
Does Labeling Children's Books Constitute Censorship?

Lisa Hunt and Melanie Wachsmann,
Guest Columnists

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For many elementary students and even secondary students, the school library consists of rows and rows of books marked with labels of different colors and shapes. These stickers and dots indicate which books are considered—by one rubric or another—appropriate for a particular reading or lexile level. Reading programs such as Accelerated Reader (AR) and Read 180 require students to read books at their specific reading levels and answer questions about books on those lists.

Libraries that use these kinds of labels do so to help children find books that are at their reading levels and fulfill the requirements of AR and other reading programs. Such labels, their proponents argue, enhance access and improve convenience for readers. However, the same labeling practices can lead readers to prejudge books by their labels rather than by their content, thus creating entire “classes” of books that readers avoid or that parents or teachers deem to be off-limits to certain groups of students. The American Library Association (ALA) “opposes labeling as a means of predisposing people’s attitudes toward library materials.”¹ That concern addresses not just overt censorship—the restriction of borrowing privileges by label or level—but also the potential of labels to induce a tendency toward self-censorship by the student.

Does the use of labeling in school and public libraries constitute censorship, as the ALA statement implies? Alternatively, is labeling simply a convenient way to help the busy children’s librarian or library media specialist guide young people to books they will enjoy? In this column, we hear from two library media specialists with differing views.

LISA HUNT

As the library media specialist at the elementary school where I work, I am the children’s literature expert in my building, and my role is to provide expertise along with a library collection that meets curricular needs. Recreational reading is part of our school reading curriculum, so I have chosen many of the books in my collection with the aim of providing books that appeal to students with a wide variety of interests. Books in my library collection are labeled in many ways. In addition to labels that indicate the availability of a reading program test offered within the digital reading program software used in my school, labels also are used to show awards that have been won, young-adult content level, and graphic novel format.

My goal is to collaborate with classroom teachers to create opportunities that encourage reading—I provide the books and the opportunity for students to select them, and teachers

provide time in class for reading. These two elements are required components of many reading programs like AR, but they are also essential for success in creating avid readers through free, voluntary reading.² When students discover and read books that match both their personal interests and their reading proficiency level, the pleasure and confidence they feel in reading increases, and they are encouraged to read more. Many students who have this experience will develop into “subject specialists” who follow their preferences and voraciously read everything in the library on a given subject, by a particular author, or in a favorite genre. When a book's reading level is a good match, students are more likely to find it appealing and accessible. Labels are one tool that can help readers find those matches.

A labeling system can create helpful tools for students who don't know where to begin when challenged to browse through hundreds or thousands of books. The reality we must face is that students' time is limited during school hours, and browsing must be taught as an efficient skill. Students can be taught to use labels and other elements about library books to gather information when making their own reading choices. I teach lessons to most classes on how to choose the best book, and that includes using labels as one tool for such information gathering. I encourage self-selection and choice. In that context, labeling is an instrument to *help* students choose, not to *prevent* them from choosing.

Reading level labels can show information on the outside of the book, or they can simply indicate that a quiz is available for it, with the reading level and point information written inside. I prefer the latter method because it invites students to open up the books while browsing, and opening the book helps the student get a better feel for whether the book is the “right fit.” Used in this way—as an invitation to open the books—labels provide more information to the reader, and that information becomes part of the selection process. In other words, labels do not censor choice, but inform it.

Book labeling, if practiced in this spirit, is not a form of censorship designed to pigeonhole students into categories and restrict their options. Instead, labels are a tool to guide students through large collections numbering in the thousands—a tool that teachers and librarians teach students to understand to use libraries effectively. Students need strategies for book selection, and we teach them skills for choosing just the right book.³ Among other methods, that includes using labels of many kinds. As with any tool, the practitioner guides the use. I advocate using a label on a book as a piece of information to guide a student to the best choice of good reading.

MELANIE WACHSMANN

According to Lamme, avid readers share certain characteristics and behaviors.⁴ They read because they find reading pleasurable. They enjoy being able to find books they want to read, talking about books with others, discovering favorite

authors and reading more books by them, choosing when and where they will read, and rereading their favorites. The freedom to choose their reading material allows these book lovers to hone their reading skills.

One of the best parts of being a librarian is seeing that joy of reading develop as a child browses the library shelves and picks out any book that appeals to her. Many different elements may come into play: Perhaps the child is drawn to the book's cover, or its artwork, or its main character. However, one factor that never enters into the “appeal equation” for a child is the book's presence on a list of prescribed books. Children eventually may learn to select books from a list to meet requirements or earn rewards, but this process has nothing to do with the original joy of discovering new books to read.

When children are emerging readers, the choice of books in the library can be overwhelming, and labeling books can be a way to guide them to books suitable for their reading proficiency level. As Lisa Hunt argues, this is one reason that some libraries use labeling schemes. Labeling is popular in schools also because it enables students to find books quickly, with little or no help from teachers and librarians. This advantage is particularly pertinent in the many schools that recently have cut back on librarians and staff. In schools without enough staff to help each child individually, those little colored dots on the book spines are an expedient substitute. If that approach saves the time of the reader and of the busy librarian, and enables students to help themselves, what could be wrong with that?

The problem is that a labeled collection creates opportunities for censorship. Most overtly, students are sometimes instructed that they may check out *only* books that are on their “level” or on the prescribed reading list. But even aside from the freedom-to-read issue, there are many other legitimate reasons why students require access to books of all reading levels. What about that student who wants to revisit an old favorite or share it with a younger brother or sister? (An avid reader myself, I still enjoy looking at picture books, even though my reading level happens to be much higher than the picture book labels might suggest.) What about those books that are not on the reading list? Does the lack of an “AR” label mean a book is not worth reading? What about the student with a higher or lower reading level than the rest of the class? Should he be forced to check out a book that could cause embarrassment? Finally, shelving books according to their labels can prevent children from learning how libraries are organized and how the Dewey Decimal System works (although some libraries avoid that issue by incorporating labeled books into the ordinary organizational scheme).

I don't mean to imply that reading programs are inherently bad. And, after all, it is helpful for a student to be able to find an appropriate book that he or she can read and understand. But it is possible to provide access to books in other ways that do not promote censorship—for instance, by using the classic readers' advisory interview. Such interviews allow the librarian to learn about what appeals to the reader, not just check her current reading level. Likewise, they accustom

children to discussing books at a deeper level than the simple comprehension questions common on reading program tests. Delving more deeply into books also gives young readers a way to connect with others and to learn about new books that they might enjoy.

Being able choose from a library of books without restriction allows readers to become self-sufficient book browsers who are not afraid to pick up any book that seems interesting or to put down a book because it is not a good fit. After all, the freedom to choose is what libraries are about.

References

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