

School Librarians and Book Selection: What Do Letters to the Editor Tell Us?

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Abstract School librarians are often the only information professional in a school building. While collaboration with other teachers and administrators is valued, communication with other school librarians is also essential for support and professional growth. One area that separates teachers and teacher-librarians is the responsibility of materials selection for the school library. School librarians consider many issues when selecting materials. Increasing formats and types of information products compete for the attention of young people complicating the selection process for librarians. Decreasing budgets in school and public libraries force tougher decision making about expenditures. The education of librarians and an abundance of selection resources empower the library profession with proficiency in the selection process, however, in day to day practice, librarians often rely on communication with peers to inform the decision making process. Little research exists that gives voice to the peer communication among librarians who select materials for children and young adults. One example of peer communication, letters to the editor, is a form of communication known for eliciting strong opinions on issues of concern and a form of communication still evident in the Library & Information Science literature. Thus, I undertook a content analysis of the letters to the editor published in the well known, professional selection tool: School Library Journal in search of the issues and trends related to the selection of materials for children and young adults. The results indicate the existence of many issues and concerns related to the selection of library materials for children and young adults. A demographic portrait of the professional community that participates in this form of communication was also revealed.

Keywords Information Behavior, School Librarians, Communication

1. Introduction

In July of 2000 the New York Times began a separate Best Seller's List for children based upon the popularity of the Harry Potter books denoting a new era of children's literature[1] The excitement is not just about books; today's young person is exposed to vast and changing formats of information and entertainment products. EBooks abound and graphic novel start up collections are available. Juvenile books account for 10.7% of all book publication in the United States[2].

The economy is another complicating factor in the selection process. While choices increase, budgets for school libraries continue to decline due primarily to a decrease in state funding[3]. Public libraries demonstrate an increased reliance on local funding sources also due primarily to decreased state funding[4]. Selection of titles from among the variety and number of materials available for children and young adult library collections is a more daunting task than ever before in the history of publishing. The responsibility

for balancing the increasing myriad of choices with decreasing budgets falls upon the shoulders of school librarians. We know that evaluation and selection of materials is a valued component of professional responsibility. Students preparing to work in school and public libraries are required to study children's literature and materials selection. Knowledge of selection principles and methods is a component of ALA's Core Competences of Librarianship[5].

In addition to educational preparation, professional tools to assist in the selection process are available in the form of books, journals and websites. Journals such as Booklist, Kirkus Reviews, Publishers Weekly and School Library Journal are now available online offering features such as advanced search capability.

We see that, equipped with education and tools, librarians are expert in selecting the best books and materials to fit the collection while balancing the budget. Still, concerns and controversial issues exist and practitioners must make decisions on a daily basis. Fortunately, colleagues and multiple forms of communication outlets provide 'places' for the professional discourse that aids us in ongoing practice. The purpose of this study is to identify specific trends and issues of concern to librarians who select books and materials for children and young adults as expressed in professional discourse.

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2. Review of the Literature

A review of the literature revealed a paucity of data driven research and a plethora of anecdotal works that reflects the voice of school librarians about the selection of books for children and young adults. Of those issues discussed, funding is frequently mentioned. Bray and Hollandworth[6] discuss the impact of diminished funding on the role of the school librarian. Marcum[7] suggests bartering as a method of sustaining library collections. In this method, libraries would offer titles no longer needed in trade for an equivalent of money. The credits could then be used in exchange for titles from other libraries. International school libraries are not immune from budget restrictions. A case study by Newcomer[8] revealed successful strategies for cost effective collection development and maintenance. The author found that time spent soliciting donations and grants is worthwhile. The study also revealed that limiting the loss of existing materials is vital to maintaining a strong collection. The preservation of materials and an active inventory system, both practices sometimes overlooked, will effectively limit loss.

Another funding concern in recent decades is that available funds are targeted towards computers and other technology resources. The Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries is an example of the recognition of this concern. The Foundation was established in 2001 to assist school libraries with building collections[9].

Censorship is among the well known, controversial issues of materials selection for children and young adults. A bi-monthly column "Scales on Censorship," has appeared in *School Library Journal* since 2006[10]. The column features questions from librarians about topics such as how to handle challenges to books. The column editor responds with best practice, law, and examples. Specific data about challenges to books in libraries has been continuously collected and made available since 1990 through the Office of Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. The data are collected from newspapers and reports from individuals. The ALA Challenge Database holds 10, 415 book challenges[11]. The statistics show parents as the people most likely to challenge a book, school libraries as the type of library most likely to experience a book challenge, and sexuality as the mostly likely reason given for a challenge to a book

Is the non-selection of books censorship? Concerns about teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease prompted Cohen[12] to conduct a study about the attitudes of public librarians and the role of public libraries as a sex education resource for young adults. The study found that librarians viewed the public library as a source for materials about reproductive health but not as a source for materials or programming about sexual health for young adults.

Another controversial topic is the development of collections for the gay, lesbian, and bisexual population. Loverich[13] purported that in order to select books of interest to this minority population librarians would need access to reviews of those books. Books considered of interest

to the population were found to be reviewed less often than other books in traditional review sources. One reason found is the books of small presses are reviewed less than books from large corporations. It was recommended that librarians use a variety of strategies including small presses that specialize in gay and lesbian materials.

Hoffert[14] found that the collection of world languages materials is of increasing importance in libraries. The survey reports that Spanish is the predominant second language in 98% of public libraries with non-English holdings with Chinese as the second largest growing collection. Other language collections found in public libraries include Polish, Russian, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Ukrainian, Serbian, Croatian, German, Italian, and French.

3. Research Questions

This study is concerned with the discourse of librarians within the context of professional communication. In particular, I sought to identify the issues and trends of interest to school librarians who select books for children and young adults. What topics are discussed in the letters to the editor? What relationships exist among the data? Who is writing the letters?

4. Methodology

I conducted a content analysis of 189 letters to the editor published in *School Library Journal* from 2005 through 2009 (N=189). The letters were identified through a full text search of the EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete database. The term "database" will be used hereafter. The coding categories include: primary subject terms, keywords or phrases, author gender, author affiliation, and year of publication.

Primary subject heading refers to the descriptive term assigned to each document by the database vendor through the use of its thesaurus. In this study the document refers to a letter to the editor and the database is EBSCO Academic Search Complete database[15]. The primary subject terms are chosen from the database thesaurus. The scope notes of the database thesaurus were used to clarify distinctions among similar primary subject headings as you will see in the analysis section of this study. The subject terms are assigned by relevancy in the database, so in the case of multiple subject headings, only the first is considered for this analysis. For the purposes of this paper, primary subject headings are indicated by quotation marks and upper case first letters, i.e. "School Libraries".

Although this study is quantitative, key terms and phrases in the letters were identified. The purpose of the keywords and phrases was to provide a subcategory with which to distinguish among letters to the editor that have the same primary subject headings. For example, "School Libraries"

as a primary subject heading may have “funding”, or “staffing” as a keyword. Phrases such as “ethnic stereotyping” helped clarify issues related to a specific book title. The recursive process of identifying keywords and phrases was simplified by the succinct nature of letters to the editor as a form of communication and the editorial limitation of 350 words per letter in *School Library Journal*.

Author information was used to create a snapshot of those who write letters to the editor in *School Library Journal*. Each letter includes the author’s name and affiliation. The name of the author was used to identify gender as male or female. In the cases of gender neutral names or initials the person’s affiliation or other available professional information was consulted to verify gender. The affiliation of the author was used to create categories that show the professional role of the author, in other words “Where is the author coming from?”.

This study is limited to a quantitative analysis of the 189 letters to the editor published in *School Library Journal* between 2005 and 2009. The methodology is limited in that it reveals a description of issues identified in the letters by a count of their occurrence but does not reveal a qualitative account of motivation or cause. Additional keywords and phrases drawn from the text do show specific attitudes about an issue (appalled, thrilled) and give further detail about the issue being discussed. It can be deduced that the issues discussed in the letters to the editor are of importance to the letter writer but no generalizations about interest in the issues can be applied to the larger population of *School Library Journal* readers and/or librarians. It was not within the scope of the study to measure how many of the 38,000 subscribers read the journal or its letters to the editor.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Primary Subject Headings

An analysis of the letters revealed the occurrence of a large variety of subject headings. Issues related to service included scheduling, behavior in the library, and what constitutes good literature. Issues related to change appear with discussions of the correct balance of “digital vs. print collections” and the “future of technology”. One issue of interest was about the value of public library and school library cooperation. Letters stated that “we should work hand in hand” and that our common goals are “literacy, the love of books, and (lifelong) education”.

Many individual book titles were discussed in the letters to the editor. The “appropriateness” of the following titles was discussed: *Skippyjon Jones*, *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, *Taking Responsibility: A Teen’s Guide to Contraception & Pregnancy*, *Superhero Madness*, *The Higher Power of Lucky*, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and *The Cow in Apple Time*. Two letters to the editor were in response to book reviews. One letter stated that the book titled *Nicky Deuce: Welcome to the Family* reinforces negative stereotypes about Italian-Americans. A book review of *The Boy in the Striped*

Pajamas drew discussion of whether or not the book, which is about the Germans and the Holocaust, is “glib and life cheapening”. The factual accuracy of an informational book: *Escape From Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy*, was also a topic of discussion.

Surprisingly, the subject term “Magazine Covers” also accounted for several of the total occurrences. The letters were specific to two issues of *School Library Journal*. The January 2007 issue, which featured a caricature superhero librarian, “compelled” one letter to be written in complaint and caused one letter writer to cringe. An opposing view suggested readers “lighten up” and not be offended by the cover. The cover of the November 2009 issue also elicited responses from readers. The picture of librarians in a bar holding drinks brought comments such as “inappropriate”, “offensive”, disturbing, and “appalled”.

The many letters about censorship generally fell into the category of either justifying or opposing censorship. Statements justifying censorship included it is “unethical for me not to make an effort to protect our students from content that may be harmful to them” and that “fear of censorship” should not “override our good judgment”. One letter identified limited funding as a reason why books with “explicit sexual situations, violence, homosexuality, racism, religion, and use objectionable language” are easy targets to not be purchased thus avoiding possible book challenges. Those opposed to censorship suggested that young people will generally choose appropriate materials, however, if they find their choice “bothers or offends them or bores them, to shut it, turn it in, and check out a better choice” and that “It is not our role to decide what is decent literature”. The confusion caused by the “difference between vocabulary and content levels in Accelerated Reader and book reviews was cited as a cause of censorship. It was recommended that the education of administrators and parents about these differences “is essential to forestalling book challenges.”

The Newbery Medal was another topic of discussion in many of the letters. An article by Silvey[16] in *School Library Journal* suggested that recent Newbery winners were not popular with young people today as compared to the 1990’s. Responses to the article included comments that recent winners were “scholarly but not great read”, “less reader friendly”, show the bias “many librarians have in favoring fiction titles over nonfiction books”. The challenge was made that winners be of “quality and a good, mainstream book.”

5.2. Author Demographics

A analysis of author demographics revealed that the letter writers were predominantly female (80%), male (20%). This finding closely matches the findings of the American Library Association for the profession at large 80.9% female and 19.1% male[17]

The professional affiliation of the letter writers was coded into nine categories. The categories include school libraries (51%), public libraries (23%), professional organizations (7%), academic libraries (7%) and vendors (5%). One author

group, book authors (3%) wrote letters agreeing or disagreeing with discussions or reviews about their books. A final group, organizations other than library organizations (3%), responded with letters to the editor about issues specific to their mission. The organizations included Barahona Center for the Study of Books in Spanish for Children and Adolescents, the Healthy Kids Watch Less TV Coalition, the Jewish Education Center, and the Italic Institute of America.

6. Conclusions

The most surprising finding of this study is in variety. I began the study thinking that most letters would be written by school librarians about issues specific to selection. I found that school, public, and academic librarians responded to the journal. Book publishers, book authors and special interest associations voiced their opinions in the journal. This revealed a picture of a professional community in dialogue about issues of importance.

Are traditional methods of communication, such as of writing letters to the editor of professional journals, still viable? The American Civil Liberties Union[18] recommends the use of letters to the editor for advocacy, to reach many people at once, to point out additional information in response to an article, and to show support or opposition about an issue.

The results of this study indicate that many people still use letters to the editor to speak carefully about issues they consider important. The letter is usually a response to something already in print so that response is in effect part of a larger professional discussion. Print discussions differ from online discussions. You do not necessarily have to be a member of a group or a subscriber to read a print journal or submit a written response as you to participate in an online group. With these differences in mind, a writer takes time to compose a letter to the editor for a print journal, knowing that it will appear in print for anyone who picks up the journal to see, showing a 'courage of convictions'.

The results of the study also show what may be a trend in less reliance on print communications. The number of in letters to the editor in School Library Journal rose steadily from 2005, peaked in 2008, and declined in dramatically 2009. This is not surprising given that librarians who select books for children and young adults have many resources to consult and many venues for advanced communication. For example, the American Association of School Librarians has several electronic discussion lists, sponsors the AASLblog, and has a presence on Facebook and Twitter. Professional organizations that serve librarians exist at the state, national and international level all with journals, and interest groups, and Internet based communications. Methods of communications continue to evolve with an emphasis on instant connections such as the use of Ning at the AASL 2011 Conference[19].

As librarians, we are providing instruction, resources and services to children and young adults born into a world of

fast communication that crosses geographic boundaries. Perhaps when these youth take the reins in another decade or two, a print journal with letters to the editor will be a part of history. Hopefully, the particularly thoughtful and meaningful nature of a letter to the editor will find its way into future of professional communications.

Further exploration of communication amongst school librarians would be welcomed. For example, it would be useful to know how school librarians use online communication tools, why they use the tools, and what are the outcomes from these forms of communications. It would also be interesting to know how librarians decide among the many journals, user groups, and social networking tools available. A probable portrait of the communication tools to be used in the near future would inform not only school librarians but also library and information science educators.

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