

# Censorship: some issues for teacher-librarians

There has been a long history of debate about 'censorship' in school libraries. The debate has raged around the suitability and availability of certain texts in the school library or curriculum. Legitimate concerns on the one hand about freedom to read, have had to be weighed against the concerns of parents worried about influences that they believe will hinder their children's development.

There are now more complex issues arising from the rapid expansion of electronic media and children's easy access to material that would otherwise be restricted to adults. What's the role of the teacher-librarian in today's media environment of television, videos, computer games and the internet? Protector or impartial provider?

Some in the community are unconcerned about such issues. They claim that children today are very 'media savvy', and do not need protection. Others take the view that while children may be technologically more savvy than their parents, they still need protection from content that exploits their immaturity. They argue that 'Knowing how to light a match, does not stop you being burned', and 'We should not be adopting a 'Little BoPeep' approach'.

In a sense, Australia's well developed classification (note: not 'censorship') system for films, videos, computer games, and its separate self-regulatory system for television, can make the job easier for teachers using such materials in schools. All these should carry a classification indicating age suitability (for example, 'M' not recommended for those under the age of 15 years). Higher classifications such as MA (15+), and R (18+) have legal force in regard to under-age children. Some State education systems have policies which require teachers not to expose students to material classified as unsuitable to their age group, but these are not always observed, especially at end of term time when students bring their own videos to school!

When it comes to the internet, there are no such systems in place, and there are real hazards out there for the unwary child. These include exposure to commercial exploitation, invasion of privacy, exposure to paedophile activities and to pornography. The community at large cannot take a cavalier approach to the impact of such materials and activities on the young. Children need effective systems of protection from the predators in cyberspace.

So what's a responsible teacher-librarian

to do? Children have as much right as adults to benefit from use of the internet, but schools must have active programs to minimise the risks. These will include vital media education, the development of school internet use policies, and the use of filtering systems. The more effective of these presently seem to be server-based products that access selected sites on the internet, such as Kidz.net and SmartZone. Offering parents opportunities to increase their understanding of the internet and on-line safety issues (such as Young Media Australia's Cybersafety course) can add to the mix of protective strategies.

A whole-of-community approach is needed to ensure that media experiences enhance rather than hinder children's development.

*Barbara Biggins OAM, is executive director of Young Media Australia (<http://www.youngmedia.org.au>), convener of the Commonwealth Classification Review Board, and a manager of a child health service library. Young Media Australia is Australia's only national advocacy group representing the interests of children and young people in relation to the media. Barbara will be part of a panel session on censorship in public libraries at the ALIA 2000 conference.*

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