books is crucial for helping students to engage in “critical literacy” (p.78). By encouraging young readers to engage with these materials, critical thinking, empathy, and cultural competency can be greatly increased, especially with active facilitation from teachers or librarians to help students ask questions and explore these works (Graff,2013). Additionally, access to banned or controversial books allows for students to explore and develop their own opinions about things (Gallo, 2008). Reading, or having the option to read, these works of literature is extremely important to the independence of adolescents, and helping them to develop independent thought (Gallo, 2008). In the article *Bold Books for Teenagers: Censorship, Clear Thinking, and Bold Books for Teens* Don Gallo (2008) sums up the idea of the importance of allowing access to these books by stating “denying teenagers access to a controversial book denies them a better future” (p.117). In addition to reading banned books, discussions of why they were banned in the first place, what censorship is, and how access to these books is important and valuable within a classroom or school library setting (Burke & Greenfield, 2016). Starting these conversations with students would benefit critical thinking skills, as well as expose them to concepts of free thought and access to literature. Access to banned books is important to child and adolescent development of critical thought, and this can also be extended to the specific category of LGBTQ+ banned books.

Access to LGBTQ+ banned books, in addition to all banned books in general, is very beneficial to children and adolescents. By providing children and adolescents with these books, librarians can support all readers, and especially children who are members of the LGBTQ+

community. Changing curriculum and library collections to include these banned books allows for a more accepting and safe community for LGBTQ+ students, which also makes a safer space for everyone (Curwood et. al, 2009). By allowing young people to have access to literature about LGBTQ+ people from a young age, libraries and schools can help to shift mindsets of readers to be more accepting of all people (Curwood et. al, 2009). Currently, books with LGBTQ+ characters and themes are being published and supported more frequently, but with that issues of people wanting to prohibit access to these works of literature continues to be a problem(Jones, 2022). Because of this, it is very important for librarians to work to get adolescents access to these new books that they can relate to or learn from. By having a collection of LGBTQ+ literature in the library, librarians can begin the important process of creating a welcoming space for all students, especially members of the LGBTQ+ community that may not feel supported in other aspects of school or their lives (Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020). Additionally, many young people gain comfort and clarity about their personal identities from reading LGBTQ+ books (Garry, 2015). It is extremely important that young people have access to not only fiction about characters that they can relate to, but also informative texts that can provide them with information when they are exploring their identities (Garry, 2015). LGBTQ+ books can act as a “window or mirror” for a young adult, either being a way for them to see themselves and express about how they are feeling, or a way for them to understand what other people go through (Altobelli & Lambert, 2022 ; Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020 ; Jones, 2022). Libraries can provide this support and comfort for adolescents when they may not be able to receive it from other places. Having access to LGBTQ+ books can make a significant impact on a young person’s life by allowing them to feel seen and accepted, and for this reason being able to have these resources is extremely important (Altobelli & Lambert, 2022). Making LGBTQ+ books

visible for young people is crucial to not only allow members of the community to feel supported, but also to promote inclusion for all readers (Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020).

Librarians and information professionals have an ethical responsibility to work towards reducing censorship of banned books, such as LGBTQ+ books, to benefit children and other users of libraries in general. Additionally, the banning of LGBTQ+ books goes against the ethical codes and foundations of librarians and information professionals as a group. The American Library Association has many values that they use as frameworks for how librarians should conduct their work, and two of the most important are the *Library Bill of Rights* (2022) and the *Freedom to Read Statement* (2020). The *Library Bill of Rights* (2022) has many parts of its values that are contradicted by the idea of banning books. First, it states that “materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation”, which means that, when thinking about banned LGBTQ+ books, a book should not be removed from any collection because the writer or contributor is a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Library Bill of Rights, 2022). Additionally, the document states that “libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment” (Library Bill of Rights, 2022). This point, more than any other, shows that banning of books goes directly against the values of librarianship. A third point that also supports the idea of librarians challenging LGBTQ+ book bans for children and young adults is “libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas”, because if LGBTQ+ books are not available for children and young adults, then they do not have that free access (Library Bill of Rights, 2022).

In addition to the *Library Bill of Rights* (2022), the American Library Association’s *Freedom to Read Statement* (2020) condemns censorship and removing books from collections,

and emphasizes the importance of having diverse views and resources available to the public. Because of these values, and the ethical responsibility of librarianship it is paramount that librarians in all settings, such as schools or public libraries, work to combat censorship and the banning of books. In addition to combating formal book banning, it is extremely important for librarians to prevent any sort of self-censorship when creating a library collection for children and young adults, or in any library setting (Altobelli & Lambert, 2022 ; Garry, 2015 ; Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020). In *Going Beyond Book Displays: Providing Safe Spaces for LGBTQ Youth* Gay-Milliken and DiScala (2020) state the following:

As school librarians, we must confront our own biases and discrimination. Regardless of one's personal beliefs or the opinion of your school or district administration, and perhaps breaking with some of the cultural norms of your community, access to ideas and information in the school library is a civil right for all students (p.12).

For these reasons, and the reasons outlined by the American Library Association, it is the job of librarians to combat censorship and book banning of all books, and work to provide students and patrons access to all resources, including LGBTQ+ books.

When schools and libraries ban LGBTQ+ books, they engage in unethical censorship of literature and harm students, and in turn librarians should work to stop the banning of these books and create more access to diverse books for children and young adults. Historically, LGBTQ+ books are some of the most frequently banned books within schools and libraries, which makes it even more important that access to these works is increased (Bickford & Lawson, 2020). By keeping children and young adults away from diverse media, censorship harms them in many ways. Access to LGBTQ+ books supports not only children and young adults within the LGBTQ+ community, but also all students and patrons of libraries by promoting diversity,

inclusion, and critical thinking. Additionally, it is extremely important for young people within the LGBTQ+ community to have access to both fictional characters to relate to, and informational texts, because sometimes they might not receive any support elsewhere (Garry, 2015 ; Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020). Due to both the benefits that children and young adults receive from reading books about LGBTQ+ related topics, as well as ethical values librarians have, there is a responsibility to work to provide patrons with access to these books. The ALA *Library Bill of Rights* (2022) and the *Freedom to Read Statement* (2020) outline multiple responsibilities and ethical values of librarians in the United States that support the claim that librarians should be working to prevent the banning of diverse books. Additionally, librarians need to work against their own biases to prevent any self-censorship when developing collections for children and adolescents in order to provide them with the most diverse and enriching collections of literature that they can (Altobelli & Lambert, 2022 ; Garry, 2015 ; Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020). By working to combat the banning of LGBTQ+ books, librarians can support the learning and social-emotional growth of all children and adolescents reading their collections, as well as continue to uphold the ethical standards that are important to librarianship as a profession.

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