

Editorial: Winter 2011

Posted on [February 14, 2011](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



By Marcia Mardis, Guest Editor

Welcome to the second issue of the *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* (JRLYA), the official research journal of the YALSA and the only research journal devoted to youth librarianship. The intent of this journal is to enhance the development of theory, research, and practices to support young adult library services in information-rich environments.

If you are a librarian who works with youth, you may not be sure what research has to offer your practice. Research is an important component of strengthening practice and making sure the libraries evolve to remain centrally relevant to children, teens, and all of the other people who comprise their social, cultural, and learning networks. Research has many faces. At times, research informs practice; at times, practice informs research.

[Figure 1](#), based on Stokes and Mardis, illustrates the ways in which research and practice are linked in librarianship.¹

For librarians, these relationships are deeply intertwined and help us model the inquisitiveness, creativity, and lifelong learning we hope to impart to our younger patrons. As librarians, we strive to understand the information needs of our users and how to help our patrons use information to meet their person needs. Practice without research and research without practice are close-ended endeavors that lack the responsiveness to patrons which is central to youth librarianship.

In This Issue

The researchers in this issue reflect a range of perspectives on youth librarianship, from the personal to the professional to the political. Paulette Rothbauer presents a fascinating exploration of teens' interest in reading for pleasure. For anyone who feels that the Internet has killed leisure reading, Rothbauer has found that the role of reading as sensemaking is still treasured even if the opportunities youth have to encounter books are changing. Katie O'Leary wrestles with many of the same issues of helping youth situate libraries in their lives through her in-depth exploration of the very well-articulated information needs of a young man with Asperger's Syndrome and how fueling his passion for hockey is the gateway to helping him feel connected to the world

Joni Bodart and her research team have examined the role of the Printz Award in youth literature. In this study, the researchers discovered consistent themes in Printz Award-winning books that not only help youth make sense of the world around them, but the Award also raises some larger questions about youth librarianship and how books are selected for recognition. In the final paper from the YALSA's 2010 Symposium (other papers from this

event were included in the Fall 2010 issue of *JRLYA*), Catherine Andronik shares a thought piece in which she frames her intended research also regarding the Printz Award winners. She compares the Printz Award winners and award process to the ways in which literature for young adults is treated differently in Australia. We are looking forward to your continued exploration of this area, Catherine!

Amy Pelman and Beverly Lynch present a thorough and detailed analysis of the laws pertaining to intellectual freedom in libraries. Through an examination of laws and court cases, they trace the development of the guidelines and values librarians embody to ensure that libraries remain places where information and thought are freely developed and exchanged.

Regardless of whether you consider yourself a practice-based researcher or a research-based practitioner, *JRLYA* offers you scholarly, but accessible, investigations of phenomena that make librarianship an exciting, ever-changing, rigorous field. Even if you never considered the role of research in your own practice, enjoy these articles and you will be inspired to ask, explore, and answer your own questions!

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An Initial Exploration of Printz Award Winners from Outside the U.S.

Posted on [February 14, 2011](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



By Catherine Andronik

Editors' Note: This paper is the last in JRLYA's series of brief papers presented at YALSA's 2010 Young Adult Literature Symposium: Diversity, Literature, and Teens: Beyond Good Intentions, November 5–7, 2010.

Abstract

The Michael L. Printz Award has existed for just more than a decade, still in its infancy compared to the Caldecott and Newbery awards. As I examine the lists of winners and honors titles since 2000, I am struck by the international range of the selections.¹ While the majority of titles are by authors based in the United States, the percentage of titles from other English-speaking countries is significant.

Drawn to the international aspect of the Printz Award, I recently began work on my doctoral dissertation at Charles Sturt University of Australia, focusing on the amazing number of books by Australian authors that had been recipients of the award or an honor selection. I intend to examine the factors that set Australia's best young adult fiction apart from the hundreds of other books available to American teen readers, as well as explore differences between the Australian and American publishing industry, which may have contributed to the degree of attention Australian authors have received.

[Table 1](#) depicts the Printz Award winners and honors books by year and includes the authors and their countries of origin.

In only two years, 2004 and 2010, were all Printz—winning titles written by American authors. In 2005, only one of the four winning or honors titles was by an American. In both 2008 and 2009, the majority of winning or honors titles were by non-American authors.

There have been fifty-seven Printz Award-honored titles since the award's inception in 2000. [Table 2](#) illustrates a breakdown of all the Printz Award titles by country of origin and percentage of the total.

These numbers may not seem significant until one realizes the comparatively small percentage of foreign young adult books sold in the American market. During the six weeks I spent in Australia in 2010 doing research for my dissertation, I had the opportunity to visit a number of bookshops and to speak with several authors and publishers. In the bookshops, especially independent ones, I was amazed by the number of completely unfamiliar titles and authors. I have been a school librarian, primarily on the secondary level, for more than twenty-five

years; during that time I have been a reviewer for two publications and I am an avid reader of young adult fiction. I have also taught a university course on adolescent literature as an adjunct lecturer. With typical American arrogance, I always thought I knew my stuff—until I saw Australia’s young adult literature. Of course, there were the usual American and British offerings, but also packing the shelves of those bookshops were some names of familiar Australian authors, and I’d never heard of many of the titles. Beside them were books by authors of whom I had been totally unaware. Australian bookshop owners and an avid Australian YA blogger gave me a tour of the teen section of Gleebooks that left me reeling, as if I were in—well, another country! The realization was not gradual; it was sudden and momentous and weighty: there existed, in this fellow English-speaking country, a teen book culture that certainly overlapped America’s in certain areas, but in others was totally and incredibly alien.

Publishers, bookstore owners, and authors offered various explanations and insights into this new world. They agreed that as long distance transportation becomes quicker and more regular and the media raise awareness of titles from a variety of sources, American titles have been playing an increasing part in the reading habits of teens around the world.

American titles are infiltrating foreign markets to a much greater degree than foreign titles are infiltrating the U.S. market for several reasons. First, there is the sheer size of the United States—American publishers’ print runs can be in the tens of thousands because the potential market is so huge. England’s market, historically more familiar and accessible to American readers, is smaller; Australia’s and New Zealand’s is smaller still. Australian publishers simply do not print tens of thousands of copies of young adult titles. American publishers also tend to be reluctant to pick up titles from abroad. We may pride ourselves on our multiculturalism, but it is a multiculturalism filtered through an American perspective. Publishers still feel that authentic foreign dialect and vocabulary may deter teenage readers and Australian authors are equally reluctant to rewrite their books for an American audience, insisting that even American kids should be savvy enough to figure out through context that a “servo” □ is a service station and an “esky” □ is a picnic cooler. The result is that the United States sees only a fraction of international young adult fiction written in English. So it is all the more significant that so many Printz Award winners and honors titles have been by authors from a country other than the United States, and that nearly half of the top award winners have been by non-American authors.

The Australian publishing industry includes a practice that may set its young adult books apart from their international counterparts. The same book may be published with different covers and marketed to different audiences, such as to adults and to children, simultaneously. This was the case with Margo Lanagan’s *Tender Morsels*. Although promoted in the United States to young adults, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak was published in Australia as an adult title. In addition, Australian publishers do not group all “young adult” □ books together as a genre; rather, the genre is divided along age lines and books targeted towards thirteen-year-olds are differentiated from books for eighteen-year-olds. The books for older ages tend to feature a character type not often seen in American books: nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, out of high school, sometimes at uni (as in “university” □), sometimes working (or, in some cases, not working). Thus, we see an older protagonist, out of school and on his own, in Markus Zusak’s *I Am the Messenger*; Liga, the heartbreaking main character in Margo Lanagan’s *Tender Morsels*, is a twenty-something with two young daughters; and there is a wide range of ages featured in Lanagan’s short story collection *Black Juice*. While coming of age and growing independence is a common thread running through many Printz Award titles, few carry those themes quite so far.

The Printz Award titles also represent a variety of genres, ranging from contemporary fiction to biography. While it is difficult to classify some of these titles into single genres, [Table 3](#) illustrates the approximate breakdown of titles by genre.

Curiously but appropriately, this breakdown probably represents a collection analysis of the holdings of the average high school library media center, with the possible exception of equal numbers of poetry and short story collections. Contemporary fiction has always been the mainstay of young adult literature, a fact that is clear from an analysis of the Printz Award titles.

The research for my dissertation is still in its early stages, and certainly more trends like those described here will become clear as it continues. One major piece that remains missing involves interviews with American publishers of teen fiction, as my perspective is currently skewed towards their Australian colleagues. However, it is clear even now that quality literature for adolescent readers is coming out of English-speaking countries around the globe, and that American librarians serving teens are recognizing and celebrating the unique contributions of international authors to an evolving genre.

Reference

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The Printz Award Winners Under a Microscope: Content Trends, Committee Challenges, and Teen Popularity

Posted on [February 14, 2011](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



By Joni Richards Bodart, Ashley N. Barrineau, and Mary L. Flamino

Abstract

A content analysis of the winners of the Michael L. Printz Award revealed six common content trends: journeys, teenage angst leading to self-actualization, family relationships, romantic relationships, controversial issues within the content, and diversity of story characters. The majority of these thematic elements have been historically present in literature for young adults. However, the controversial subject matter and diversity of characters prevalent in many winners are more recently developed trends in young adult literature showcased in Printz Award winners. Additionally, the authors discussed the challenges faced by the committee in selecting a winner each year and the popularity of these winners among the teen audience.

Peter Butts, chair of the 2001 Printz Award committee, described the stereotypical young adult novel as one with an “artificially dictate[d] plot” □ to let teen readers know they were not alone in their adolescent emotions, or with a plot used as “vehicles for imparting adult values.” □¹ The stereotypical young adult novel is credited with the development of the “problem novel,” □ which the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) defined as books that impart to readers “an obvious message about a single problem, populated by characters and carried by a story arc that support that message and little else.” □² However, of late, “problem novels have on the whole become something entirely different in current teen literature.” □³ This change is reflected in the books that have received the Michael L. Printz Award.

The Michael L. Printz Award was established in 2000 to recognize the best title, based solely on literary merit or quality, published for teens between the ages of twelve and eighteen, during the preceding calendar year. The award was established in response to requests to recognize young adult literary excellence from members of YALSA. According to Michael Cart, who was involved in the creation of the Printz Award and served as committee chair in 2006, the decision to design and implement this award focused, in part, on “the establishment of a more expansive definition of the term ‘literary merit.’” □⁴ The committee’s preference for an unrestrained definition of quality in young adult literature resulted in the current criteria for the Printz Award. On the Printz Policies and Procedures web page (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/printzaward/aboutprintz/michaellprintz.cfm), after identifying what quality *is not*, YALSA personnel have acknowledged that it is far harder to determine what quality *is* and that new literature can change and redefine quality. Therefore, flexibility in criteria regarding literary quality was not only preferred, but necessary, according to committee members.⁵ The committee also hoped that flexible criteria

would inspire submission of “‘edgier’ books relevant to the lives of high school students” □ in all their diversity and would encourage authors writing for teens to create books that moved beyond the stereotypical young adult novels of past generations.⁶

Between 2000 and 2010, the Printz Award committees that served annually selected winners. Therefore, eleven titles have been honored with the Printz Award as the *best* young adult book of the year. In this study, the researchers sought to determine commonalities between the Printz Award winners. In addition to addressing the challenge to which each Printz Award committee must respond in choosing a winner, researchers analyzed the eleven titles and identified common themes or content trends. These six common themes included: journeys, teenage angst leading to self-actualization, family relationships, romantic relationships, controversial issues within the content, and diversity of story characters. The research reported in this study will identify common themes, the presence of these content trends in the Printz Award-winning books, and the extent to which these content trends provide fresh perspective in young adult literature.

Finally, although each year’s decision reflects the committee’s consensus on their definition of literary merit, in this paper, the researchers examined the popularity of these titles among the intended teen audience.

Method: Identification of Content Consistencies in Printz Award Winners

The researchers identified common themes by reading the eleven of the winning Printz Award titles. After reaching consensus about emerging patterns within the books’ content, the researchers developed and defined a list of six content trends. The authors set up a Google Document to collaboratively recognize the presence of each trend in all of the previous Printz Award winners by:

- listing each work,
- listing the determined themes below the title, and
- revisiting each Printz Award winner as textual evidence was recorded to demonstrate support for the trend’s existence within the title.

In many instances, descriptions of content themes were adapted from Koellings’ *Best Books for Young Adults*. After the analysis of content trends among the Printz Award winners, the authors conducted a literature review to determine which themes were typically found in young adult literature in general and whether any common themes were new to the young adult literature scene.

Results: Common Themes Among Printz Award Winners

Six common themes were identified’ as prevalent in many of the Printz Award winners.

Theme 1: Journeys

The first theme identified was journey, which the authors defined as character progression from one place or stage to another. The theme was identified to be present when a character in the work embarks on either a literal or physical quest or a metaphorical journey, during which time they overcome a large mental, emotional, or spiritual challenge in his or her life. The journey theme was identified as present in all eleven of the previous winners in a literal sense, a figurative sense, or both.

For example, a literal journey is a foundational element of the 2002 winner, An Na's *A Step from Heaven*, because the story centers on main character Young Ju and her family's immigration from Korea to the United States. The other title where the journey theme was present only in a literal sense was the 2010 winner, *Going Bovine*. The winner of the first Printz Award in 2000 was *Monster* by Walter Dean Meyers. In this work, the journey theme was present in a figurative sense as 16-year-old Steve's internal struggle about his guilt and being labeled a "monster" unfolds for the reader in both screenplay and diary format during the character's trial for a convenience store hold-up that resulted in murder. *Jellico Road*, the 2009 Printz Award winner, presented the journey theme metaphorically. In 2004, Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* included both a figurative and literal journey. Metaphorically, the main character, Bobby, journeys to understand parental responsibility and the intense love one feels for their child as he embarks on fatherhood alone. Bobby also journeys literally when he decides to move away from the city where he's always lived to the country because it is what is best for his daughter. Other Printz Award winners that included a journey theme in both a literal and figurative sense included *Kit's Wilderness*, *Postcards from No Man's Land*, *How I Live Now*, *Looking for Alaska*, *American Born Chinese*, and *The White Darkness*.

Theme 2: Teen Angst Leading to Self-Actualization

Teen angst leading to self-actualization is the content trend among Printz Award winners. In *Best Books for Young Adults*, Koelling wrote, "Of great importance to teens at all stages of adolescence is the development of a positive sense of self, which does not often come smoothly and can exact a price."⁷ The researchers used this stage of development to define this content trend. The theme was assigned to a book when major characters indicated anxiety about who they were as individuals at the beginning of the story and surmounted this angst through coming of age or through the literal and/ or figurative journeys they made, leading to a realization and knowledge of self. Protagonists in all eleven of the Printz Award winners experienced angst, catharsis, insight, and self-actualization.

In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles decides to go to his father's alma mater, a private boarding school in Alabama, rather than stay home and attend a public school where he doesn't fit in. One of first people he meets at his new school is the mysterious Alaska, with whom he immediately falls in love. But by the end of the school year, he has learned the importance of family and friends, and how they can help him overcome his insecurities. This theme also plays a major role in *The White Darkness*. Main character Sym is a hearing-impaired teen that is shy and self-conscious about sex, a popular topic among her English girlfriends. Sym shares little with her classmates, but instead finds comfort in her imaginary lover, a Polar explorer named Titus Oates, who was abandoned after wandering off in the Antarctic wilderness ninety years prior. During her journey through her imaginary Antarctic "ice," Sym comes to realize her worth as a strong individual who can survive, begins to feel comfortable enough to risk speaking to those around her, and opens up to the idea of real romantic relationships.

Theme 3: Family Relationships

Another trend was the family relationships theme, which is found to a degree in all of the winning Printz Award titles. The researchers defined this theme as a "focus on teens in the context of their family lives."⁸ This theme occurred when family history or secrets, family crisis, the definition of family, or teen identity within the family unit were elements in the book's plot.

Family ties and history are honored in *Kit's Wilderness* in the bond between Kit and his grandfather, whose health deteriorates throughout the book. Dealing with the loss of his grandfather is a major difficulty for Kit and the other members of his immediate family. In *A Step from Heaven*, the entire plot centers on a Korean family and how their relationships and family dynamics change as they embark on their new life in America. Main character Young Ju struggles to find her individual identity as an American citizen while upholding the Korean cultural values her parents have impressed upon her.

In *The First Part Last*, Bobby comes to understand the meaning of parental roles; the strength of bonds in an untraditional family, family is also addressed in *How I Live Now*. The importance of family theme was echoed in the most recent Printz Award winner, *Going Bovine*, as main character Cameron experiences a new realization of his life's importance to himself and his family. In another take on family, family secrets are simultaneously revealed to the main protagonists and to the reader in *Postcards from No Man's Land* and *The White Darkness*.

Theme 4: Romantic Relationships

The next major theme in many of the winning Printz Award titles was teenage romance. Koelling stated, "As teens are growing into their adult bodies and experiencing the accompanying physical, psychological, and emotional shifts, their sexual identities take center stage and are of tantamount importance in their continuing development."⁹ This content trend appeared as young love, lust, or sexual encounters in nine out of the eleven Printz Award winners. Although young love or interest in the opposite sex did not play a role at all in *Monster* or *A Step from Heaven*, all other Printz Award winners featured a romantic theme.

In *The First Part Last*, a romantic teen relationship results in pregnancy and single parenthood. *Postcards from No Man's Land* includes the details of Jacob's sexual interest in both males and females, as well as a wartime love affair from the past told alongside a story of attraction in the present. *How I Live Now*, set during a fictional world war, also features a wartime romance between two first cousins. *Looking for Alaska* has a number of romantic elements, especially pertinent being Miles' lust for female main character Alaska.

Theme 5: Controversial Topics

The next content trend found in all the Printz Award winners was the presence of controversial topics within the story. The researchers again looked to Koelling who defined this theme as an element in a work that would create "a conflict of opinion"¹⁰ among various readers and critics about the appropriateness of that element for the intended audience. In *The Official YALSA Guidebook*, Michael Cart stated, "To further expand the potential readership, publishers began encouraging authors to write edgier, more sophisticated and even experimental fiction."¹¹ In fact, the Printz Award criteria, "In accordance with the Library Bill of Rights, CONTROVERSY [emphasis added by researchers] is not something to be avoided. In fact, we want a book that readers will talk about."¹² Controversial topics in young adult literature are often found in books labeled as problem novels.¹³ However, the presence of this theme in the Printz Award winners did not imply the trendy problem novel of the early 1970s, where the problem was the central focus of the story and "drew heavily on the possibilities for preachy moral instruction."¹⁴ Instead, the controversial subject matter identified in all of the Printz Award winners showcased a distinguished problem novel in which "books...feature more than one story line peopled with multiple and complicated characters of all ages from any number of backgrounds who face problems for which

there may be no ready answers.”□¹⁵ In other words, controversial themes “emerge[d] genuinely from the character’s actions, choices, and circumstances.”□¹⁶

For example, controversial subject matter was present in *How I Live Now* that Daisy has an eating disorder. In the 2001 Printz Award winner, *Kit’s Wilderness*, central character John Askew drops out of school to embrace his dark side. Also, main character Kit describes the ghosts of small children who had died long ago in a collapsed mineshaft, indicating the presence of supernatural elements. According to the Office of Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, occult or supernatural content is the sixth most frequent reason why books are challenged.¹⁷

Incest is typically a taboo topic in American society and sexually explicit content is the most frequent reason that a work is challenged,¹⁸ yet *Postcards from No Man’s Land* contains a number of controversial topics, including allusion to bisexual and homosexual relationships, affairs that led to illegitimate children, and assisted death or euthanasia. Meg Rosoff’s 2005 winner, *How I Live Now*, was controversial due to the romantic and sexual relationship between main character Daisy and her first cousin Edmond.

Theme 6: Diversity

The last common theme pertained to the diversity of characters in the Printz Award winners. Young adult literature expert Patty Campbell wrote, “For a long while YA fiction depicted an all-white mostly middle-class world.”□¹⁹ For purposes of identifying the presence of this theme in the winning Printz Award titles, the researchers defined diversity as characteristics of central protagonists that are unlike or different in terms of race or ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. The diversity theme was determined to be present when characters had traits that were different than those of white American characters who were middle-class and heterosexual. This theme was represented in many of the Printz Award winners above and is also included in the Michael L. Printz Award criteria. This criterion states, “Librarianship focuses on individuals, in all their diversity, and that focus is a fundamental value of the Young Adult Library Services Association and its members. Diversity is, thus, honored by the Association and in the collections and services that libraries provide to young adults.”□²⁰ It was apparent that Printz Award winners’ main characters comprised an ethnically, racially, and gender diverse group, although they were not diverse in sexual orientation or socioeconomic status.

In regard to racial or ethnic diversity, main characters from eight of the eleven Printz Award winners were not white Americans. For example, main characters of Printz Award winners have included a Korean girl in *A Step from Heaven*, an African American boy in *The First Part Last*, English boys in *Kit’s Wilderness* and *Postcards from No Man’s Land*, an English girl in *The White Darkness*, and an Australian girl in *Jellicoe Road*. Also, there is a Chinese main character in *American Born Chinese* and the main character in *Monster* is African American. Although not exclusively related to the author’s definition of diversity, the researchers concurred with Michael Cart in his recent article “A New Literature for a New Millennium? The First Decade of the Printz Awards”□¹² when he observed that “...fully half of the 10 winners to date were first published outside the United States (*Kit’s Wilderness*, *Postcards from No Man’s Land*, *How I Live Now*, *The White Darkness* in England, and *Jellicoe Road* in Australia).”□

Seven of the previous Printz Award winners contained male main characters and four contained female main characters. Since male characters seem to have been favored, the researchers wondered whether there was an

attempt among the committee members to increase young adult male readership by showcasing quality young adult literature featuring central male protagonists. This question was particularly interesting in light of the fact that “[b]ooks featuring strong, intelligent, courageous, quirky, artistic, determined, scrappy, wily, independent, resilient, witty females dominate...fiction...on recent [Best Books for Young Adults] BBYA lists,”□ of which titles are selected not solely based on literary merit, but on teen popularity as well.²²

Sexual diversity was present in only one of the winning titles: *Postcards from No Man’s Land* was the only title that featured a protagonist who indicated his sexual orientation to be something other than heterosexual, although the 2000 honor title *Hard Love* featured an openly homosexual central character.²³ Though the previous Printz Award winners were not diverse in regard to sexual orientation, in *Postcards from No Man’s Land*, the bisexuality of the main character and open homosexuality of other central characters were not treated as problems but rather as aspects of their characters. This is an evolutionary way of treating gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) issues in young adult literature, as “[t]o treat a broader range of sexual identities no longer necessitates a somber tone and message-driven delivery.”□²⁴

Finally, in regard to socioeconomic diversity, three main characters were of low socioeconomic status. These characters included Steve in *Monster*, Young Ju in *A Step from Heaven*, and Taylor from *Jellicoe Road*. Additionally, two main characters came from wealth, with the remaining seven were found to have been part of the middle class. Therefore, when considering diversity based on socioeconomic status, it seems that the previous Printz Award winners have reflected the norm in young adult literature.

[Table 1](#) illustrates the identified content trends in each of the previous Printz Award winners. Each of the previous Printz Award winners appears in the top columns and lists each of the common themes discussed previously in the rows.

Discussion: Trends and the Development of YA Literature

Several of the common themes or content trends identified by the authors to be present in the Printz Award winners are typical themes in literature for young adults. These content trends included the journey, teen angst leading to self-actualization, family relationships, and teen romance themes. As mentioned previously in the definition of the theme dubbed “teen angst leading to self-actualization,”□ the researchers observed that characters often develop a sense of self through their experiences during their literal and/or figurative journeys as they move through the story. Similarly, the researchers found that main characters in the previous winners often sought to identify their individuality in the context of their familial and romantic relationships. As Michael Cart remarked, “As the teen years are when an individual, separate identity and the early self of adulthood are being established, it comes as no surprise that a great number of books are published for teens that treat, in one way or another, themes of the self.”□²⁵ From this statement, the researchers interpreted content trends that were issues surrounding the general and broad theme of coming of age. In her chapter titled “Trends and Issues in Young Adult Literature,”□ Pam Cole stated that “[t]he genre addresses coming-of-age issues”□ in a list of “characteristics that have historically defined”□ young adult literature.²⁶ Therefore, the content trends identified in Printz Award winners have been present in young adult literature over time, which is highly appropriate since they are written specifically for a teen audience (however vastly diverse) that faces issues surrounding the unique experience of coming of age through an identification of self. The Printz Award winners have all showcased quality works that emphasize the issues surrounding this common teen experience.

On the other hand, the controversy and diversity themes identified by the authors to be present in the Printz Award winners appear to be trends more recently developed in young adult literature. Although controversial subject matter has typically been found in young adult literature, these topics have frequently been presented in ways that aim to solve protagonists' problems through moral instruction, as is definitive of the original problem novel.²⁷ The trend toward a less didactic and more realistic and open-ended problem novel was exhibited by the way controversial subject matter is presented in the previous Printz Award winners. "Some current subjects in realistic YA fiction hark back to the problem novel, but without succumbing to the single-mindedness of that form,"²⁸ Marc Aronson writes in *Exploding the Myths*. "I suspect that literary distinction for teenagers will most often arise in texts that have a great deal to offer but also allow space for the reader to enter."²⁹ Controversial subject matter in young adult literature, presented through the problems that protagonists face, is evolving to be less one-sided. Rather, it is up to the reader to determine what is right or wrong. Michael Cart confirmed this in his discussion of the first decade of the Printz Award: "A staple of [adult] literary fiction, ambiguity had been largely absent from young adult literature but is an essential constituent of...*Monster* (a book in which the question of the main character's guilt is left to the reader to resolve) and its use was another herald of the coming-of-age of young adult literature."³⁰ The maturation of young adult literature through the presentation of controversial topics in the evolved problem novel was also hinted at by YALSA, in its statement that "[p]erhaps this trend reflects a more complex society and adolescent experience. Perhaps it is a natural progression or evolution of a literature that has simply grown up."³¹ The controversial subject matter identified as a content trend in the Printz Award winners exhibits this new vein in young adult literature: presenting controversial problems in an open-ended manner that allows for the adolescent reader to evaluate and therefore develop moral consciousness at a time in life where it is being fully realized and shaped.

Finally, diversity of character is becoming more celebrated, or at least has evolved into a content trend from a time when the world of young adult literature was portrayed only through the stories of white middle-class Americans. Michael Cart wrote, "The wonderfully varied and newly expansive, international nature of today's YA literature is evidenced by the fact that books first published in other countries are also eligible for the Printz Award, affirming the fact that the renaissance of YA literature is not confined to these sunny shores but is now indeed, a global phenomenon."³² As mentioned previously, diversity is encouraged by YALSA through their consideration of the concept in the Printz Award criteria. Diversity in young adult literature is of the utmost importance because it is imperative to ensure that "every young adult of every race, ethnicity, color, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age and religion can find his or her face and condition being reflected with accuracy and compassion in the pages of good books."³³ The content trend of diversity identified in the Printz Award winners represents parallels a shift to honor this important prerogative. Of the Printz Award winners, Cart wrote, "[A]ll of these books are... distinguished by their diversity, which is emblematic of the wonderful welter of innovations and trends that—since the late 1990s—have been redefining the meaning of 'young adult literature.'"³⁴ However, only time will tell if this trend towards more diverse young adult literature, as exemplified through the previous Printz Award winners, will continue to grow and expand. It is hoped that the field of young adult literature will continue to grow and expand through the themes of quality controversial subject matter and diversity of character.

The Challenges of Selecting the Best

Because Printz Award criteria are flexible, committee members' reading interests, preferences, and definitions of quality literature differ greatly, which makes selecting the very best title in the expanding and varied field of young adult literature a challenging task each year. Jonathan Hunt, who served on the 2008 Printz Award committee,

stated, “You wrestle with the award criteria, with your own literary prejudices, and with the committee process... It’s hard not to get defensive, especially when you are not at liberty to disclose just how the committee reached its decision, but criticism...presents an opportunity to open up a dialog about our fundamental perceptions of teens, books, and teen book awards.”³⁵ His article not only provided an excellent glimpse into the challenges faced by the committee as they worked to choose the year’s best young adult book, but it also revealed issues related to personal literary interpretation and differences in opinion about book appeal and the definition of quality.

Hunt also made an important point about the Printz Award committees:

It’s a mistake, of course, to think of the Committee as if it is a single monolithic entity, as if it is of one mind about *anything*. The reality is that [each] committee is made up of nine passionate people—and a different nine every year—who have widely divergent opinions, attitudes, and tastes. Chances are that your opinions, attitudes, and tastes were represented by someone on the committee.³⁶

It is useful to keep this observation in mind when thinking about the selection of winning titles of any literary award.

What of Popularity?

In the same way that quality is flexible in the Printz Award criteria, the notion of popularity is also difficult to define. In his book *Exploding the Myths*, Marc Aronson, who served on the YALSA committee to create the Printz Award in 1999, defined it: “Popularity is a measure of how many people like something.”³⁷ For purposes of this discussion, the researchers used Aronson’s simple definition of this term.

Young adult librarians have long debated the quality versus popularity question when discussing patrons’ needs. Former Printz Award committee chair Peter Butts wrote, “In the literature of YA criticism the conventional wisdom places popularity and quality at opposite ends of the spectrum.”³⁸ This debate has resulted in the inclusion of teen opinions in the committee process for the Best Books for Young Adults, in which books are selected based on a balance of both quality and popularity.³⁹ Also, the creation of the Teens’ Top Ten list as part of Teen Read Week recognizes what is popular with young adult readers by allowing teens to nominate and choose their favorite books from the previous year.⁴⁰ However, the Printz Award committee is required to select a winner based on quality alone, as each committee defines quality. While there are thousands of young adult titles published annually, this committee must pick out the titles they agree deserve the Printz Award. The gold and silver stickers affixed to the covers of the winning titles and honor books set them apart from other titles on bookstore and library shelves, indicating that these titles deserve extra consideration (although whether the titles received this additional notice is unclear).

Many teenagers are notoriously difficult to please, and likely to be wary of all things recommended by adults, including award-winning titles recommended by parents and teachers. Pam Cole hinted at this dilemma when she wrote, “[T]eens don’t generally choose a book on literary merit, and as teachers we engage our students best when we know and respect what they enjoy.”⁴¹ However, teachers and librarians know that teens don’t always enjoy something they feel is required of them.⁴² When a class of library and information science students discussed the impact of the award stickers on children’s and young adult titles, many of them recalled that books with those stickers were frequently considered to be “good for you books” rather than titles they’d enjoy reading.⁴³

In the ten years since the Printz Award was first given, many of the winning titles have not maintained their popularity, but some of the Printz Award winners are consistently popular. The first winner, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, and *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson⁴⁴ are repeatedly read and recommended. Others popular titles include John Green's *Looking for Alaska*, and two more recent winners, *Jellico Road* and *Going Bovine*.⁴⁵

Beginning in 2003, *Teen Read Week* included an opportunity for teens to select their favorite titles from the preceding year, creating the Teens' Top Ten list. That year, *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson was selected by teens.⁴⁶ Like *Monster*, *The First Part Last* is realistic urban fiction, the story of a teen father who has to make difficult decisions that thrust him into adulthood far sooner than he had expected. Only two other Printz Award titles have been selected by teens for the *Teen Top Ten*. It would seem that quality and popularity do not always coincide, perhaps making the Printz Award's emphasis on quality even more important since the winners are titles that teens might not have chosen on their own.

Many books have maintained great popularity in addition to their Printz Award recognition and are also found on other lists, like the Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers.⁴⁷ It is difficult to discern if the easier reading level improves the popularity, or if the multiple mentions on different lists made these titles more easily identifiable to list compilers. Subject matter often drives popularity and can even trump a high reading level; when teens enjoy a story for its content, a more challenging (or less challenging) reading level becomes less important. Controversy also draws in more readers, since it may be caused by subject matter with which teens can readily identify.

Regardless of whether or not they are popular among teens, the Printz Award winners were all well-written and relevant to issues facing today's teens. These quality titles have enhanced the young adult literature world and garnered more respect for teen literature.

Conclusion

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, eleven committees of nine members each read thousands of books and selected eleven exceptional titles for the Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in literature written for young adults. The winning titles expressed the teen experience in a variety of ways, from a teen on trial for murder to a teen obsessed with an Antarctic expedition to a teen facing the inevitability of death. The winning titles all contain themes and ideas that teens can relate to their daily experiences, or that can lend insight into the lives of friends or acquaintances, often through the lives of teen characters from unfamiliar situations, countries, or ethnicities. Teens are beginning to experience life's hardships and controversies, and they look for books that reflect those experiences; these books help identify the various challenges that they will face. The truth and authenticity of these titles make them important and also make them winners for young readers for generations to come.

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4 Responses to *The Printz Award Winners Under a Microscope: Content Trends, Committee Challenges, and Teen Popularity*



[marc aronson](#) says:

February 15, 2011 at 6:31 am

The most obvious trend in the Printz is that committees have favored novels, while all books, including anthologies, plays, poetry, and — Nonfiction — are eligible. If there is one disappointing trend in the award selections it is the clear avoidance of nonfiction. While there is now a YA NF award, that is only in the last two years and there is no reason why a book cannot win both. The Printz is not a fiction award, and yet it has become that.

[Reply](#)



[Ashley Barrineau](#) says:

February 15, 2011 at 4:41 pm

Rural Teens on the Role of Reading in Their Lives

Posted on [February 14, 2011](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



By Paulette M. Rothbauer

Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative inquiry into the reading habits and library practices of older teenagers living in a rural municipality in southwestern Ontario, Canada. The researcher interviewed twenty-seven young adults between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years about their reading practices and preferences. Participants included teenagers who identified as avid, moderate, or light readers, or as nonreaders. Responses to the specific statement, “Using your own words, describe for me the role of reading in your life,”¹ were used as evidence in this paper to make case for the significance of reading in young people’s everyday lives. Four major themes related to the experiences of reading emerged in this analysis: autonomy and independence, habit and comfort, experience, and knowledge. The paper concludes with a discussion of possible implications for library services to rural and small-town youth. This work makes a contribution to the understudied fields of rural librarianship and studies of reading among rural youth.

Despite the large number of public libraries in North America serving rural and small-town constituents, we know little about the role of either libraries or reading in the everyday lives of rural youth. In today’s world, the daily lives of young people seem to be saturated with digital technology and socially networked communication practices, leading to assertions and assumptions that books, reading, and libraries have only a marginal place in the media landscape of rural youth coming of age in the early years of the 21st century. However, when asked directly about the role that both libraries and reading play in their lives, young people often give poignant testimony. Taken together with evidence that residents of rural, remote, and small-town areas in North America do not always enjoy widespread access to powerful computers and networks that are available in many urban and suburban areas,¹ it would seem that information policy and professional library and information science practices designed to support the pervasive use of various information and communication technologies at the expense of reading promotion and library use may be short-sighted. Just as techno-boosterism is an extreme position, so too would be casting a blind eye to the undeniably media-rich and technologically mediated lives of young people today, advocating only for the pleasures of reading the printed and bound book.

The position taken in this research follows from Eliza Dresang’s articulation of the value of her theory of radical change in the context of the information seeking behavior of young people.² Dresang calls for a conception of reading and information seeking that privileges the imbrication of digital media with handheld devices of all kinds, including printed and bound books. In this study, engagement with textual media of any kind is included as it was presented in the self-reported descriptions of the role of reading—whether the reading of printed and bound

books or of digital materials—among older teens living in a rural municipality in southwestern Ontario, Canada. The findings in this work are taken from responses of twenty-seven young people between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years to the statement, “Using your own words, describe for me the role of reading in your life.”□ Four major themes related to the experiences of reading for these young people emerged in this analysis: autonomy and independence, habit and comfort, experience, and knowledge. After a review of research literature and selected professional articles on rural libraries and youth, followed by an overview of the research methods used for this qualitative inquiry, each theme will be discussed in turn privileging comments from the young adult participants’ accounts of reading. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications of the findings of this study for rural library services to youth.

Rural Youth, Libraries, and Reading

Over the past thirty years in library and information science (LIS) professional literature, there have been consistent, although infrequent, reports of the practices of librarians and other library workers in rural library systems, and, of these, very few reports of services to teens and young adults. When it comes to rural library services in general, LIS literature provides an account of external pressures that affect the sustainability of rural libraries: budget shortfalls, declining populations in catchment areas, the lack of a professionally educated workforce combined with a lack of access to ongoing professional development and technology skills training. *Library Trends* has devoted two journal issues to rural libraries: first in 1980, edited by John M. Houlihan, and again in 1995, edited by Patricia LaCaille John. Both issues addressed what is perceived to be the neglect of rural libraries by “scholars and decision-makers, and the national library press and literature”□³ and both are concerned with the “new”□ electronic technologies of the day that were seen to hold the possibility of mitigating the isolation of rural communities by connecting them to larger networks of information.

Another journal dedicated to rural library services, *Rural Libraries*, provides additional information on the development of rural library services predominantly in the United States. Among its publishing output were several calls for improved service to young people and for youth advocacy, along with summaries of best practices for various library programs.⁴ In these articles, authors often emphasized the need to adapt existing rural library service strategies to correspond to changes in the demographics of rural and small-town communities, as well the need to respond to both the opportunities of and demands for access to new technologies.⁵ For example, in an article that provided an update on factors affecting library services in rural libraries in the United States in 2002, the author cited such issues as homelessness and poverty, the rise of migrant families, at-risk behaviors of rural youth, institutional challenges such as the lack of specialized youth services library positions along with restricted library budgets, and few opportunities for professional development for rural library workers.⁶

Given the general absence of youth services staff positions and dedicated library programs or services for teenagers in many rural areas, it is perhaps not surprising that the recommendations for improving library services to rural and small-town young people follow general guidelines for library services to all teenagers. There is concern about establishing a basic level of service that addresses staff attitudes towards teenagers, improved collections and programs, and the development of appropriate teen spaces in libraries.⁷ School and public library cooperation is another major theme in the professional literature as youth advocates are required to capitalize on opportunities for sharing resources from local expertise to collections of materials and resources.⁸

Despite recent research reporting that services to young people are central to the overall suite of programming and services offered in rural libraries, very few researchers have specifically looked at how rural and small-town youth use libraries and how they get access to reading materials.⁹ Still more infrequent are recent studies of rural youth and reading practices. In the mid-1980s, Constance Mellon reported on the results of a survey about reading preferences and habits with more than 300 ninth-graders in rural eastern North Carolina.¹⁰ She found evidence that teens were actively reading and, provided that they were able to exercise independent choices, that they valued reading as a pleasurable way to alleviate boredom. Harold and Fern Willits reported on an earlier reading survey, conducted in 1983 with more than 3,000 eighth- and eleventh-grade students in rural Pennsylvania.¹¹ They found that “the more the person was involved with his/her family and peers, participated in school and community activities, worked on chores at home, or watched television, the more hours he/she reported reading.”¹² Rothbauer investigated the place of the library in the reading accounts of older rural teens, seeking to understand the seeming dissonance between the lack of a visible reading culture and ample evidence that teens in the sample community were regularly engaged in reading practices in their daily lives.¹³

The research reported here follows from Rothbauer’s earlier work to illustrate, using details from my participants’ own statements, the role that reading takes up in their busy lives. Such evidence can contribute to an interrogation of the pervasive conceptualization of youth today as people who live the entirety of their out-of-school lives online; furthermore, it shows that if the research gaze is on the consequences of specific modes of engagement with various media products among young people, it is possible to learn more about the meaning that such engagement might hold.

Research Methods

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger qualitative research project that investigated reading practices, perceptions of libraries, and library usage among older teens living in a rural municipality in Canada.¹⁴ Although several different methods of data collection were conducted for the larger study, this paper will report findings based only on the transcripts of face-to-face conversational interviews with twenty-seven young people who were between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years old. The researcher conducted all interviews and transcribed and analyzed the interview data. Interviews took place at mutually convenient locations between November 2006 and March 2007.

The overarching research problem of the larger project concerned the degree to which rural young people living in the periphery of a large urban center were marginalized from a rich print culture or from digital forms of textual engagement due to their geographic location. The secondary research question reported on in this paper focused on how youth perceived of the role that reading and libraries did play in their lives as they came of age in small-town and rural Ontario.

The Research Site

At the commencement of this project, the municipality that functioned as the research site had a population of approximately 10,000 people with half the people living in the single town and the rest residing throughout the rural countryside and eleven small villages. The economic pillars of the county, of which this municipality was a part, were manufacturing, tourism and agriculture: correspondingly, there was a large blue-collar workforce. The municipality was largely Christian (70 percent Protestant, 18 percent Catholic); most people resided in families in

homes that they owned; 91 percent of the population had English as their first language; and only 10 percent of the population was born outside of Canada. Just more than 1 percent of the population declared themselves as visible minorities (e.g., as Latin American, black, Southeast Asian, Korean, or Chinese). The household income was about ten thousand dollars a year less than the province-wide average. The youth demographic split equally into male and female: 3.7 percent of the population were males between fifteen and nineteen years of age (n=370) and 3.7 percent of the population were females between fifteen and nineteen years of age (n=375). Approximately 40 percent of youth population lived in the only town and 72 percent of all youth were attending school full-time.¹⁵ Within the municipal boundaries, there was one full service library branch in the only town and one small, one-room branch in an adjacent village, although small branches of the larger county library system were located in adjacent villages of the bordering municipalities. There was one high school with a library and a teacher-librarian. There were several churches and sporting arenas, one Christian bookstore, and no music stores, cinemas, or Internet or wifi-enabled cafes. There were no identifiable, neither publicly nor privately managed, dedicated teen-only spaces.

Sample of Youth Participants

Purposive sampling was used as it allowed for emergent sampling design, the serial selection of sample units (i.e., participants), continuous adjustment, and the selection of sampling to redundancy of categories.¹⁶ Gaining access to youth participants was achieved through negotiation with the regional school board, the high school administration and teaching staff, and with the active support of school and public library staff. Letters of information that outlined the research purpose and methods were created for youth participants, adult caregivers, parents, and guardians and were distributed through classroom visits and via the school and public libraries. Interviews were conducted with twenty-seven young people who were between the ages of fifteen and eighteen years of age between November 2006 and March 2007; fourteen participants were female, thirteen were male. Their median age was seventeen years. All participants lived in or near the specific rural municipality with approximately 18% of them living in the single small town. All young people meeting the age and residence requirements were invited to participate. When asked, approximately 56 percent of participants saw themselves as readers, leaving 44 percent who saw themselves either as non-readers or light readers. In an attempt to recognize the value of their time, especially given their very busy schedules, participants were given \$20 gift certificates from retail stores located in the nearest urban centre. Compensation was not offered as an incentive but as a symbolic recognition of the participants' contribution to this project.¹⁷ Demographic data related to the income and education levels of participants' parents were not collected: the purpose of this study was to learn something about the nature of reading and libraries and their meaning in the lives of rural young people rather than to make generalizations about rural youth.

All participants were white and most had lived in or near the municipality for all or much of their lives.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

As the sample of participants was diverse, including youth who like to read a lot, who like to read a little, and who do not enjoy reading at all, interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method of eliciting meaningful data about the individual experiences of reading and libraries. Interviews permitted responsive questioning and interview schedules could be tailored to the unique context of each face-to-face interaction. Key features of in-depth interviewing include a flexible structure to encourage talk about specific topics, interactivity to encourage

free talk from participants, use of probes to explore and expand salient themes, and new ideas and new thoughts that are generated for both the researcher and participant about the interview themes and topics.¹⁸ The interviews were between twenty and sixty minutes in duration. In keeping with guidelines for this kind of interviewing, a uniform schedule of rigid interview questions was not used, but as the interviews progressed, “hermeneutic prompts”¹⁹ were developed that were taken from other accounts of reading. These prompts were used to explore specific ideas with individual participants that occurred in previous interviews. A general interview guide was created for use during the interviews to ensure that all areas of interest were covered. The researcher conducted all interviews in face-to-face encounters. Interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times and occurred in the public library, the school library, or at a local restaurant. Informed consent was required for all interviews, and interviews with minors occurred only with the additional written consent of parents or guardians. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Towards the end of the conversational interviews with participants, they were asked to describe, in their own words, the role of reading in their lives. Their responses to this question were coded for recurring themes in an attempt to come to an understanding of what reading means to these young people.²⁰

Data analysis was guided by open-coding techniques and involved the qualitative procedures of active listening, immersion in the data, data reduction and transformation, and thematic analysis.²¹ These procedures correspond to the “constant comparative method”²² of grounded theory techniques by which close attention is paid to the data to see which themes emerge. Such techniques encompass interpretive activities such as counting statements, looking for metaphors, comparing and contrasting statements; these techniques were used throughout the entire project to make sense of the data. I also used different methods to isolate themes: looking at the text as a whole, close readings of selections from the texts, and “insightful”²³ readings that are an interpretive attempt to make sense of the data within the specific contexts of the inquiry (i.e., rural librarianship and reading practices).²² Strategies of peer debriefing (with other LIS and youth researchers) and member-checking (with participants) were used to test the salience of the thematic analysis. To aid with qualitative coding of the transcribed digital texts in an Apple computing environment, each interview was coded by the researcher using TAMS Analyzer Software version 3.4, created by Matthew Weinstein, a product designed specifically to be used for qualitative data analysis.

Results: “Using your own words, describe for me the role of reading in your life.”

Four major themes related to participants’ descriptions of the role of reading emerged in this analysis: autonomy and independence, habit and comfort, experience, and knowledge. In the section that follows, I elaborate and illustrate each theme using evidence taken from the interview transcripts.

Theme 1: Autonomy and Independence

When asked to reflect on the role of reading in their lives, many participants discussed reading in terms that emphasized a sense of independence and autonomy, especially from school assigned reading and from teachers’ evaluations. For example, quiet-spoken Richard,²³ as avid a gamer as he could be given his dial-up access to the Internet, enjoyed reading stories about “wars that really happened”²⁴ along with computer and car manuals and magazines. When asked about the role that reading played in his life, he responded quickly and firmly in marked difference from his shy and tentative responses to many of my previous questions: “Definitely not like what I read for school. You have a choice to pick what you want to read”²⁵ (Richard, 17 years, moderate reader). Lena, an

eighteen-year-old avid reader with plans to become a librarian, expressed a similar sentiment. Her response emphasized the freedom associated with making your own reading choices and from simply choosing to read: “Just doing stuff on my own; I like doing that. And reading, just obviously, like, how can you be any more independent other than just to read?”□

Katherine, an avid reader who particularly enjoyed the novels of Stephen King and did not like romance or fantasy (“those books with magic”□) also described the role of reading as something that set her apart from other people. Katherine was receptive to book recommendations from others, especially from her aunt, who had recommended every “good book”□ Katherine had read in the past year. She said, “[A] lot of people if they see me reading, they always ask me, why are you reading that for? Like it should be for a class. It’s never for a class. They always look surprised and say, ‘I don’t read.’”□ She went on to say that although reading for other than school purposes a bit unusual in her circle of friends, it did not bother her to be perceived as being different, or in Katherine’s words, “It’s just too bad for them”□ (Katherine, 17 years, light reader).

Eighteen-year-old Nick described himself as an avid reader although he spoke poignantly of the challenges he faced over the years as a child who was identified in a different school system as a struggling reader.²⁴ For Nick, reading was a way to exercise power in an educational system that left him frustrated and resentful. The following excerpt from the interview illustrates both of the rebellious nature of Nick’s reading and his sense of empowerment:

What’s the role? Well, since I’m *illiterate* and stuff, I kinda want to read more ‘cause its kind of like a ‘stick it to the man’...Well, it’s kind of like, you know, a program where they try to get you to read again and like a lot of the counselors when I was at it said I was the smartest kid...I didn’t like it. I didn’t like a lot of the rules because I thought basically they treated us like we were retarded which is a major problem. So once I got into high school I started kind of at the applied level and then went up to academic level, so now I’m in academic English. I plan to go to University which is the opposite of what they thought I was going to do in public school...My ambition is to, you know, to kinda give them the middle finger in a way (Nick, 18 years, avid reader).

As even these short responses show us, voluntary reading can contribute to a sense of autonomy and independence born of resistance to sanctioned reading and important for feelings of self-validation and empowerment.

However, another common theme to emerge from the interviews favored an opposite sense of the role of reading, one that is associated with comfortable routine and habits.

Theme 2: Habit and Comfort

Many participants spoke of the role of reading as a way to relax, whether it was a mundane way to fill the time or as an active method of escape from the pressures of their daily lives. Katherine and Richard described reading as sometimes simply being a way to alleviate boredom or a way to pass the time as seen in their respective comments: “I usually read like every morning on the bus, in my spare [time], in class when it’s boring,”□ and “It’s just something to do when there’s not very much else to do.”□ Joe echoed these ideas by saying, “When I’m bored, that type of thing”□ (Joe, 16 years, avid reader). Some participants spoke of reading in a slightly more

active way when they recounted their reading habits. For example, after Darren related how difficult it was for him to find time to read since much of his leisure time was devoted to sports, he described his daily practice of reading online as follows: “[It’s] kind of a habit. Every night—go home, go to the computer, read stuff...any time I find time. Just whenever I walk in”□ (Darren, 15 years, light reader).

Young women were much more likely to describe reading as a way to escape or to distract themselves from stressful events of the day. For example, after Carmen told me that she’s been reading since she was little, laughing about how her mom read to her in the womb, she said, “So, I don’t know, I just think it’s really important to be able to read and broaden my mind...I think it can be a way to distract yourself if you have a lot going on in your life. If you have time, take a minute and sit down and read”□ (Carmen, 17 years, moderate reader). Lena’s description of reading as escape is a much more active method of carving out a space of peace and quiet: “Sometimes it acts as an escape. Like I’m having a bad day so I’ll pick up something and just close myself off to everyone else and just read”□ (Lena, 18 years, avid reader). Jennifer, an avid reader and regular public library user, who often checked out five books per week on average, talked about reading in a similar way when she commented, “Well, if I’m like in a bad mood or something, it takes me off into my own little world so I’m just like not there”□ (Jennifer, 15 years, avid reader).

Lisa immediately launched into a discussion of her favorite books and authors, speaking with obvious enthusiasm and enjoyment about works by Elizabeth Chadwick, Eoin Colfer, Brian Jacques, Philip Pullman, and C.S. Lewis. She also described how reading, not television, creates a space to “de-stress”□ in her very busy school schedule: “I love to play sports. I do track and field in the spring and did basketball last year. I don’t really have time this year. I was thinking I had my plate full a couple of weeks ago, and I was kind of like, go, go, go! Like [with] TV you have all those commercials and stuff and you kind of lose interest sometimes, like flip to another channel miss half the show. But reading’s like, [you] get into it [and the] next time you look at the clock it’s four hours later”□ (Lisa, 15 years, avid reader).

So while some young women in this study described reading as way to make a space of quiet and escape in their busy lives, other participants spoke of reading as a way to understand and access different experiences or to make connections with others.

Theme 3: Experience

Like other readers, the participants in this study described the role of reading in their lives as a way to understand experiences of others; for some this led to feelings of connectedness with others, and for others it shed light on possibilities for themselves. For example, in response to a question about an important book in her life, another reader, Samantha (17 years old, avid reader) told me about *A Child Called It* by David J. Pelzer.²⁵ It was difficult for her to tell me what she liked about it, but she acknowledged that it was insight into the experience of abuse and recovery recounted in the book that made it so compelling to her.

Katherine’s comments illustrated the way the experiences in a book can reflect one’s own experiences when she said, “I guess it depends on the book I read. Like if I read a book about someone struggling and they make it through, I’ll be like, oh, I can do something like that”□ (Katherine, 17 years, avid reader). Shelley enjoyed reading, but like many in this study, she felt she just did not have time to read as much as she might like. She watched a number of television shows regularly and told me that she read “quite a bit”□ online. Her attempt to describe for

me the role that reading played for her illustrated the common desire among the young people in this study to connect with the world in experiential terms. She began by claiming that the role of reading is “imagination,” but then after a moment of reflection, she elaborated, saying, “...sort of, because when you read, it almost carries you somewhere. It’s not so much to escape, as it is to experience the other side of it” (Shelley, 18 years, light reader).

Harvey was an outgoing young man, heavily involved with activities related to school government, sports, his church, and his community who told me that his favorite book was the *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini.²⁶ He described how this book really showed him that reading could be something different from what he was used to:

Well, reading before was transferring information from a page to your brain and holding it there. Now I think reading is more about the feeling. It’s more about...being involved in the reading and not just reading it for a book. You’re reading it and you want to be involved and you know you’re getting your imagination going and you’re reading because you like to and you’re reading because you enjoy it. It’s more involved... (Harvey, 17 years, avid reader).

This excerpt demonstrates that not only does reading give access to different kinds of experiences, but that the experience of reading itself is valued, especially when one is given the chance to reflect on what reading means.

Theme 4: Knowledge

Although participants recounted several pleasurable examples of reading practices throughout these interviews, when asked directly about the role of reading, most of them gave responses related to Louise Rosenblatt’s concept of “efferent” reading, or reading for the information “take[n] away” from the text.²⁷ This idea held true regardless of their status as a light, moderate, or avid reader. While it was common to hear brief comments such as, “It’s kind of just something I enjoy doing” (Karen, 16 years, avid reader); “I just read for fun” (Samantha, 17 years old, avid reader); “I just love to have a good story” (Ruth, 15 years old, avid reader); or “I guess I read for pleasure” (Bill, 18 years old, moderate reader), the most dominant theme in the responses to the question about the role of reading relied on notions of learning, information, or knowledge. This is illustrated below with a selection of excerpts from the interviews:

Well, reading is really to get good ideas right. Like Kurt Vonnegut is all about ideas, even *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*²⁸ is more a bit of a fluff or entertainment novel but still [it’s] got a lot of ideas (Nick, 18 years, avid reader).

Like I enjoy learning so I always pick up a book to kind of influence myself, um, to get different opinions, obviously (Lena, 18 years, avid reader).

Yeah, it makes you think. Also if you want to talk to people about something and have like mature conversation, it helps to have read some books (Shelley, 18 years, light reader).

The more I read, the more words I understand...I do better in English. Like when I was younger I didn’t have a very big vocabulary (Marie, 17 years, avid reader).

Well, I guess, that by reading a book I was able to do something that I wasn't able to do before...I don't know, I guess it broadens insights (William, 15 years, avid reader).

For understanding I think. Reading's the heavy part. Without the ability for books and stuff I don't think I'd be able to get a lot of stuff done. Like, the biggest thing could be like the tutorials and stuff that helped me 'cause otherwise you're out on your own and you have no clue what to do (Michael, 17 years, light reader).

Um, I think it just helps to keep my brain going. Like I learn a lot of bigger words and I learn how to use them and stuff (Jennifer, 15 years, avid reader).

Responses associated with the concepts of knowledge, information, and learning came from across the sample of participants, from those who loved to read and who read a lot as well as from those who were light to moderate readers. The concept of reading may be a taken-for-granted understanding of what reading means among young people. The consistency with which participants responded with this sense of reading suggests that reading, as a way to learn and to gain knowledge, was an easily accessible idea to them, whereas meaning associated with pleasure and experience is harder to articulate and may require a certain maturity in their reading careers or histories.

Discussion

In many respects, the themes reported in this paper confirmed the findings of other studies that seek to understand the motivation to read for pleasure among young adult readers. In a fine-grained case study of five adolescent readers, Anne R. Reeves reported that when her participants were asked why a person should read, responses related to “learning new things” and accomplishing goals related to other interests (such as sports) and to the unique pleasures of being transported to imaginative “places, people, and plots” through engagement with texts.²⁹ In a study of attitudes towards pleasure reading among younger teens, Vivian Howard developed a taxonomy of adolescent readers that describes reader positions that range from Avid Social to Reluctant Solitary.³⁰ Howard found that the young teens in her study “read for pleasure for the same reasons that adults read for pleasure: to be entertained, to pass the time, to relax, to exercise their imaginations, to escape, to clarify vocational goals.”³¹ However, unlike the participants in Howard's study, who lived in a large regional urban municipality, the rural youth in this study did not exhibit strong peer influenced social reading preferences and habits. This difference invites further research that explores the extent to which such positive peer influence as reported by Howard can be harnessed by libraries to foster a visible reading culture among communities of rural youth.

In a survey of urban teens' leisure reading habits, researchers found that the majority of their respondents indicated that reading for pleasure and reading for learning or educational reasons were among their primary motivations.³² These researchers also found that the majority of urban teens who participated in their survey indicated that they were regular readers, thus providing more positive evidence that when we shift our research focus to teen-generated perspectives on reading habits, preferences, and attitudes, we are likely to find a deeper and more meaningful engagement with texts than is found in the popular adult discourses on teen reading or in the quantitative findings of large-scale national surveys. When directly asked about reading, teens and young adults may disrupt some of the commonly held notions regarding their lack of interest in or motivation to read for pleasure or for information. In this study, participants needed to be reassured during the interviews that I was

interested in all kinds of reading: online sources, comics, news, “not for school” □ and “not from the library” □ choices and more; once they realized they could talk about the kind of reading they enjoyed (and not necessarily the kind of reading they thought I wanted to hear about), it was easier for them to articulate in their own words what reading meant to them.

It is also worth echoing the claim that Hughes-Hassell and Rodge made at the beginning of their article: “The leisure reading habits of urban adolescents have not been widely studied.” □³³ It is also very difficult to identify research into reading for pleasure among North American rural and small-town youth. The research reported here makes a small contribution to our knowledge regarding of the role of reading among rural and small-town youth, a consistently understudied population.

Conclusion: Making Teen Reading Visible: A Role for Rural Libraries

I wondered when I embarked on this research project whether reading for rural and small-town youth would offer possibilities that mitigated any sense of isolation that might be experienced by youth living in the periphery of a large urban center. There was little evidence, however, in this sample of young people that they perceived any lack of access to cultural ideas and practices due to their geographic dislocation. Even though access to the Internet and to the city itself was reported as being inconsistent, the young people in this study would seem to participate as agents and consumers in a globalised media culture that allowed them to feel connected to their urban and international peers. However, the material conditions that define the print culture of their municipality do suggest a certain impoverishment of access to reading materials and to an active reading culture. As I report elsewhere,³⁴ four factors came together in a specific rural and small-town environment to render a picture of an invisible and isolated teen reader despite evidence that youth were reading and making reading selections throughout their days as they moved through their local environments. An understanding of these factors in light of the dominant themes from the teens’ description of the role of reading in their lives helps illustrate the challenge for rural libraries seeking to serve youth readers. The following factors contribute to what I have called the placelessness of reading:

- the sheer physical proximity of reading materials that determined the type of materials that young people read (e.g., books on a mother’s night table or in a brother’s closet, magazines at the doctor’s office, materials in the school library and so on);
- the perception of the public library as a place of childhood memories of both reading for pleasure and library visits;
- the role of the Internet as a kind of default place for making reading choices (e.g., online news and music sites); and
- the commonly reported lack of time for leisure reading.

The potential exists for rural libraries to respond to these factors to mitigate the invisibility of an active reading culture by providing a visible ground for reading events and diverse reading choices, as well as a site for young people to enact and explore reading identities as teen readers. As reported by young people themselves, reading of all kinds supports their growing sense of autonomy and independence, provides the comfort and reassurance borne of habit, provides access to diverse experiences of the world, and contributes to expanding stores of information and knowledge for all aspects of their lives. These multiple facets of the reading experience illustrate

that reading plays important and active roles in young lives—roles, moreover, that are clearly associated with developmental milestones of adolescence and young adulthood.

Support for free reading choices and active reading practices among young adults in rural and small-town communities can be a positive contribution to healthy youth development. The themes outlined in this paper and as articulated by young people themselves clearly dovetail with sets of internal assets developed and popularized by The Search Institute. Reading for pleasure is identified as an internal asset related to a commitment to learning, but additional assets are supported in turn: the development of self-esteem and resistance skills, feelings of personal power, exercising interpersonal and cultural competences, and an orientation towards empathy, caring, equality, and social justice.³⁵ For rural and small-town libraries seeking to justify collections and to strengthen reader services to teens and young adults, there is ample evidence that support for readers and reading contributes to healthy teen development.

While it is inappropriate to generalize from the findings reported here to larger populations of rural and small town youth, the *meaning of reading* as articulated by the youth participants suggests implications for those libraries serving similar populations of teenagers and young adults. The teens in this study clearly illustrate that reading in their daily lives has significance for their emerging identities, for their general sense of well-being, and for their understanding of and knowledge about the world. However, there is a certain invisibility attached to their reading, in part because there are no obvious spaces for their reading activities to be supported. So on one hand, we have teen readers exercising active reading choices and experiencing significant rewards of reading, and on the other hand, we have libraries seeking to respond to teens' needs for information and reading materials. Yet the two parties seem to orbit in separate spheres, rarely encountering one another on any meaningful or lasting ground. Aside from now commonplace entreaties to library staff to, first of all, expand their notions of what counts as reading among their constituents to allow it to encompass all kinds of media formats and secondly, to continue to privilege readers' ideas of quality, it is suggested that libraries urgently need to do more to signal their willingness to be a stable site in their communities for reading activities, for reading promotion, and for ongoing experiments in what counts as reading. Depending on the library and library system, this may take many forms, such as long-term strategic plans that position the library as an institution committed to serving teens as readers, but it might also mean a renewed commitment to tried and tested readers' advisory services, including the creation of pathfinders and displays, booktalking, class visits, book clubs and literature circles, and myriad other programs that support both curricular and out-of-school reading interests.³⁶ The challenge for rural libraries and library staff is how to bring recognition and visibility to what may be invisible but active teen reading cultures. The first line of action is to curb assumptions about the lack of teen reading and to investigate the reading practices and reading cultures of local populations. In many rural and small-town communities, the public library is the *only* place that has the capacity, both in terms of reading and literature expertise and collections of materials, to provide a space that encourages the pleasures of reading with its associated benefits. Through their support of teen reading and readers, rural public and school libraries are positioned to take up a critical and central place in their communities as reliable and consistent portals of access to readable texts, whether printed and bound or digital, and to support young people in their needs for autonomy and comfort and their quests for experience and knowledge.

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2 Responses to *Rural Teens on the Role of Reading in Their Lives*



Kate says:

February 15, 2011 at 10:36 am

The Public Library and the Internet Survey does not necessarily support technology over reading promotion. In fact, the study shows that last year 31.0% of rural public libraries offered e-books in the library and 41.% offered e-books remotely, in addition to databases, digital special collections and online book clubs. It would be interesting to know how many of these digitized textual resources are aimed at teens.

Thank you for the very interesting article!

[Reply](#)



Paulette says:

March 27, 2011 at 12:36 pm

Hi Kate — I didn't mean to suggest that the PL & I Survey promotes tech over reading, but that it gives evidence that there are lots of gaps in access and levels of internet connectivity 😊

I know that a lot of public libraries have been dealing with a huge surge in patron requests for help with their new e-reading devices, and also demand for digitized textual resources...but I'm keen to know more about how this plays out in services and RA with teens.

[Reply](#)

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Information Seeking in the Context of a Hobby: A Case Study of a Young Adult with Asperger's Syndrome

Posted on [February 14, 2011](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



By Katie O'Leary

Abstract

This case study focuses on a young adult with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) whose hockey hobby necessitates significant information seeking that satisfies cognitive, affective, and social needs to the point that it precludes the development of practical self-help skills (i.e. cooking, laundry, grocery shopping). Such an extreme case points to implications for LIS research and practice in developing information seeking models based on an understanding of the ends served by information seeking and use, particularly in the context of a hobby. A model of information seeking in the context of a hobby is developed based on evidence in this case that hobby-related information seeking enables identity construction and social connections.

How do different cognitive processing styles impact and shape approaches to information literacy development? How is information used in everyday decision-making, and how are people motivated to use information? Ross Todd asked these questions as prompts for the future direction of research in information literacy.¹ No single study can answer these questions since myriad groups and individuals will supply different answers, creating a rich and complex picture of the role of information in people's lives. As Todd phrased it, developing information literacy promotes the effective use of information, or the "moving on, enabled and empowered by information."² In this study, the researcher narrows Todd's questions to focus on a group whose cognitive processing, decision-making, and information use are affected by Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs). This case study focused on a young adult with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) whose hockey hobby necessitated significant information seeking that satisfied cognitive, affective, and social needs to the point that it precluded the development of practical self-help skills (e.g., cooking, laundry, grocery shopping). Such an extreme case points to implications for library and information science (LIS) research and practice in developing information seeking models based on an understanding of the ends served by information seeking and use, particularly in the context of a hobby. The primary conclusion of this study is that the hobby-related information seeking of young adults enables identity construction and connection to a social world.

The view of user studies as vehicles for studying the ends served by information seeking rather than the means is borrowed from Wilson.³ In 1981, Wilson voiced the concern that "a great deal of user studies research has suffered from a concentration on the means by which people discover information rather than upon the ends served by information-seeking behavior."⁴ Since then, the work of Brenda Dervin and others has reversed this trend; however, there is much work to be done on identifying specific ends served by information for specific groups in

society. Since user studies are, in a sense, inexhaustible, models of information behavior such as those developed by Wilson are important for amalgamating, comparing, and developing user studies. Basing an understanding of information seeking and needs on Wilson's "conception of information (facts, data, opinion, advice) as one means towards the end of satisfying fundamental needs" such as physical, cognitive, and affective needs, in this study, the researcher developed a model of information seeking in the context of a hobby.⁵

Literature Review

Researching the information behavior of young adults with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and the related implications for public librarians requires interdisciplinary work that spans literature in psychology, sociology, and library and information science (LIS). Literature from these fields forms a picture of how the cognitive, social, and affective dimensions of information behavior influences information literacy and use in the everyday world of young adults with AS. The picture is complex, revealing deficits in LIS literature on disabilities and on everyday information seeking by adults, signaling opportunities for research and development in practice.

The majority of LIS literature on effective service for patrons with disabilities is dated, having been published in the decade following the installment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. A search of the Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database in February 2009 revealed only ten articles about libraries and disabilities published in the last ten years in peer-reviewed journals. Books published show similar trends of concentration in the 1990s, and a bias towards the American context, with the exception of the *International Resource Book for Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons*.⁶ Studies of library literature revealed some problematic trends, such as referring to people with disabilities as "challenged patrons" or "problem patrons," pejorative misnomers that incorporate the homeless, the mentally ill, young adults, older adults, and the deinstitutionalized and disabled.⁷ The only article retrieved from LISTA having to do with autism and public library service was an article by a practitioner from the *Children and Libraries*. Though not peer-reviewed, the article's author Halvorson expressed the positive view that libraries can be important places for children as they get older, and that librarians can help the young person with AS to develop and nurture their special interest area (SIA).⁸

A defining characteristic of a young adult with AS is his or her SIA. Official diagnostic criteria support this fact, including the current criteria established by the World Health Organization and those written by Hans Asperger, who named the syndrome in 1944.⁹ However, only seven articles on SIA were discovered in a search of key journals in ERIC and PsycINFO databases. One is by Winter-Messiers, who conducted a qualitative study aimed at evaluating the impact of SIA on youth with AS, and the implications for teaching and care.¹⁰ From her data collected from twenty-three interviews with youth, three theories about SIA emerged: SIA are fused with core self-image; SIA are a means to an end when used in teaching; and SIA diminish the deficits typically recognized in youth with AS. Considering the positive impact of SIA on youth with AS, research into this key area is important for developing effective service models for this demographic. In particular, the implication of such research for the development of information literacy programs is an exciting prospect.

Since people with AS are not the only pursuers of special interests, it is logical and fruitful for research to place them within a larger demographic of people who pursue serious hobbies. Stebbins was the first to develop a theory of "serious leisure" from 1982 to the present, describing it as a "career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience."¹¹ He speculated that 20 percent of the population

engages in a serious hobby, representing a significant demographic that engages in deliberate and dedicated information seeking that, importantly, connects them to a social world.¹² So far, few LIS scholars have researched serious hobbyists, Hartel being a notable exception. She explored the information behavior of hobby chefs and described serious leisure as “an exciting and virtually unexplored frontier for the library and information studies field.”¹³

While young adults with AS share the pursuit of serious leisure in common with the general population, they have a unique cognitive profile and set of clinical features that set them apart. There is a plethora of literature on PDDs that discuss these features, much of it synthesized in the two-volume *Handbook of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders*.¹⁴ Of particular import to the development of information literacy for the effective use of information in everyday life by young adults with AS are: 1) the features of AS that are strengths in relation to the pursuit of a hobby and 2) weaknesses that can be addressed through participation in hobby-related information seeking at the public library. These strengths and weaknesses of people with AS include: a preference for verbal communication and language as a primary medium through which they learn about themselves and the external world; their weakness with visual or other sensory information; their comfort and exceptional abilities with factual information; and their weakness with affective or socio-contextual information.¹⁵ Another feature of the syndrome is the occurrence of comorbid disorders, usually anxiety and depression expressed in as much as 65 percent of people with AS.¹⁶ Comorbid disorders are prevalent in people with AS as a result of being “chronically frustrated by their repeated experiences of failure to engage with others and form friendships.”¹⁷ A dissertation by Shtayermman suggests that suicide ideation in young adults with AS is linked to AS symptomatology, age of diagnosis, employment status, peer victimization and stigma.¹⁸ Librarians serving and meeting the needs of people with AS need to be aware of these clinical features in order to have an understanding of how the cognitive and affective dimensions of AS impact learning, information literacy, and information use.

Finally, the basis for my understanding of information literacy in the context of the everyday world of adults comes from Ross Todd’s article “A Theory of Information Literacy: Information and Outward Looking.”¹⁹ This article emphasizes information as a transformational process: “a process of ‘inward forming’ or ‘in-formation.’”²⁰ He presents four fundamental concepts on which a theory of information literacy—with a focus on information rather than literacy—can be built. These four concepts are:

1. A view of people as active consumers of information,
2. The centrality of cognitive activity,
3. A constructivist conception of information where information is that which enables people to construct sense of their world, and
4. A focus on enabling the purposeful utilization of information.²¹

Todd emphasizes the word *enabling*, reflecting his view of information literacy “as an essential dimension to personal empowerment and to the quality of life beyond formal schooling.”²² Todd’s powerful work is central to the development of this research on the ends served by—in other words, the meaning of—the hobby-related information seeking of a young adult with AS. What is exciting for the future of LIS is the statement of Todd’s that, as for the process of “in-formation” in everyday information seeking and use, “[t]he information literacy literature to date gives little attention to this aspect.”²³

Research Questions

Following from the deficits and opportunities revealed in the literature, my research is one manifestation of how LIS research can venture forth into the territory of everyday information seeking and use, and the process of “information.” □ Because of the dearth of literature on patrons with disabilities, and on the SIA of people with AS, it was deemed valuable to conduct this study with a focus on such individuals. This small study was also seen as an opportunity to illustrate the value of qualitative methodological approaches in user studies for gaining insight into how library services impact lives, instead of how patron behaviors and problems impact services.

The primary questions addressed in this study are:

1. What are the ends served by the information seeking behavior of young adults with Asperger’s Syndrome?
2. What are the subsequent implications for researchers and the public librarian’s development of information literacy programs for such individuals?

Essentially, the intent of the research presented here is to determine what meaning SIA-related information and the public library has for young adults with Asperger’s Syndrome given that these may represent their only connections to the larger social world.

Method

Participants

As this was a pilot study conducted within the scope of an LIS seminar, the sample consisting of one twenty-three-year-old young adult male with AS and his father was one of convenience. The young adult referred to in this study by the pseudonym Alex had a special interest in hockey that he pursued daily at the public library and was therefore considered to be an excellent candidate for this particular study. Alex’s father was the chosen parent to be interviewed because he shared Alex’s interest in hockey and was in a position to give insight into the role of the hobby in Alex’s life.

Instruments

Qualitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate considering the sample size and information sought. Semi-structured interview and semi-structured observation were the two methods used. A unique set of interview questions were composed for each participant, the aim being to use the father’s testimony to triangulate and expand upon the young adult’s. Wilson’s view of information as facts, advice, and opinions, and Kulthau’s information search process methodology and instruments were used in the creation of the interview protocol.²⁴ The semi-structured observation was conducted only with the young adult to collect data on information literacy skills and information seeking behavior on the Internet in relation to his special interest. The observation was conducted like a “think-aloud” □ session wherein Alex was prompted to explain what, why, and how he was seeking information on the Internet.

Procedure

The young adult interview was conducted at Alex’s parent’s home, in their computer room. This setting was chosen because it was one with which Alex was familiar and comfortable, minimizing the stress potentially

induced by participating in the interview and observation. Alex's father was interviewed at a coffee shop. Alex was not present during this interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

Detailed notes of what was said and exhibited behaviorally during each interview and the observation were subsequently transcribed and coded. Coding themes were developed and identified in consultation with literature on serious leisure and SIAs.²⁵ Out of these themes and their relationship to the literature, a theory of information seeking behavior in the context of a hobby was developed and implications for public library practice were identified.

Results

The data revealed six major themes: belongingness, personal fulfillment, self-image, social interaction, self-regulation, and information skills.

Belongingness

Alex's father described how Alex's interest in hockey grew out of family activities such as family road hockey games and watching hockey games on TV together. The special interest in hockey is something that Alex's dad shares with him: "Hockey's number one for me. It's about my health, my personality, and being in physical shape." □

For Alex, wearing his hockey jerseys representing his favorite team, the Minnesota Wild, makes him a visible member of a larger community. "Like I wear my number nine and all the people who wear the number nine, we're supporters. We have an understanding of what he's doing out there." □ His father said that Alex wears his jerseys "almost all the time. He has six jerseys." □ Belongingness is important to Alex, whose team is not an intuitive choice considering that he has no previous history in Minnesota, they're not the top-ranked team, and they are not a long-standing team. His choice of team seems to hinge on the fact that "*everyone* in Minnesota loves the Wild, they won't turn you down if you're a hockey fan." □ Alex's dad confirmed the fact that "Minnesota has never *not* sold out a game." □

Alex described belonging to a community who can talk about hockey. "It's called being a hockey talker" □ which includes people he meets at the mall. "There's a hockey store in the mall... we're all in the same scoop." □

The other aspect of belongingness that Alex mentioned was a sense of belonging at the library where he seeks information. Alex described the library as "peaceful," □ "a joy," □ his "preferred thing to be at," □ "like a home," □ and "welcoming." □ The library is a haven where Alex can go to express himself and also to be in the company of others. "The library isn't known as a social place but it is...there's people who I notice over time and now they are my acquaintances." □

Personal Fulfillment

Hockey is not just a pastime for Alex, who described it as similar to a basic need: "It's not like basics, like *necessary* as in having to eat, but I love it *that* much, it's a fundamental interest." □ He also emphasized, "It's

beyond the stats for me, it's a philosophy, there's many aspects." □ Hockey knowledge is a source of deep fulfillment for Alex, who said, "It's the passion in my life." □

Seeking information about hockey always yields personal satisfaction. "You love to just search and search and search," □ said Alex, who only stops "when I've found some success, when I have some satisfaction." □ His dad described the fulfillment as a cognitive reward: "It feeds his brain," □ challenging his "selective memory ability, calculation, concentration, following information, and absorbing." □ With all of this information processing, "He's becoming the expert, that's important to him," □ said his dad. Alex confirmed this when he said, "I very much so value it." □

Self-Image

Alex's dad described hockey as "vital" □ to Alex because it's part of his identity. "Minnesota is 'his' team. He's always saying 'my team' and 'we,' there's a real sense of ownership there, a real sense of commitment." □ Because being a fan is closely tied to his self-image, it can have negative consequences, like when Minnesota did not make it to the playoffs. Alex's dad said, "He stopped wearing his jersey, he was going to quit his team." □

Alex identified himself as a "hockey talker," □ which can be a major source of confidence but also sometimes necessitates hiding information: "There's a shame factor, I don't want to admit that I don't know something...you don't want them to think you're a dud." □ Being a hockey talker is about being an expert and information plays a key role in the maintenance of his self image as a hockey talker.

Self-Regulation

Controlling anxiety, managing loneliness and depressive feelings and feeling empowered are key benefits of Alex's special interest. When he feels down or mad about hockey, he looks to online forums and other information for support and "ways to think about it." □ Alex mentioned that hockey is "about how I *feel* which is important, there's no necessity, it's a joy." □ Information seeking for hockey is a non-stressful activity that Alex can do to feel excited, passionate, and confident.

Other information seeking, such as looking for music videos on YouTube, is also something he looked forward to: "I like getting passionate and sitting back, getting comfortable." □ Again, the rules in the library seem to make it a safe space where he can learn to accept certain limits. Talking about approaching the reference librarian, he said, "There's a time limit, you can't go over there for a half an hour," □ and when on the Internet, "You have to have patience, don't get all anxious, just wait." □

Alex's father talked about the benefits for authorities when using his special interest to help regulate his behavior. "It's a good tool to redirect him and get his attention," □ he said, adding, "To be *effective*, you should know his interest...it's an incentive you can use to keep him engaged and less in his head." □

Social Interaction

Alex identified hockey as "a way to be social." □ He said, "It gives you the basis of talking about hockey, you know it's an organized thing...like we'll be talking about hockey and someone might say, well, what do *you* think?" □ Alex described hockey talk as a pattern of conversation that he understands and can participate in successfully.

Alex's father described hockey as "a connection we wouldn't have otherwise, absolutely not."□ The extent to which hockey, for Alex, is a core basis for social interaction is illustrated nicely by this anecdote given by Alex's dad: "We'll be in the car with Mom and he'll be talking away, and I'll say, 'Alex, let's include Mom,' and he'll say, 'Okay, Mom, what do *you* think about Gaborik?' He can't change the topic!"□ This confirms Alex's point that hockey is a basis for talking to others.

Alex mentioned that he talks to people at the mall, at the grocery store, "a *lot* of people"□ about his interest. His dad confirmed, "It's a *huge* social thing for him, he'll talk to *anybody* with a jersey on."□ His dad emphasized that Alex "loves people"□ and hockey provides him with a tool for interacting, connecting, and relating to others.

Information Skills

Alex's information skills were observed to be highly developed in relation to his special interest. He would analyze the title, date, citation, and URL before clicking on a result, and would use this information to rephrase his search. He said, "Sometimes you have to add fancy terms to get an answer to your question, like slang to sound cool."□ He also exhibited sophisticated information literacy in his ability to compare and contrast sources and differing points of view: "You don't want to rely on *one* source only, you want as much opinions as you can get."□ He also pointed out, "You don't go to www.wild.com for opinions because *of course* they have good things to say about their team,"□ indicating an ability to detect bias and read critically.

Both Alex and his dad emphasized that while people are important for sharing information with, official information sources like the TV and Internet were identified as key sources of information. His dad asserted, "He always respects the experts,"□ suggesting that he identified authoritative information and weighed it against less reputable sources. He was able to use the information to summarize teams, make predictions, calculate averages, match players, and create a dream team. He was also able to use his stats knowledge to help him verify or test the validity of rumors and to test his own beliefs, saying, "You've got this belief yourself, and you're juggling it."□

Discussion

Returning to Todd's questions stated in the introduction of this study, it is possible to analyze how the themes of belongingness, personal fulfillment, self-image, social interaction, self-regulation, and information skills give clues as to how Alex's cognitive processing style shaped approaches to his information literacy development, how he used hobby-related information in everyday decision making, and how he was motivated to use information. This analysis helped to clarify the meaning hobby-related information seeking had for Alex.

The themes of belongingness and social interaction revealed that the unique culture or ethos of a hobby, described by Stebbins "as manifested in shared attitudes, practices, values, beliefs, goals,"□ set the tone for information behavior and, by extension, information literacy development.²⁶ Only certain channels were deemed relevant sources of information because of their association with authorities in the field or their acceptance by the hockey talker community. Alex's cognitive style, characterized by strong verbal skills/auditory memory, rote memory, and calculation, also impacted his preference for certain kinds of information and information channels over others, such as hockey statistics on the Internet versus on the radio, and sharing rumors by talking to others rather than by posting to forums. The fact that the culture of hockey talk implied a certain pattern of communicating and exchanging facts, advice, and rumors allowed Alex to overcome some of the social barriers of AS such as one-

sidedness and “approaching others in an inappropriate or eccentric fashion.”²⁷ Information literacy development should be shaped with these factors in mind.

The themes of self-regulation and information skills are indicative of how Alex uses information in everyday decision-making. Young adults with AS often become overwhelmed by everyday decision-making and can experience negative emotions in response “to the challenges inherent in trying to navigate a complex social world.”²⁸ In order to cope with such emotions, Alex made a conscious choice to visit the library every weekday and to use information resources to soothe, relax, and bring joy into his life. Alex said he got “a lot of joy out of picking up hockey facts.”²⁹ Winter-Messiers similarly found that the participants in her study “felt positive emotions, including enthusiasm, pride and happiness, when actively engaged in their SIA”²⁹ and that it helped them to cope. Alex also used favorite YouTube videos and music to manage his emotions. Alex’s decisions about who to trust, what to believe is true, how to respond to adversity, and how to approach social interactions were all informed by participation in his hobby. When Alex described hockey as a “major fundamental interest”²⁹ and “a philosophy,”²⁹ it was clear that hockey information was a way for him to make sense of the world and “move on”²⁹ within it.

Finally, the themes of personal fulfillment, self-image and, again, social interaction revealed how Alex was motivated to use information. Alex’s father described hockey as “a connection with people he wouldn’t have otherwise,”²⁹ “he enjoys that connection,”²⁹ and “it’s part of his identity.”²⁹ Alex explained his role as “being a hockey talker”²⁹ and that he didn’t want other hockey talkers to “think [I’m] a dud.”²⁹ These responses implied that the motivation to use information comes from a deep desire to connect to others, be recognized, and accepted. This finding confirms Wilson’s information seeking model that shows physiological, cognitive, and affective needs as the driving forces behind information seeking and use.³⁰

Scholarly and Practical Implications

Both the parent and the young adult emphasized that the special interest went beyond a leisure activity to encompass a sense of self and a way of relating to others. Seeking information about the special interest was not just an end in itself but a means to much larger ends such as friendship, belonging, communicating, managing negative emotions, and personal fulfillment. These ends of information seeking for Alex are indications of what meaning the information seeking process has for him, and how information literacy empowers and, in the words of Todd, “in-forms”³¹ him.³¹ Considering the role of information literacy in the effectiveness of information seeking and use, the implications for public library services are significant. Developing information literacy programs for people with AS and, for that matter, for people with serious hobbies, is tantamount to developing programs that enable them to connect through their hobby to a social world and construct the lens through which they view the world.

[Figure 1](#) incorporates Wilson’s view of information seeking and needs as antecedent to and in service of more basic physiological, cognitive, and affective human needs.³² If we were to map Alex’s hobby-related information seeking onto this model, we would find that hockey is as much a part of his “Person”³² as it is his “Hobby”³² and that the librarian, the Internet, TV and radio are the mediators and channels through which he gains the information necessary to participate, contribute to, and belong in the social world of hockey talkers. As potential mediators of hobby-related information and experts of information channels, public librarians have the opportunity to play a role in a person’s sense of belonging, fulfillment, identity, and worldview.

In providing services and programs to people with AS or other PDDs in particular, some notable practical information came out of the interviews. First, library rules established and reinforced by the librarian are important for the young adult with AS in order to facilitate their ability to navigate the library space effectively and establish a sense of belonging at the library as an autonomous being with the same rights as others. Alex has two hours on the library computers and must follow the rules of computer use just like everyone else. The boundaries and rules established at the library help Alex to navigate this space as successfully as others without the disability. Second, establishing trust and authority with a young adult with AS will involve learning their SIA and communicating with them about it, as well as being consistent in enforcing rules while allowing second chances. As Alex's dad said, "If you want to be effective, you should know his interest."□ Young adults with AS may need a second chance to prove that they can adhere to rules and respect authority, and will be the most diligent patrons at this once they have learned. Third, this case study illustrates that Alex identifies with his special interest, not his disability. When developing any programs for people with AS, it would be wise to target their hobby, rather than their disability.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were primarily due to the fact that the sample size was small and the participants had personal relationships with the researcher. As a consequence, results may be biased since the participants were well aware of the researcher's high valuation of libraries and the profession, and generalizability is questionable. It should also be noted that Alex's special interest is socially acceptable and exceptionally useful for connecting with others, which is not always the case for people with AS. SIAs can range from hockey to airplanes to industrial fans and toilet brushes.³³ Therefore, the ends served by Alex's information seeking may not be the same as those for others with AS.

Future Work

The model of information seeking in the context of a hobby developed in this case study needs to be tested for its validity with other adult hobbyists. Even beyond service to people with ASDs, there is considerable value in LIS research focused on the formidable information needs of participants in serious leisure. While LIS "favors academic contexts as research subjects,"□ adult information seeking in the context of a hobby could be an avenue for instigating community outreach and information literacy programs that bring people together, regardless of ability or disability, around common information needs and interests.³⁴

Note: This article received the Pratt Severn Best Student Research Paper Award in 2009 from the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) and was presented at the 2009 ASIS&T Conference.

Acknowledgment: The author would like to thank Dr. Heather O'Brien and Shaun O'Leary for their contributions to this work.

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The School Library versus the School Board: An Exploration of the Book Banning Trend of the 1980s

Posted on [February 14, 2011](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



By Amy Pelman and Beverly Lynch

Abstract

While attempted book banning in school libraries continues to this day, a rash of book challenges occurred during the 1980s. Parents, students, and other stakeholders brought lawsuits against groups and individuals attempting to ban books from school libraries. At that time, no legal precedents were in place to guide school administrators on appropriate responses to book challenges. As a result, in 1982, *Board of Education v. Pico* (457 U.S. 853) reached the Supreme Court. This paper closely examines *Pico* and other related court cases and investigates principles of the First Amendment with regard to students and their right to intellectual freedom. Recommendations for addressing book challenges are provided.

How is the freedom of speech taught in schools? Sometimes it is taught when it is violated by the school board and students have to fight to protect their rights. Throughout history, students have received their most powerful lessons regarding the First Amendment of the United States Constitution by standing up for their right to receive information and ideas—that is, by reading books school officials would rather they didn't see or discuss. One student, Steven Pico, who defended his freedom to read until it reached the highest court in the land, has said, "After twelve years of schooling, my education had in many ways finally begun."□¹

In the school library, parents, community members, or school board officials have encountered books that they believe kids should not read and have sought to have the books removed from the shelves. In 1976, three school board members of the Island Trees School District in New York, having recently received a list of thirty-three "objectionable books"□ at a conference hosted by a conservative parents' organization, had a janitor unlock the high school library. Once inside, they went through the card catalog and found eleven books from the list. In the following weeks, the school board ordered that all eleven books be removed from the district's schools, nine from the high school library and two from the junior high library. The nine books from the high school library were: *Slaughter House Five* by Kurt Vonnegut; *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris; *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas; *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* by Langston Hughes; *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous; *Laughing Boy* by Oliver Lafarge; *Black Boy* by Richard Wright; *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* by Alice Childress; and *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver. One of the books removed from the junior high was *The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud.

At first, the school superintendent objected to the school board's course of action. He asserted that a policy "designed expressly to handle such problems" ² was already in place and recommended it be followed, even stating that they should not remove materials merely based on a compiled list they knew little about, and that the school board should at least review the books first. In response, the school board appointed a committee of parents, school officials, and other members of the community to review the books: "The committee was to take into account the books' 'educational suitability,' 'good taste,' 'relevance,' and 'appropriateness to age and grade level.'" ³ The committee recommended that five books remain in the library (*The Fixer*, *Laughing Boy*, *Black Boy*, *Go Ask Alice*, and *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*) and that two be removed (*The Naked Ape* and *Down These Mean Streets*). The committee was undecided on two of the books (*Soul on Ice* and *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*). However, the school board ultimately rejected the committee's recommendations and removed all the books from the library as it had originally intended.

Had the school board had followed the policy noted by the superintendent, the case may have had very different results. After a press release was disseminated announcing the decision and labeling the books "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy," ⁴ Steven Pico, then a seventeen-year-old junior at Island Trees High School in New York, led a group of his peers into court to challenge the school board's order to remove the books from library, stating that the students' First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and information had been violated. ⁴ This challenge became the first school book banning case ever to be settled at the Supreme Court level. The battle lasted, in total, seven years.

The *Board of Education v. Pico* Supreme Court case was decided five to four in favor of Steven Pico and the other respondents. Justices Marshall, Stevens, Blackmun, and White concurred; Chief Justice Burger and Justices Powell, Rehnquist, and O'Connor dissented; and Justice Brennan delivered the plurality opinion of the court. ⁵ Most of the Justices wrote some sort of concurring or dissenting opinion asserting specific focal points they felt most relevant. While *Pico* was the first school library book banning case to reach the Supreme Court, it was by no means the first instance of book banning in schools—from the 1960s to the 1980s, a pervasive clash of viewpoints led to a rash of book banning in public schools across the country. In several instances, people seeking to have bans revoked turned to the courts, and ' many of the issues and ideas related to book banning and censorship are now inextricably linked to the precedents set in the resulting court cases. The themes addressed by the courts, and the main issues of conflict in many of the book banning events, were: school board discretion, student First Amendment rights, the right to receive information and ideas, and the selection and removal of books. The *Board of Education v. Pico* decision did not outlaw book banning or censorship, nor did it set clear guidelines for school boards to follow, and it did not even fully define students' First Amendment rights in relation to censorship and selection. All the same, the Supreme Court decision, as well as the events leading up to *Pico*'s hearing in Supreme Court, is worth further exploration for understanding how to respond to First Amendment threats in schools.

Before *Board of Education v. Pico* reached the Supreme Court in 1982, six cases were brought to lower federal court (i.e., district courts) to address virtually the same act of removing books from the school library. The courts' decisions were evenly split—three cases were decided in favor of the board of education (or whatever group or agency was seeking removal of books), and three were decided in favor of a student's right to receive the information contained in the books. These six previous cases, which so closely resembled *Pico*, addressed the main themes stated above, but in different ways. The issues surrounding the school boards' role with regard to books and school libraries, although still not entirely clear, can be explained further by critically examining related court cases, including *Pico*.

School Board Discretion

Despite multiple cases being previously addressed by lower courts, by the time *Board of Education v. Pico* reached the Supreme Court, there were still no clear answers or laws pertaining to the removal of books from school libraries. This absence is likely the reason that the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case even though it had rejected similar cases in the past—clarification was simply not emerging from the lower court decisions. Decisions in other lower court cases acknowledged that the daily operations of schools were best left to the school officials put in place to oversee them. In the dissenting opinion in *Pico*, Justice Burger held this opinion even after the Supreme Court had reviewed the case by stating, “[T]he issue comes down to two important propositions: first, whether local schools are to be administered by elected school boards, or by federal judges and teenage pupils...”⁶ The school board members, it was argued, are elected school officials put in place to decide the curriculum and operation of the schools and have unfettered discretion to “protect” the students however they see fit. On the other hand, others wondered how this particular type of “protection” could co-exist with the essential freedom to exchange ideas.

In 1972, in *Presidents Council, District 25 v. Community School Board No. 25*,⁷ the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the school board’s absolute discretion to restrict students’ access to the book *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, a highly regarded account of a Puerto Rican boy growing up in Spanish Harlem. In this case, as with *Pico*,⁸ the issue of school board discretion was highlighted and the notion of First Amendment principles dismissed. Judge Mulligan, writing for the court, declared that someone must bear responsibility for book selection, and since school boards are statutorily empowered to operate the schools and prescribe the curriculum, the board is the appropriate body.⁹ In cases with similar outcomes, like *James v. Board of Education* in 1975,¹⁰ more justifications for school board discretion were upheld. One was the *in loco parentis* policy, which states that members of the school board and the school administration stand in place of parents while students are in school and consequently should be permitted to make decisions to oversee the growth of students’ intellectual and social values. Another validation for the school board maintaining ultimate responsibility can be called *indoctrination theory*, which states that schools perform certain socialization and indoctrination functions. Local school boards therefore must be given broad discretion to shape the minds of the students to accomplish these goals.¹¹ In *Pico*, the Supreme Court addressed the theories of school board discretion throughout the case. The plurality opinion of the court began by conceding, “Our precedents have long recognized certain constitutional limits upon the power of the State to control even the curriculum and classroom.” The court then pointed out, however, that the respondents in the *Pico* case were not seeking to limit the board’s discretion over the curriculum, and that the issue in the case related only to library books. At the Supreme Court level in *Pico*, it was to be up to the respondents to prove that the board had partisan concerns motivating their decisions to ban books, and subsequently, the board would have to prove that suppression of ideas was not their aim. Justice Brennan recognized that while the school board claimed reliance on their “duty to inculcate community values,” they were, at the same time, duty-bound to follow First Amendment guidelines, just as schools had been forced to do in the case where it was decided “a student in a public school could not be compelled to salute the flag.”¹²

In summary, the plurality opinion found that although school boards do have a great deal of discretion with regard to school operations, states and boards must be in line with the First Amendment. Justice Brennan also pointed out that the “special characteristics” of a school library make it the most appropriate place for freedom of speech and expression to be recognized. Some concurring justices and all dissenting judges expressly disagreed with the tenet that school libraries have characteristics that set it apart from other school grounds, such as the

classroom; a numerical majority of judges agreed that there should be no constitutional distinction between the classroom and the library. Nevertheless, Justice Brennan stated, "...We think that the First Amendment rights of students may be directly and sharply implicated by the removal of books from the shelves of a school library."□¹³

The five to four vote of the Supreme Court in *Pico* yielded several important results. First, it was decided that the school board does have absolute discretion over curriculum with Constitutional constraints, but beyond the classroom there should be some imposed limitations. Second, it was stated that school boards have a role in determining school library content, but that it too is limited. Third, with regard to the type of discretion used by school boards in the selection of materials, Justice Brennan stated, "Our constitution does not permit the official suppression of ideas."□¹⁴ Finally, matters of opinion (e.g., politics, nationalism, and religion) should not be prescribed by limiting the availability of books or other learning materials.

To address the indoctrination theory, it was stated that indoctrination was "intended to describe the school's role in transmitting values...there is no suggestion...that the power of school officials extends beyond curriculum control to the suppression of ideas."□¹⁵ These somewhat concrete precedents emerged from the *Pico* case, but a great deal of disagreement and ambiguity remained concerning the school board and its relation to the school library, as well as matters of discretion. One interpretation of how limited discretion can be viewed was put forth when "Justice Blackmun explained that even if a majority of the community wished to eliminate certain ideas from the school library with which it disagreed, in our system, the Bill of Rights protects the minority from official imposition by the majority."□¹⁶ This was an important distinction and one that was likely ignored in earlier cases where the court ruled on behalf of the school board. It is true that it complicates the matter of school board discretion, and that it would be hard for parents to understand when they believe they have their child's welfare in mind. Nevertheless, it is an important principle of the Bill of Rights that should be upheld in a public school just as much as in other government institutions, if for no other reason than to avoid "the effect of governing school affairs simply by a vague and indefinite pall of orthodoxy."□¹⁷

In one circumstance that did not end up in a courtroom but where justice was still sought, the results were compromising. When Judy Blume's books such as *Blubber*, *Deenie*, and *Starring Sally J. Friedman as Herself* were removed from two Hanover, Pennsylvania elementary and middle school libraries in 1984, only the school librarian stood up against the censorship. The people she turned to for support included Judith Krug, director of the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, who wrote a letter to the Hanover School Board and pointed out, "[B]oards who would restrict the access of minors to materials and services because of actual or suspected parental objections should bear in mind that they do not serve *in loco parentis*."□ Further, Krug poignantly stated that "well-written, sensitive books that address the very real issues, questions and concerns of young people in our society...are extremely popular with young people for these very reasons."□¹⁸ The books were returned to the shelves but were restricted so that parental permission was required for students to check them out. The school librarian stated that she felt her job "now entails something of the role of police officer"□ and that "when students defy the order and try to peek into the restricted titles, should I report them to the principal for disobeying orders? The atmosphere of freedom in our library has been replaced by one of moderate tension and confusion."□¹⁹ It may be safe to assert that not even parents or school board officials seeking removal of certain titles intended to transform the school library into such a place. Often, the consequences of these and similar restrictions on library books are not considered or understood by the people involved at the time of their removal. This is perhaps more substantiation that the act of challenging book content (particularly popular, acclaimed, and generally accepted titles) is one of irrationality and fear, rather than one of thoughtfulness or even protection.

Student First Amendment Rights

Although some courts dismissed the idea that students' First Amendment rights were jeopardized when school boards removed books from their school library shelves or classrooms, the complaint kept arising. Thus, it was necessary to determine whether students at school were entitled to the freedoms that the Constitution guarantees citizens of the United States. In 1969, this was decided in *Tinker v. Des Moines* after students were suspended for wearing black armbands to school in order to protest the Vietnam War. The Supreme Court established the now famously invoked principle that students and teachers do not “shed their Constitutional right to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”²⁰ It is understood, however, that the Constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression is still tenuous and not clearly defined. This holds true today even after the many precedents set by these court cases, including *Pico*.

When *Pico* was at first heard in the Federal District Court, the court ruled in favor of the Board of Education, stating that:

The board acted not on religious principles but on its conservative educational philosophy, and on its belief that the nine books removed from the school library and curriculum were irrelevant, vulgar, immoral, and in bad taste, making them educationally unsuitable for the district's junior and senior high school students.²¹

On these grounds, the district court dismissed any implication of violation of the students' First Amendment rights. The lower court's decision cited many of the previous cases mentioned above, such as *Presidents Council* and *James v. Board of Education*. Using these standards, the district court judgment also stated that courts should not “intervene in the daily operations of school systems unless basic constitutional values were sharply implicated.”²² In this decision, the court found that they were not. *Pico* and the other respondents appealed this ruling. The U.S. Court of Appeals reversed the district court judgment, concluding, “[P]etitioners were obliged to demonstrate a reasonable basis for interfering with respondents' First Amendment rights.”²³ One of the three judges in the court of appeals concluded that the school board acted unreasonably and out of character in interfering with the school library, did not illustrate proper motivation for violating the students' rights to receive information, and' tried to conceal the fact that a free speech issue was at hand. The appeals court judge felt that because the motives were unclear, uncovering the school board's motivations would prove whether or not Constitutional values were breached. The motivations of those who attempted to remove books from a school library would become a focal point of *Pico* at the Supreme Court level as well as for future book banning cases. At this point, the petitioners (members of the Island Trees School Board) chose to submit their case to the U.S. Supreme Court rather than going back to trial at district court, because it is believed they didn't think it would be granted *certiorari*, or judicial review.²⁴

Other cases have identified that there should not exist a “chilling”²⁵ of student rights, which, as acknowledged by the court in *Pico*, are liberty of conscience, freedom of expression, and right to receive information and ideas.²⁵ One such case was *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District*, where the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that the school board had infringed on students' First Amendment rights specifically by removing books from the library. The judge stated, “A library is a storehouse of knowledge...That privilege is not subject to being withdrawn by succeeding school boards whose members might desire to ‘winnow’ the library books for the contents of which occasioned their displeasure or disapproval.”²⁶ Again, motivations are implied as the reason these types of acts are cast in opposition to principles of the First Amendment—the book banners were seeking to impose personal

sensibilities upon the students. Even when a book contains language that is not appropriate for everyday use or describes unsavory ideas or feelings, the ability of the book to have a positive impact on the reader or provoke discussion or awareness is not necessarily diminished.

Right to Receive Information and Ideas

The clear delineation of students' right to freedom of speech in schools means that a tenet of those rights comes into question: namely, the right to receive information and ideas. Does freedom of speech and expression include the right to receive information? The Supreme Court has decided that this tenet should be inferred from the First Amendment. This was established in *Lamont v. Postmaster General* in 1965. When delivering the opinion of the court in this case, Justice Brennan stated, "The dissemination of ideas can accomplish nothing if otherwise willing addressees are not free to receive and consider them."²⁷ In *Board of Education v. Pico*, Justice Brennan stated, "[T]he Constitution protects the right to receive information and ideas."²⁸ This idea includes, in effect, the intellectual freedom of the students. Even under the curriculum and guidance of a school setting, a student has a reserved right to intellectual freedom. If not, the school would closer resemble a totalitarian regime, where individuals are not free to seek outside ideas and gain information that is not prescribed to them. Again, in *Pico*, it was put forth that a school library is an especially appropriate place to uphold the First Amendment ideals that include the right to read and receive ideas. Although other judges did not agree with the distinction, this ideal is in line with the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights. If school boards are to truly uphold their "inculcating" function of readying young students to join society and learn community values, protecting their freedom to read and access ideas should be encouraged as a reflection of American society. Public libraries and the American Library Association help define and uphold intellectual freedom. If members of public school boards do not value these types of institutions, it seems they are denying students knowledge of, and appreciation for, a highly valued feature of society.

As a reaction to the many challenges of intellectual freedom, including the right to receive information and ideas, the library community began to publish and speak out against censorship. The response grew in the 1980s and remained steady. As late as 1996, Betty J. Turlock, then president of the American Library Association, published an in-depth article in *The American School Board Journal*, where she stated:

The freedom to think and read what we choose without censorship or limitation is one of this nation's most precious freedoms. But in local school districts these days, it is a freedom that seems increasingly fragile: Censorship attacks on books are growing more common in school classrooms and media centers.²⁹

She then went on to explicate that parents do, of course, have authority over what their children read, but that a parent's discretion extends only to their *own* children and it is an infringement of Constitutional liberties to attempt to extend them to other people's children. The right to read includes the antithesis, or even the antidote, to governmental mediation of what is read, expressed, or even thought.

Selection and Removal of Books

Like most of the book banning court cases in recent history, *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District* was forced to address the issue of selection and removal of books. That is, censorship—what it entails, if it's necessary, who should do it, and how certain selection practices are mandated. *Minarcini* came to trial because the school

board not only rejected teachers' request to add Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and a book by Kurt Vonnegut to the high school curriculum but also ordered the removal of those books from the school library.³⁰ The school board gave no other reason for rejection other than that the books were "completely sick" and "garbage." The court ruled in favor of protecting intellectual freedom and that "once having created a library, the school board does not have the power to censor its contents based only on the social and political tastes of its members."³¹

Although it was originally hoped the *Pico* decision would provide specific laws about book selection and removal, 'it is now known that the courts will not provide specific guidelines to those difficult scenarios, as 'interfering with the state and school affairs may be too imposing.' Rather, teachers and school officials now have access to plenty of literature, advice, and examples to choose from when developing procedures and guidelines around the selection of materials so as not to infringe on students' rights while still providing access to materials they deem appropriate for schools.

In 1978, *Right to Read Defense Committee v. School Committee of the City of Chelsea*³² further explored the principles of censorship. A poetry anthology entitled *Male and Female, Under 18* was banned by school officials and subsequently challenged in federal district court by the Chelsea school librarian and a committee of supporters. A specific poem entitled "The City to a Young Girl" was stated as the reason for banning the book. The poem, written by a 15-year-old girl, expressed her feelings and frustrations about being sexually harassed on the streets of Brooklyn where she grew up. One parent wrote a newspaper article opposing the book and labeling it "filth." The familiar sentiments she expressed convey how "over and over again, the facts in these incidents are the same..." and that "most of these books deal with social problems such as ghetto life, discrimination and drug abuse."³³ This perhaps provides a clue into the mind of a censor, i.e., people who feel that censoring books is appropriate appear to believe that removing literature about these issues will eliminate the issues. Despite there being no substantial evidence suggesting that literature can have harmful effects on students, denying children access to literature about such social difficulties effectively prevents children from being able to confront them.

Would-be censors at many schools often chose books of similar creed, substance, and literary value. In *Pico*, two of the books were Pulitzer Prize winners. Many times the books were approved and even hailed by teachers, librarians, and other professional educators for confronting social ills and highlighting marginalized groups in society. In defense of removing the books, school officials and parents used only excerpts of the books, particularly those containing "bad" words. Those seeking to censor such materials did not attempt to speak about the books as whole entities; rather, paragraphs or passages were taken out of context and put on display for interpretation' even though there is no way to truly interpret a text's meaning or impact in this manner. Upon close inspection of the facts, it seems that some school officials and parents were threatened by ideas or expressions that related in some way to intellectualism. This reaction can be supported by the idea that the only known effect of exposure to literature might be a level of awareness or sensitivity that was not present before.

As a result of the court's plurality opinions in the *Pico* case, a test for determining if a book removal has free speech implications was developed. The following are extracted from that case:

- Those removing books should be able to prove "substantial and legitimate government interests" such as obsolescence, architectural necessity, or other legitimate educational considerations.
- A balance test might be enacted: was the book removed solely because the school board disliked it? Or is there substantial evidence to the contrary? The motives *will* be considered, and they should not be ambiguous or

suspect. If the motives are suspect in any way, the removal is censorship. The unconstitutional reason for the removal of books, however, must be shown as the decisive factor for it to be a violation of First Amendment free speech.

- A court of law will review the procedures and guidelines used to make the removal decisions.
- There can be no “unusual or irregular intervention in the school libraries’ operations by persons not routinely concerned with their contents.”□
- Finally, a board must prove concretely, not abstractly, “that the interests of discipline or sound education are materially and substantially jeopardized”□ by the material they are seeking to remove.³⁴

At the same time, school librarians, school boards, and other educators can now enact certain guidelines around selection and removal to prevent a First Amendment challenge from occurring. First, they must develop procedures and follow them. This caused a great deal of trouble for the school board in *Pico* when it became evident to the court that the board had violated its own policies by rejecting the appointed committee’s recommendations. Justice Brennan went so far as to suggest that the outcome of the case might have been different had the school board sought the opinion of librarians and other professionals and heeded their advice. Second, the opinion in *Pico* emphasized that a school board can transmit “community values”□ and that which reflect a community’s philosophy and ideas, but they must consider First Amendment principles and not impose certain ideas and values. This paradox would be difficult for anyone to interpret and enact, especially for those so concerned with the welfare of students and who believe that actual harm can come from exposure to specific words or ideas—certainly one of the most unclear and confusing outcomes of the book banning cases of the 1980s. The next guideline for school officials to consider, specifically when seeking to remove books are, is to bring order, protect the rights of others, or to promote standards of civility and decency. This provides yet another confusing and difficult guideline to follow. Presumably, one of these arguments might stand in as a passable justification for motivations based on personal responses, which may or may not infringe upon a student’s right to receive the ideas contained within.

The next selection considerations, while still open to interpretation, are more straightforward and aim to provide a balanced presentation of viewpoints, types of literature, and so on. Further selection considerations are that some books provide needed variety, more factually accurate accounts, or might interest students more than others. Once more, selection of materials walks a fine line with censorship and there are no definitive rules for achieving proper selection; indeed, such a thing probably does not exist. In the case of book banning, however, the issue is typically with preventing rather than with providing. The hope and aim is to avoid book banning by properly selecting materials in the first place and informing school officials that it is a potential Constitutional violation to remove them from the shelves once they have been approved. “Selection, then, begins with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; censorship, with a presumption in favor of thought control.”□³⁵

In the present day, book banning and censorship still occur but under somewhat different circumstances. This can be seen as a direct impact of the rash of court cases in the 1980s. It seems that today “local officials [will not] be eager to have their private lives and political motivations examined at trial and scrutinized in the press.”□³⁶ School boards, parents, and other members of the community no longer wish to be brought into the public eye just so they can take a few books off the library’s shelves. This is not to say that books are not removed and challenges not brought to court. In 2001, a school in La Mirada, California removed *Sophie’s Choice* from the library shelf after receiving a parental complaint about the book’s sexual content. In response, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) threatened to sue the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District if it wasn’t replaced.

During protests led by a student at La Mirada, the author of the book, William Styron, was quoted on his views about censorship, saying, “I think it’s reprehensible. I find it shocking...it’s improper to allow people to be browbeaten about books in this country.”³⁷ Nowadays it seems as though when challenges are brought, the district officials react carefully and according to policy and procedure. At La Mirada, the principal was said to have removed the book in order to review it in accordance with a policy stating that this must be done when parents find materials objectionable. It was later reported that the book was returned to the library shelves after being reviewed and after the ACLU’s threat to bring a First Amendment lawsuit; a message from the superintendent of the Norwalk-La Mirada schools stated, “[W]e are definitely not into censorship.”³⁸ The book remained off school library shelves for three months while the principal decided if it was appropriate for curriculum. The managing attorney of the Southern California Chapter of the ACLU, however, reported that the book was returned for different reasons: “[T]he book is back in the library because district officials got some good advice from their attorneys—and realized they was [sic] in the wrong.”³⁹ In addition, in this particular case, as with other cases, the popularity of the challenged book went up as a result of media coverage and curiosity. This is probably an unintentional result of book banning and, depending on the point of view, can be considered a positive or negative effect of the publicity received.

The ongoing complaints of parents and school board officials about what is on reading lists and in school libraries proves that the concerns and inclinations are much the same as they were twenty years ago. Challenges do appear to be brought less often, however, and other changes are taking place. These changes lean less towards obvious concerns over curriculum and values and more towards evolution and the recognition that one-size-fits-all educations should be a thing of the past (the emergence of charter schools being one example). Changes to public schools can be attributed to the need for hands-on learning and more personalized educations; however, much of the motivation for change is perhaps for the ability to directly cater to parents’ and school officials’ sensibilities, ones that they will not have to defend to the ACLU or any other organization concerned with intellectual freedom.

It has been stated that when “the Supreme Court chose to concern itself more with questions of procedure than with questions of substance, more questions were left unanswered than were decided.”⁴⁰ This may be true, in part, from both sides of the debate. The *Pico* decision did not outline specific rules or regulations for acceptable content in books, which may be upsetting to parents especially concerned about it. It also did not outlaw book banning—a law which many proponents of intellectual freedom might have liked to see put in place. One person of particular authority of opinion is Steven Pico, who spent seven years of his life trying to get nine books put back on the shelves of his (former) high school library. He eventually succeeded, and some years later he stated in a speech to school librarians that it was imperative not to underestimate the importance of this decision. One must realize that Supreme Court doctrine evolves slowly. Consider that this case came to the most conservative court in sixty years, and that the court was being asked to recognize a First Amendment right which had no firm history in Constitutional law. This was the best decision we could have hoped for in this environment.⁴¹

These are powerful realizations for anyone who might criticize the events and outcomes of the *Pico* case. In reality, precedents evolve slowly; however, progress has been made. Despite the ever-increasing modifications in the structure of public schools and the slow evolution of perceptions about intellectual freedom for students (or anybody), it is entirely too difficult to predict if students in public schools will forever have to learn about First Amendment the hard way.

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4 Responses to *The School Library versus the School Board: An Exploration of the Book Banning Trend of the 1980s*



Robert D. Morrow says:

November 27, 2011 at 8:09 pm

My older brother, Richard Morrow, was the Superintendent at Island Trees during the famous book-banning case that reached the Supreme Court.

He is now deceased and I would like very much to make contact with Stephen Pico and ask him some questions about the case. Can you provide me an email or give him my email so we can correspond? My brother didn't discuss exactly what happened, but I believe he stood up for the First Amendment rights of the students and, as a result, lost his position as Supt.

This is very important to me and I hope you will be able to assist me.