

Miriam Braverman Prize Essay

OPERATION – PATRIOTS ACT: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING A FREE AND INFORMED SOCIETY

by Michele Siple

Why do we need to know all this stuff? My dad knows all this stuff, and he's mad all the time. I'd rather be happy and ignorant," a 9th grader stated during an English class in which the teacher was trying to initiate a discussion about the recent elections. As my husband (the English teacher) relayed the story to me later, he was dismayed to hear this girl's reasoning for apathy yet comforted in a small way to hear that at least her father held some passion for current events.

Many of us take our democratic rights for granted, growing fat and lazy on our foreparents' efforts. Some of us have been oppressed and disenfranchised for enough generations that democracy seems like a farce. A school of thought that has recently gained popularity is that, to be a patriot, we as citizens must accept our government representatives' decisions without question, as all decisions are made for our own good. Based upon this country's founding ideas, however, the most basic right and duty of a true patriot is to question each and every decision that our government makes. We must ensure that our representatives are upholding our rights and those of our counterparts. We must make sure that those we elect are sufficiently pursuing and protecting our interests. As citizens and patriots, we have a duty to remain informed on issues that affect us and our neighbors.

As librarians, we all have a mission to not only maintain, but promote a free and informed citizenry. While all libraries play a role in slowing the trend of ignorant bliss (and possibly reversing it), a large percentage of the U.S. adult population has already surrendered to a life of aggressive apathy. The most effective place for libraries to play this essential democratic role is in the schools. School libraries have been doing so for years, however, recent developments in technology and federal policy have created barriers to the

process. School libraries must continue to work at this role, sometimes subversively. This type of "infiltration" into our youth takes an organized plan. Some call it curriculum – I call it Operation: Patriots Act.

Like tobacco companies, elementary school libraries can use the curiosity and naivety of children to promote the agenda of a free and informed citizenry. Libraries nurture children's curiosity and use it to instill a sense of "information entitlement." Teen angst and anger against society and "the man" can be channeled into productive action in the high school library. Rather than continuing to be frustrated, students learn how information can empower them and how to use that power to protest government actions that they disagree with and to support political candidates who promote their agenda.

The School Library's Role as Promoter of Information Literacy

The most basic, fundamental step in this mission is to imbue information literacy tools into these young people at an early age and then develop this literacy as they grow. Students who cannot think independently as children have much less chance of thinking independently as adults. Information literate students are able to recognize the need for information, identify and locate it, gain access to it, and evaluate the quality of the information. Students who can do this "feel good about themselves as learners, and they leave school feeling passionate about some content." (Hancock, 1993). In many schools, students are guided to think in pre-formed molds that the school system prepares (take standardized tests, for example). Teaching students to take control of their own learning counteracts the information dependency created by traditional schooling (Hancock, 1993).

Covert Technique 1: Luring By Personal Interests

Students are constantly bombarded with information and may be resistant to the concept of self-initiated research. Carol Gordon (2002) performed a study of 9th graders to determine research perceptions. These students viewed research as "one of the trials and tribulations of going to school" and as a waste of time that could be spent learning other things. Librarians are more productive in these attempts when they lure young people into information seeking activities by linking the activities with the students' personal interests. As Gordon (2002) states:

Research is not collecting information and rearranging facts. It is not a

linear process of steps or a recipe that dictates what happens next. It is not a neat, grammatically correct paper. It is not an experiment or survey. Research is methodical inquiry driven by curiosity. It is a question, problem, or hypothesis.... The child who asks why the sky is blue may be closer to the essence of research than the high school student who looks up gun control and writes a paper that summarizes various points of view about the topic.

Example: Q&A Time for Children.

Small children often have endless questions, for which parents and teachers may not have readily-available answers. "How do zebras get their stripes?" "Where do bugs go in the winter?" This myriad of questions shows a curiosity in children that should not be smothered. School and public librarians might consider providing "Question Night" or "Question Hour" to help parents and children learn together where to look for such information. Instead of simply having children come in and explore in a general manner, "Question Nights" encourage children to come in who have specific questions they'd like answered. Both parents and students learn to search for the information either in library databases, online, or on specially prepared "question websites" containing information on the most frequently asked questions developed by the library. For children too young to read, picture-based websites could be helpful.

Example: Controversial Debates

"The essence of a healthy democracy is open dialogue about issues of public concern. An integral part of the training of young citizens, therefore, includes the discussion of controversial social, political, and economic policies." (Harwood & Hahn). As children become older, cliques and stereotypes begin to develop along with a student's sense of self. As students become more interested in social issues, school libraries can use the opportunity to teach students how to grapple with these issues and to "deliberate with other citizens about the nature of public good and how to achieve it." (Harwood and Hahn, 1990).

Some school libraries have created an effective teaching tool by working with social studies classes to hold controversial debates, which allow students to compare views on controversial issues. Students research their points of view and cite references during their debate. The environment must be one of intellectual safety – free from retribution for unpopular ideas. Issues may be as varied as "Eminem is anti-female and should be

banned" to "Immigration laws in California should be changed so my family can stay here." Even if the debate topics chosen by students seem trivial, their debate preparation involves material relevant to the student and helps a student learn the research and information interpretation process. It basically takes "Question Night" to a new level, having the student interpret the information that she/he retrieves and use it for the benefit of winning an argument. In addition, the debate itself opens the student to opposing points of view and help a student develop listening skills. The student must listen to the opposing student's point and think quickly to counter the point. (Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

Covert Technique #2 –

Empowerment Through Information Retrieval Tools and Evaluation

One definition of "frustration" is having an information need and not being able to fill it. The first step in promoting an informed citizenry in the school is peaking interest in government and current events. If people have no tools to retrieve information on these topics, either the frustration pushes them right back into apathy, or they accept the easiest-retrieved information, which is usually not the most accurate. Many students assume that slogging through research is much like chopping down a forest with a dull axe. School media specialists have the opportunity to teach these students that their information literacy skills will be their "power tools" to help them in their research. Our youth have a reputation of being raised suckling on the teat of the internet, and 64 percent of graduate students surveyed felt prepared to perform independent research, yet fewer than 1 percent of the same students could correctly name a meta-search engine, and only 29 percent could list two criteria for evaluating a website. (Gordon, 2002). These are graduate students – imagine the knowledge level of those with less education. This is obviously an area where school libraries need to push harder to reach more students more effectively.

Example: Bridging the Information Gap

Although school libraries and computer labs are a great place to level the playing field for information "haves" and "have-nots," an inequality of access to school technology still exists, and we must be cognizant of that as librarians. Insufficient numbers of computers, a common problem for both primary and secondary school media centers, can lead to scheduling that limits the availability to certain types of students. "...at all school levels, the most exciting computer opportunities are disproportionately available to

students with the highest abilities; low achieving, high risk students, particularly in high school, are less likely to be in classes in which these opportunities occur.” (Neuman, 1991). These high-risk students are the most likely to become disenfranchised adults and the least likely to receive the computer-related information literacy skills to combat the trend. Knowing this helps the school media specialist create scheduling that embraces these students and that leads to their “positive attitudes towards technology in the library so that under-served students can understand its relevance to them” (Neuman, 1991).

Example: Teaching Information Evaluation and Critical Thinking

Gordon’s (2002) study of 9th graders revealed that a number of them assumed that research would lead directly to an answer on a bookshelf rather than the material needed for them to create their own answer. School libraries teach students how to fish, yet they must also teach them the importance of comparing the quality of the fish caught with a pole to the ones skimmed off the top with a net.

Ernest Boyer, former U.S. Education Commissioner, points out that “Our children must learn how to ...distinguish facts from propaganda, analysis from banter, and important news from coverage. The sheer mass of information and variety of media formats challenges every learner to filter, interpret, accept and/or discard media messages” (Considine, 1994). Learning analytic skills early establishes a strong foundation for adulthood, where critical analysis is imperative to navigate through the “spin” of most news stories in our current political environment. As Considine (1994) also states,

If schools truly wish to foster responsible citizenship, curricula must address more than...who won an election. We must also direct children’s attention to how elections are won. To study the political process without also studying the role of advertising and the news is to ignore the context in which electronic information both covers and creates candidates and public policy.

School librarians must foster a sense of healthy skepticism within our students regarding the sources of their material and provide learning opportunities to reinforce the knowledge that not everything that they read/see/listen to is true.

*Library’s Role as Protector of Students’
Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*

Promoting an informed citizenry also means protecting the citizen’s intellectual freedom and privacy. Maintaining intellectual freedom for students is a difficult task for school media specialists. They act *in loco parentis* and therefore must keep parents’ wishes in mind, mainly involving the protection of our students from information seen as inappropriate for them. Also, because our schools receive support from our parents as taxpayers and in many other ways, schools certainly want to maintain a positive relationship with them. However, these children are students, first-and-foremost, and “Our primary community – youth – has no voice. These children are non-voting, and they do not have a voice unless we as their advocates allow them one.” (Sutton, 1994). Keeping that in mind, it is difficult, but imperative, to promote the concept of intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights to our students, rather than limit their access to certain books and online materials (Scales, 2000) even though in many ways these students are not yet allowed to exercise these right themselves.

The development of critical viewing, thinking, and listening skills offers children greater protection and independence than do well-meaning attempts to control the content of music, movies, or television, which inevitably clash with First Amendment rights. When young people can recognize a stereotype, detect bias in news reporting, and understand how images can be offensive and demeaning to minorities, they are less likely to accept the value systems portrayed in media representations. (Considine, 1994).

Example: Collection, Censorship, and Curriculum

School libraries must sometimes be more restrictive in their selection process than their public library counterparts, however, “any lesser goal than assisting in the development of the critical faculties of students puts the school library at risk of becoming marginal, irrelevant, ignored, and devalued.” (Schrader, 1996). To avoid defending controversial books to parents or school boards, many frightened school media specialists have begun self-censoring. Some have begun limiting young students to read only from the “easy” section and requiring written parental permission before any aged child may read books such as Judy Blume’s *Forever*, or Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While selecting new books for the school collection, they attempt to “choose safe books. These practices, however, aren’t eliminating the problem; they are amplifying the issue.” (Scales, 2000).

In many cases, simply having a school board-approved collection policy in place may help prevent such a desperate need for self-censorship. Such policies may not prevent material from being challenged; however, a national questionnaire sent to school librarians shows that a policy that is effective in dealing with complaints and that is followed leads to challenged material being retained. (Hopkins, 1996).

Scales also mentions that the school media specialist should not only avoid self-censorship whenever possible but “must realize that our task is much broader than raising public consciousness for First Amendment rights through Banned Book Week exhibits.” Working alongside social studies teachers, the school media specialist incorporates Intellectual Freedom lessons into the curriculum to reinforce that First Amendment rights extend to many areas of a student’s life.

To combat stereotypes and encourage independent thinking, the school librarian should ensure that the school materials collection be broad enough to reflect perspectives other than just the mainstream. “One would prefer to have citizenry, whether in the voting booth, in the jury box, on the school board, or next door, whose ideas about Native Americans had not been exclusively formed through coloring cut-outs of Pilgrims and Indians or producing ice cream container Kachinas and brown paper bag headdresses.” (Taylor and Patterson, 2000). Therefore, rather than worry about too much information being available to our students, we should instead concern ourselves with the lack of such information and with the students “who have access to only one view of the world...with no knowledge of choice (or)...awareness of diversity.” (Schrader, 1999).

Example: Filtering Software versus Critical Searching

Assuming that the Supreme Court maintains that CIPA is unconstitutional, school media specialists may be faced with the difficult decision of keeping filtering software versus asking school librarians to monitor internet usage. Parents’ wishes will be a major influence in such a decision, but schools would be doing students a disservice by not informing all those interested in the pros and cons of using filtering software.

The most obvious problem with filtering software is its inaccuracy. “Internet blocking software is like performing brain surgery with a chain-saw....Society is intrinsically complex, and complex concepts do not fit into simple compartments. The word, phrase, and site identification strategies of

the blocking products pigeonhole ideas and impose ideological agendas” (Schrader, 1999). Recent studies found that widely used filtering software blocked sites such as the Richard “Dick” Arney official site. (“Internet Filtering,” 2002). In addition, Schrader (1999) also points out that many students who are avid readers usually read above their publisher-assigned reading level, yet rating software uses these levels as law for all children, regardless of maturity level.

More importantly, filtering software removes vital decision-making opportunities from students. By making the decisions for them, filtering software prohibits students from learning to make judgments and decisions using their own moral criteria. Teachers of information literacy therefore miss a real and necessary opportunity to “facilitate and promote critical thinking in action. They (filtering software) disempower everyone.” (Schrader, 1999). Librarians may need additional resources to pursue this avenue if they remove filters, but they would certainly be able to explore internet usage issues with students this way. Using questions such as “What do you do when coming across a website that makes you feel uncomfortable or mad?” can help students navigate through non-censored materials themselves. These people will be dealing with the same issues later – why not arm them with the necessary tools now, with supervision?

Library’s Role as a Bridge Between School and “Real Life”

Many students have a “school life” and a “life,” and they keep the two worlds separate. In order for students to become truly informed, they must learn to bring their social and political interests into the library, and to use their information literacy skills to critically analyze information bombarded at them in everyday situations.

Example: Transitioning Techniques

Much of what students are taught in school may never make the transition into their adult lives. If students, especially disenfranchised ones, do not see the information that they learn as useful in daily life, then they simply will not retain it. Fortunately, “The library serves the whole child, not just in his school capacity.” They can “be recognized for all of their interests and all of their pleasures – everything they want to know about...” (Sutton, 1994). One of the most effective tools school librarians can use is to determine how these children fit into their schools and their community. Keeping track of each child may not be within reach, but a school librarian

who knows her school community and culture has a stronger background to help determine how to work with students. In addition, many schools librarians are able to connect the students' interests with outside organizations or museums that help strengthen that in-school/out-of-school tie.

Example: Channeling Frustration & Anger into Action

A free and informed citizenry should also feel capable of expressing their points of view and acting to affect their government. School librarians, in combination with social studies teachers, are in a position to teach students how to channel their frustration with their parents, their peers, society, or their government into action – most importantly, POSITIVE action. There are many questions that can be posed to students: Slaves were forbidden from learning to read for a reason...what would that be? Why would being able to read make such a difference in the attitude of those disenfranchised? How do adults go about making changes in their country? How can voting, petitions, letters to the editor help? Think about your neighborhood – if you all agreed on an issue or political candidate, and you all voted on this issue or for this candidate in an election, wouldn't your hundreds of votes make a difference? How could you get the word out to others who may not be familiar with this particular issue or candidate?

Conclusion

School media specialists have the opportunity to teach our youth not only that they are entitled to information but what to do with the information once they retrieve it. Teaching how information can be interpreted and analyzed, how to explore different points of view to see the "whole picture," and how to use this information to benefit ourselves and our country is essential to developing a free and informed society of patriots. Not until our students feel a sense of entitlement to this information will they begin to recognize when these entitled freedoms are being taken away.

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