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TEENAGERS, READING & CENSORSHIP

Teenagers' views on censorship in libraries



Evidence Base

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Methodology	6
3. Findings	8
3.1 What is censorship?	8
3.2 Issues of concern	8
3.2.1 <i>Swearing</i>	8
3.2.2 <i>Drugs</i>	9
3.2.3 <i>Sex</i>	9
3.2.4 <i>Violence</i>	10
3.3 Guidance or censorship?	10
3.3.1 <i>Guidance on books</i>	10
3.3.2 <i>Guidance from adults</i>	11
3.3.3 <i>Restrictions in libraries</i>	11
3.4 Censorship of books for younger children	12
3.5 Reading adult titles	13
3.6 The power of books	14
3.7 Differences between fact and fiction	15
3.8 The value of books which deal with difficult issues	16
3.9 Parental attitudes	17
3.10 Discussing books	19
3.11 Films and computer games	19
3.12 The Internet	20
4. Conclusions	22
5. Commentary	24
References	26
Appendix A: List of books used in focus groups	27

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1. Introduction

In 2004, survey of school and children's librarians in the UK was carried out (McNicol, 2005a) to investigate attitudes towards censorship and intellectual freedom. The majority of respondents to this survey agreed that:

- School/children's librarians should provide resources presenting a variety of viewpoints on current and historic issues.
- Young people should have the freedom to read and consider a wider range of ideas than those that may be held by the majority in the local community.
- Young people need to have access to a variety of resources to help them to develop critical thinking skills.
- School/children's librarians should be vigorous advocates of intellectual freedom.
- It is the responsibility of school/children's librarians to provide resources which enrich young people's quality of thought and expression.
- School/children's librarians should make it possible for young people to choose freely from a variety of points of view on controversial subjects.
- Issues, such as homosexuality or drug taking, are not too controversial for a children's/school library.

However, 29% felt that books and other resources about controversial subjects should be clearly labelled and 27% believed that parents should be able to expect that resources in the public/school library should not undermine commonly held values. Over two-thirds believed that access to controversial websites should be restricted, for example through filtering. In addition, many were also unsure whether librarians should remove resources which they knew had been the subject of censorship controversies in other libraries. More than half the librarians who responded to the survey believed that librarians should control the availability of 'dangerous and controversial ideas'.

This therefore suggested that, while librarians were likely to agree with the principles of intellectual freedom, they were less likely to put this theory into practice, especially when it came to controlling access to materials within the library.

In 2005, this survey was followed up by a series of interviews with 14 school and children's librarians (McNicol, 2005b). These raised a number of interesting and complex issues. In most libraries, fiction titles were divided according to the age group which the librarian felt they were best suited to. It was argued that this not only prevented younger children accessing inappropriate materials, but also helped students to find books which were aimed at their reading level, and at the interests of their age group.

In general, librarians felt that students had little awareness of the issue of censorship. A few had tried to actively encourage discussion, for example in reading groups. In the most schools, however, librarians said that students did not raise major objections to age restrictions. While some might try to get round the system out of bravado, most were happy to comply with the rules the librarian had put in place. While some interviewees felt that

restricting access might actually stimulate more interest in books among young people, others believed that doing so would make teenagers feel patronised.

Racism, violence (especially against women) and sadomasochism were seen as the most serious issues which should be censored in libraries used by children and young people. A number of interviewees also thought a degree of caution should be exercised with regard to sex, and authors who had been convicted of offences against children. Swearing was less of a problem, although it was acknowledged that this was an issue which might well upset parents, and often teenagers too. Graphic novels and fantasy books (e.g. Warhammer, manga), 'crossover' novels (i.e. teenage imprints of adult titles) and art books were among the most problematic types of resource to deal with. Many librarians were unsure how to treat these and had tried to find a compromise which often avoided confronting trickier issues. As well as considering each resource objectively, most librarians said they would also take account of the ethos and culture of their organisation when making decisions about censorship.

In some schools, librarians made use of older students to help them decide which age group books were suitable for. Several interviewees reported instances when students had pointed out something in a book they had borrowed which they did not think was suitable, or should be restricted to an older age group. In some cases this might be worth investigating, but librarians were often surprised by the conservative reaction of students. A number of interviewees felt that many students were quite prudish about sex, but were less bothered by violence, something which most of the librarians interviewed felt was more of a problem.

No librarians interviewed had direct control of Internet access in the library; this was controlled by the school or local authority. This caused problems because, in all cases, many useful sites had been filtered and the ease with which these could be unblocked varied. Librarians were concerned that these restrictions gave students a false impression of the reliability of the Internet and did not allow them to teach information skills to students in the most effective way. Concerns were expressed about students' level of information skills which a number of interviewees did not feel were sophisticated enough to equip them for the world beyond school.

To follow up these two research projects which focused on librarians, a further research project was designed. This involved speaking directly to young people about their understanding of, and attitudes towards, censorship to find out how they felt it affected them.

2. Methodology

A total of seven focus groups were arranged with the help of librarians who volunteered to participate in response to a request posted on mailing lists. Six took place in schools¹ and one in a public library. The composition of the groups varied. Some were pre-existing reading groups, others were class groups, and yet others were simply groups of students which the librarian who organised the session felt would be interested.

In total 88 young people (34 boys and 54 girls) took part in the focus groups. The number in each group ranged from 7 to 24. Some were from a single year group, but most included students from more than one year group. The teenagers² involved ranged in age from 11 to 16. Most, although not all, could be said to be more interested in books, and more competent readers than many of their peers.

The exact format was altered from group to group depending on the number of teenagers, age range and time available. The precise questions asked varied as teenagers were allowed to guide the direction of the discussion to some extent if there were particular areas which interested them. However, the core questions discussed were:

- What does 'censorship' mean to you?
- How do you decide what to read?
- Do your parents, teachers, librarians or other adults have strong views on what books you should and shouldn't read? What do you think this depends on? How do you react?
- Have you ever been told you couldn't read a book? How did that make you feel? What did you do?
- Should books be restricted depending on age?
- How can books affect you – or other teenagers?
- How much use of do you make of the Internet – for homework or to find out things? Do you experience any problems using the Internet?
- What do you think about the information available on the Internet – is it more or less reliable than books?

In addition, in most of the groups, teenagers were shown a number of books which might be considered controversial (see Appendix A for a list) and asked their opinions of these, and of books which discussed similar topics. The issues this exercise raised included: swearing in books, positive images of drug taking, descriptions of sex (fiction and non-fiction, heterosexual and homosexual), and instances of violence and violent crime.

¹ To give some idea of the variety of schools involved: 2 were voluntary aided; one was selective; one was a Foundation School. The size of the schools ranged from 782 to 1,468 students and the percentage of students achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE ranged from 32% to 96% in 2005 (Secondary School Achievement and Attainment Tables 2005, http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables/schools_05.shtml)

² Although some of the young people involved were under 13, the term 'teenager' is used throughout this report as the types of books they discussed were what would be considered teenage titles.

In most groups, there were some teenagers who had read *A Child Called It*, *Looking for JJ* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Although only a few of the teenagers had read *Sugar Rush*, most had seen, or were aware of, the television series. In a few groups one or two teenagers had read *The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas*. None of the teenagers in these focus groups had read *Junk* or *Doing It*, but some were aware of these novels. *Come Clean* and the *Love Guru's Guide to Sex* were new to all the teenagers.

3. Findings

3.1 What is censorship?

Many teenagers admitted they had little or no idea what censorship meant. Some referred to not being able to do certain things, such as smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol, under a given age. One group mentioned the way in which libraries restricted which books young people were allowed to borrow depending on their age. Film certification as probably the most frequently discussed form of censorship and the television 'watershed' was also mentioned. A few teenagers saw censorship as something a government might do to restrict freedom.

3.2 Issues of concern

The most common issues of concern debated are discussed below.

3.2.1 Swearing

In general, swearing in books was seen as acceptable because it was the sort of language which teenagers were used to hearing, and using, in daily life. Indeed, they argued that swearing could actually add to a book if it was in keeping with the characters, as in the case of Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. In cases like this, teenagers argued that the author was not trying shock, or to offend anyone, but was simply trying to create a realistic character. Several teenagers commented on the way in which swearing could help to make a book seem more realistic. However, one teenager pointed that a reader's reaction to swearing in a book would probably depend on the language they were used to hearing and using. Another commented that if people read words in books which they did not understand and were not used to hearing they might use them when it was not appropriate.

A number of teenagers believed that their parents were not especially bothered about swearing in books because they were aware that teenagers regularly watched films which contained swearing. One teenager speculated that the reason why some adults might be concerned about the amount of swearing in books was because, when it was written down, it was less easy to dismiss than verbal swearing:

I think the reason that people don't like swearing in books is because...it's placed right in front of you.

3.2.2 Drugs

Teenagers' reaction to *Junk* was interesting; they were keen to establish that the book did not promote drug taking:

It's okay as long as it's not giving a positive view of drugs.

...as long as it isn't saying, 'Do this, it's great'...

However, they did want the book to allow readers to make up their own minds about drugs rather than preaching to them:

...it should sort of give you clues...

In one group, teenagers argued it was important that books about drugs explained the positive, as well as the negative, side so the reader was able to understand the characters and appreciate why they acted as they did.

3.2.3 Sex

Some teenagers said they would be embarrassed to borrow books about sex from a library. They felt it was slightly easier to buy these from a bookshop, but they would much prefer to purchase books like this over the Internet so they did not have to face a librarian or shop assistant.

Not all teenagers wanted to read books with descriptions of sex. Several of the younger members of the focus groups said they did not want to read books which contained descriptions of sex, although they acknowledged that they might change their opinion when they were a bit older. One teenager commented that sex was okay if it was part of the story, but she found books that were solely about sex were boring. Another described a book with a sex story line running alongside an action storyline. This was not what he was expecting from the book and he did not feel that this added anything to the story. A number of the teenagers in one group were adamant that they would not want to read *Sugar Rush* because they did not want to read about a lesbian relationship. They felt it was something they were not used to and would not feel comfortable reading about:

I don't think you need to learn about stuff like that.

The edition of *Sugar Rush* used during the focus groups had a 'warning sticker' on the cover claiming it book contained 'explicit content'. Although this was a marketing device designed to make the book more attractive to teenagers, one said this would make her less willing to pick the book up because she was worried about the reaction from other people:

I want to read a normal book...people would say, 'What's she reading?'

Similarly, the front cover of *Doing It* which showed a girl pulling on a pair of knickers was clearly off-putting for many of the teenagers in the focus groups. A number said they would not want to read the book judging it by the front cover alone. It seemed that worries about

what other people (parents and peers) would think if there were seen reading such a book were at the base of many concerns.

3.2.4 Violence

As with swearing, teenagers felt that the amount of violence a person was exposed to in their own life would determine their reaction to violence in books. Although many of the librarians interviewed for the previous research (McNicol, 2005b) felt that graphic novels were a problem because of their violent, and sometimes sexual, content, none of the teenage focus groups saw graphic novels as a particular problem. Interestingly, one group argued that graphic novels were actually less problematic because they “seem less real”. They automatically saw comics as humorous, not something to be taken seriously. While a certain scene might be horrific if it was in a film, in a graphic novel it was less of a problem.

3.3 Guidance or censorship?

3.3.1 Guidance on books

While teenagers were adamant that there should not be legal restrictions on which books they could buy and read, as there are for films, the majority said they would appreciate more guidance on the content of books to help them to decide whether they wanted to read them.

Most teenagers agreed that books should have some form of guidance on the cover which would help them to decide whether they wanted to read it and warn them of anything which they might find distressing or objectionable. Some teenagers commented that, at the moment, covers of books were often not a good guide to the content and although the blurb might outline the story, it rarely mentioned whether the book contained swearing, violence or other features which some people might want to avoid. One suggestion was to have guidance on books similar to that already provided on videos and computer games indicating the level of swearing, sex, drug taking, violence and so forth.

In several groups, the idea that books should have age guidelines was discussed. Some teenagers thought that having age guidelines on books would help them to convince their parents that certain titles were suitable for them to read. Others, however, were adamant that there should not be ‘age certificates’ on books, certainly not compulsory ones. Some groups mentioned age guidelines they had seen on books; they felt that statements such as ‘Not suitable for younger readers’ were too vague and were not a useful way to help someone to decide whether to read a book.

Several groups pointed out that whether a book was suitable for an individual depended on how mature they were; this did not necessarily depend on their age, so ideally any guidelines should be based on maturity, rather than age. However, they acknowledged that it would not be practical to devise and implement categories based on maturity, so age ranges were probably the best alternative.

An idea discussed by one group was for children and teenagers themselves to read books and decide what age group they felt it was suitable for. Their recommendations could then be used to help other children and their parents to decide what they should read. In one group, teenagers argued that parents were the best people to decide what their child should read and books might have guidance similar to PG or 12A certificates for films which left the ultimate decision to parents.

In another group it was suggested that the author was the best person to decide whom their book was aimed at and their recommendation should be printed on the cover.

Manga titles were one type of book which one teenager thought should have age guidelines because the style of these made them more likely that younger children would pick them up. Several teenagers argued that if a younger child picked up an explicit book with a lot of text, they simply would not understand it and would not be interested in reading in, so there was less need to censor these types of books.

3.3.2 Guidance from adults

Ironically, although there are age classifications on videos but not on books, a number of teenagers said they had found staff in bookshops exercised more censorship than many video stores where staff often did not seem concerned about age restrictions. One teenager (approximately 13) had tried to buy a copy of *Sugar Rush*, but a shop assistant had refused to sell it to her: "the lady at the counter told me it wasn't suitable for me". Another (approximately 15) had not been allowed to buy a Stephen King novel.

One girl recalled being told by a member of public library staff that the books she had chosen were not suitable for her age. While she agreed it was acceptable for library staff to recommend what they felt someone of a certain age might read, they should not refuse to lend a book once the borrower was made aware of the content:

It's not really their job to say what you can and can't read.

Others agreed that, while bookshops and libraries should offer advice, they should not refuse to sell or loan a book to a teenager because they believed it was not suitable. Some teenagers, however, said they would be happy if they were only allowed to buy or loan certain books with parental permission.

3.3.3 Restrictions in libraries

In most of the schools involved in the research, teenagers were restricted in which books they were able to borrow depending on their age. Just one school had no such restrictions.

In a small number of focus groups teenagers said they would not expect libraries to stock the type of books they had been discussing during the focus group:

They [the public libraries] don't really have stuff like this whatsoever.

In one focus group in a dual use school-public library, the teenagers said they understood why some books were in the adult section and felt it was acceptable that there were books which could not be read by certain age groups.

Another group discussed how having separate library collections for different age groups prevented younger children from picking up books which were either too advanced for them or had unsuitable content. However, a number of teenagers said that age restrictions were problematic for those with a reading age higher than their chronological age. This meant they were able to cope with, but not allowed to borrow, books with more complex language. However, they accepted that there needed to be a rule which was simple to apply and worked for the majority of people. They acknowledged that deciding how to categorise books was problematic, for example, if a book was written in simple language, but had content that was unsuitable for younger readers, where should it be shelved? After a discussion in one group, most agreed that decisions should be, primarily, based on content rather than language in order to allow more advanced readers access to books which would stretch them.

A few teenagers thought that libraries needed to be more restrictive, not less; they favoured more categorisation of books for young children, primary school children and teenagers so younger children were not allowed to borrow books which were not suitable.

3.4 Censorship of books for younger children

The majority of teenagers felt that there were books which younger children should not be allowed to read. One believed that allowing younger children to read books which were too advanced for them could be harmful:

Reading stuff that's not appropriate for your age early...you lose your childhood really early.

Some teenagers thought that swearing was acceptable in books aimed at their age group, but would not be suitable in titles for younger children. Others believed that horror books or books with graphic descriptions of crime had the potential to harm younger readers:

Books with extreme things can affect your brain.

Others felt that more complex novels were often unsuitable for younger children. One teenager commented that the complexity of *Looking for JJ*, rather than the content per se, made it unsuitable for younger children:

It makes you understand how some people think in that way, how they maybe think it is right to do that sort of thing...you don't normally get a chance to see that...I think that can only be addressed to people who are older.

Although the way in which issues were treated would differ in books for teenagers and books for younger children, a number of the teenagers involved in the focus groups felt it was

important that children were made aware of problems they might have to do deal with at a young age. Teenagers thought that it was important that younger children learnt about bullying for example, even though they might find this distressing, and one way of teaching them about this was through fiction:

Learning about things is more important than them being a bit upset.

However, teenagers did appreciate why younger readers would want to read books intended for an older age group. In one discussion, teenagers compared books available for younger children to programmes on television. They felt that there were relatively few books that were as exciting as television programmes. The fact that many books for younger children were quite boring would encourage them to want to read books for older people:

He [younger brother] wants to read exciting books that are like what he sees on TV. Books for his age range can be quite boring. There should be more action thrillers that aren't gory and unsuitable for younger children.

3.5 Reading adult titles

Some teenagers said they preferred teenage titles to adult ones because "I know they're aimed at me". One teenager believed:

Adult books can be quite boring because they're not aimed at things that you would find interesting.

This did not just mean that they expected the books to be suitable in terms of the content, but also that they would be at a reading level they could cope with:

I find a lot of adult books a bit too complicated.

A number of teenagers agreed that most adult books were hard to read, so they preferred teenage titles. However, others disagreed; they enjoyed adult titles because they were more complex and required the reader to think more:

I would normally go for books like these [teenage fiction] just because it's easy reading, whereas adult books are more difficult and get you mind to actually work...I think my view now is to read more adult books.

The covers of some adult books could be misleading for children and teenagers. Judging by the design of the cover alone, some teenagers had picked up adult titles which they had assumed to be children's books. They felt that this might lead younger children especially to pick up books which were not suitable.

3.6 The power of books

Several teenagers commented that reading a book could make you change your opinion about something:

When you read books, you might walk away with different opinions to those you started with.

A Child Called It was one of the books which had affected a number of the teenagers in the focus groups; several said it had upset them or made them angry.

However, teenagers were scornful of the idea that people would be likely to copy activities, such as drug taking or shooting someone, simply because they had read about it in a book:

We take it in, but we don't follow up on that or do anything because of it.

However, a small number did think that reading about drug taking, for example, might make people more likely to try this for themselves:

If you're that way inclined a book about drugs could make you more likely to take them. Or if you're naïve and think 'Oh, I might try this'.

The teenagers involved in the focus groups were aware that books could affect individuals in different ways. The way in which someone was likely to be affected by a book would not simply depend on their age, but also experiences from their own life:

You bring your own existing ideas about drugs or whatever when you read the book, so people can read it differently.

Some thought that the way in which a book could affect you could be subtle and you might not always realise it was happening:

With books you absorb all sorts of things. If you read a depressing novel, you find shortly afterwards you are a bit more down.

Some teenagers described how reading certain books had made them think about their own lives, for example realising what they took for granted.

Reading books which they could relate to was important to teenagers. Most said that if they were not able to relate to a book, they were likely to stop reading before they finished it. Some thought that books with adults as the central characters or books set in the past were more difficult for most teenagers to relate to.

Most teenagers agreed that books which were less graphic, such as *Looking for JJ*, had less of an immediate impact than those with more detailed descriptions, such as *A Child Called It*. In *Looking for JJ*, they felt there was less emphasis on the murder; the author was more concerned with making the reader understand the central character, rather than shocking readers by describing something horrific.

Although teenagers acknowledged that books had the power to affect a reader, they were adamant that this was not sufficient reason to stop people reading them.

3.7 Differences between fact and fiction

Some teenagers argued that it did not make a great deal of difference whether or not a book was based on true events; both fiction and non-fiction had the potential to help you to understand the world. However, others thought that books based on actual events could be more powerful because they felt more real and accessible; they were aware that what was being described had actually happened, rather than just being in the author's imagination. However, others felt that fiction could be more powerful than non-fiction:

Sometimes fiction can be better than non-fiction because you get more emotions and opinions, not just facts.

Some teenagers thought that, although non-fiction books about issues such as sex and drugs were useful for basic information, fiction was equally important because it could help you to understand why someone might want to do something. Understanding motivation was seen as an important part of learning about such issues. It was also through fiction that the longer term effects of certain actions on someone's life could be seen. Because through reading a novel, they came to empathise with the characters, some teenagers argued that learning about the potential effects of drugs, for example, in this way had more effect on them than hearing about people on the news:

Fiction puts issue such as drugs in a real life situation so you can understand it better and you can appreciate what the effects can be on someone's life.

When you hear something on the news you don't feel it could happen to you, but if you read about someone you can relate to in a book you realise it could.

Apart from teenagers talking to each other, you don't really get much talk about drugs, apart from the fact that you should say no...you can't see what happens in detail, so I suppose a story...

On the other hand, there were a small number of teenagers who did not think that novels about drugs were suitable for younger readers, but a biography or autobiography about someone who had taken drugs would be acceptable as long as there was a strong moral message:

As long as at the end they don't go: 'You should try it'...as long as it says 'I wish I'd never done it'...then I think it's fine...whereas in stories, sometimes in stories you become the character, then you could take drugs.

One group was concerned that some readers might think that fictional stories were actually real and this might upset some young people. They thought the author needed to make it clear that they were just telling a story.

Some teenagers thought that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was an unusual book for teenagers. Some said they would definitely not want to read it:

It would make me feel quite sick reading about something like that in a children's book.

Others agreed that they would not want to read about these issues in a novel; they felt it was a subject which was better dealt with by reading non-fiction:

In a normal children's book, I wouldn't want it, but in a historical book with facts and figures I could understand it...

If it says 'all these people died', then it's just, like, a statistic; you think 'It's horrible', but it doesn't affect you that much...but if it's an actual story, it makes you more upset.

Several teenagers felt that this was a book which was not suitable for younger children because they might be upset or would have difficulty understanding the book. However, others disagreed; they felt that the Holocaust was an important event which children needed to learn about. One group argued that although a book such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* might be upsetting, it had an important message:

Historical stories make you face the truth about how things were.

3.8 The value of books which deal with difficult issues

A book such as *A Child Called It* could, in the words of one teenager, "open your eyes to the world a bit more". They felt it was important that teenagers, and younger children, learnt about difficult issues:

If you don't read books about these sorts of things then you might not be aware what could happen.

Teenagers in another group agreed that reading about difficult subjects was important because it could make young people more aware of things which were actually happening in the world. Another teenager thought that the value of controversial books was the way in which they might make the reader question things and encourage them to think about issues more deeply:

Lots of books raise issues and then you start to question and I think it's only when you question that you find answers; if you just accept it as right or wrong then you can never work out what your actual opinion is...it makes you think about the issues that are raised.

One teenager used the example of *Looking for JJ* which she felt was complex because the reader was left unsure how to view Alice: was she a good person or was she evil?

One group discussed at length how novels which described some of the problems which teenagers might face could teach them how to deal with things which were happening to them now, or might happen in the future:

They help you to learn how to deal with things which happen in real life.

Books might also be useful if a friend was facing a particular problem; they could provide examples of ways in which teenagers could support each other:

You feel for them [the characters] as you would do a friend, so putting them in certain situation teaches you like it would do for someone real who's going through that.

Many of the teenagers involved wanted to study some of the books discussed during the focus groups in English lessons at school because they felt that novels which dealt with controversial issues deserved a wider audience:

I think that books like this should be given in school. I think it would be difficult because schools don't want to offend parents, but a lot of people don't read books and to give them this kind of insight is good.

One teenager argued that restricting access to controversial books could prevent children and teenagers from developing, both educationally and socially:

Being censored doesn't help because it doesn't move you forward...you've got advancing reading levels, but you've also got advancing in the social department.

Some teenagers commented that they wanted novels about difficult issues to be realistic, rather than falsely reassuring. Jacqueline Wilson's novels were mentioned by one group as examples of books which attempted to discuss tricky issues, but offered simplistic solutions. When they read books where problems were sorted out too easily, some teenagers felt that the author did not understand them and they were not really able to relate to the characters or the storyline.

Overall, teenagers believed that books were valuable because they could make teenagers more aware of controversial issues, but authors should not tell them what they should think about these topics:

A good book doesn't tell you what to think...you make your own interpretation of the book.

It makes you aware of things and when things like that come up in the news and stuff it maybe gives you more of an idea...it makes you feel you're being treated as an adult rather than like a child.

3.9 Parental attitudes

Many teenagers said that their parents liked to know that they were reading, but were not overly concerned about exactly what books they chose to read. Some said their parents liked them to read more serious or 'worthy' books, rather than teenage romance novels for example. Some of the older teenagers who took part in the focus groups said their parents had been more concerned about what they read when they were younger, but had less involvement now.

Several teenagers said their parents asked about what they were reading and looked at the covers of books, but did not actually read them. One described how, if her parents were concerned about a particular title, she tried to reassure them:

I have to try and explain that it's not about anything that bad.

One girl described how her parents had different views about what books they believed were suitable for her:

I could be reading something that my mum didn't want me to read or I could be reading something that my dad didn't want me to read...it's difficult because I don't know what they're going to react to.

Several teenagers mentioned books (or magazines) which they were aware their parents probably not would approve of them reading. One teenager said her mother confiscated books and magazines such as *Bliss* which she did not want her daughter to read. Often the titles her mother was concerned about were those which had been reported as potential problems in the media. Another girl said her mother had refused to buy a book she had wanted to read because it was the story of a woman who was dying with cancer and her mother was worried it might upset her. One teenager said her parents tended to buy her a series of books so they would know what she was reading for the next few months. Others said their parents had said they did not like particular books they were reading, but had not actually stopped them from reading.

Some teenagers felt parents, and other adults, could be naïve about what they felt children needed to be protected from:

We already know about that stuff, so it doesn't make much difference reading about it.

Some felt that many adults had simply forgotten how they felt when they were younger.

Some teenagers appreciated that their parents tried to stop them from reading, or seeing, certain things because they were concerned about how they would be affected or did not want them to make mistakes, but felt that, as teenagers, they needed more freedom to learn about the world for themselves:

Parents can't protect you against everything, so you get to a point when you have to start making your own decisions.

In your teens you want to learn what the world is really like, so you can cope with things that happen on your own.

Others thought that it was up to teenagers to prove to their parents that they were mature enough to make their own judgements:

Parents try to censor things if they think they can't trust you and they carry on doing this until you show them they can trust you and you're able to handle it.

Others accepted their parents had the right to censor what they could read or see, providing they explained why and used it as a way to teach their child how to decide for themselves when they were older:

Parents can help you to make better choices when you're older by showing you how to make choices when you're younger, not just making them without explaining why.

3.10 Discussing books

Few teenagers discussed books with their peers outside organised book groups. For example, one said she did occasionally recommend a book to her friends, but "I get a blank look". Several teenagers said they did not talk about books, so they were not aware what their friends had read. Others said that few of their friends had read the same books; there were only a few books, such as Harry Potter, which virtually everyone had read. In some cases, teenagers felt that if they discussed books with people outside their book group they would be called a 'geek'. Others commented that, while some novels could provoke a lot of discussion, there was less to say about other books. One of the reasons why some teenagers wanted to read controversial books in English lessons at school was so they would have an opportunity to discuss issues and to ask about anything they did not understand.

However, some teenagers argued that fiction could be an effective way to start a discussion about difficult issues such as sex or drugs with their friends, or even their parents. One thought that, if teenagers and their parents both read a book about an issue, they could then discuss it in a less personal way, which may be easier for both to deal with. In some cases, teenagers and their parents swapped and discussed books. Several teenagers said their parents passed on books they had read and, on other occasions, parents read books which their child had bought or borrowed. A few teenagers also said they talked about, and recommended, books to their brothers and sisters.

3.11 Films and computer games

Most teenagers agreed that the content of films was 'worse' than that of books, in terms of the amount of swearing, sex and violence depicted for example. However, groups were divided over whether watching a film was likely to have a greater effect on young people than reading a book. Some argued that, when reading a book, the reader constructed an image in their own mind and this could often be worse than something portrayed in a film. One teenager thought that books had a greater effect because they required you to think more:

Books, you have to be sort of awake! With a film you can sit back and let it wash over you.

Across several focus groups, teenagers argued that books could have a stronger effect on someone than a film because:

...having pictures can limit your imagination, whereas if you've just got the words... You can make it much more gory if you're just reading it.

However, other teenagers thought that, because each reader created their own image, this meant books were less potentially harmful because someone younger would create a less graphic image than one they might be presented with in a film. Others agreed, arguing that:

[In a film] it seems awful, but when you read about it in a book it doesn't seem awful.

Some teenagers felt that people were more likely to try to copy activities in films because they had actually seen them acted out, rather than simply described. For this reason, films were more likely to influence behaviour.

With regard to computer games, some teenagers argued that, although these could be graphic, when they were playing the game they were not thinking about shooting people or stealing; they were only concerned with collecting points or getting to the next level. However, others were more concerned about the potential effects of games, especially on younger children. One thought that difference between films and computer games was that in a game you were in control; you were responsible for shooting someone, whereas when watching a film you tended to be more passive.

Some teenagers felt that their parents worried less about what films they watched than they did about what books they read, perhaps because they knew more about the content of films and/or could use the age certificates to help them to judge what was appropriate.

Interestingly, no teenagers questioned whether age restrictions and labels on films or computer games were right; they accepted that there was a valid reason for these, although most people did not stick rigidly to the age limits. Talking about 15 and 18 certificate films, one 12 year old said:

I agree that I shouldn't be watching that kind of thing because it gives me bad ideas.

One group felt that films were generally more problematic than books because the majority of teenagers who read books would be more mature, while films appealed to a wider range of people. They felt that this meant that, while there was a need to censor films, books should be unrestricted:

Why should people who are mature enough to sit down and read an adult-ish book suffer because there are people who don't even read books, but because of them they're having to censor stuff?

3.12 The Internet

Most of the teenagers said they appreciated why schools and libraries blocked access to certain websites, for example because they were worried about bad publicity if someone was to access offensive material, but they felt it was unfair that so many harmless websites were blocked apparently indiscriminately. In most schools, the students had found ways around the filtering system, but claimed to be using the Internet sensibly.

One group pointed out that it was unlikely that anyone would use the Internet to access offensive material in school because there were always teachers and other adults around and they were aware that the school was able to track which sites they had accessed. In all the

focus groups where this was discussed, teenagers reported problems obtaining resources they required for school work from the Internet in school because so many sites were blocked and they were not allowed to search for certain words, for example 'games' when looking for information about Victorian board games.

According to teenagers, many of their parents were most concerned about the use of Internet chatrooms. Some explained what restrictions their parents had placed on their use of the Internet at home. Some had 'house rules' and a small number were not allowed to use the Internet at all:

It's not that she [mother] doesn't trust me; she doesn't trust the Internet.

Most teenagers saw the Internet as being easier to use than reference books. A few were aware that not all the information was reliable, but for most, the sheer amount of information available was seen as a major advantage of the Internet over books.

4. Conclusions

The teenagers in these focus groups argued that they should have the right to choose what books they wanted to read. Teenagers in several of the groups commented that they felt they should have the right to decide to read a book; even if they personally would not want to read it, the decision should remain theirs. As one said:

I wouldn't want to read it [The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas], but I think I should be allowed to read it.

However, teenagers in several groups acknowledged that they sometimes employed double standards. While they believed that they had the right to read any book, they were worried about the effects certain books might have on others, especially younger readers:

If it's you, then you think, 'Oh, I can read it because it doesn't bother me', but you're more protective of other people; you think, 'You might get upset...'

In the case of younger readers in particular, teenagers agreed that parental guidance was important and should be listed to. They were much less tolerant of intervention from other adults.

Most importantly, teenagers wanted to be trusted to make their own decisions, although they did want guidance on the content of books, either on the book itself or provided by other people. However, they were adamant that any age categorisations should be used as a guideline, not as a means of restricting their reading. Teenagers believed they should be allowed to decide for themselves what types of material they wanted to read. An argument made by teenagers in several of the groups was that, if someone was not enjoying a book, they would put it down. There was little chance that someone would continue to read a book which they found upsetting.

There were clearly examples of subjects which at least some teenagers were not comfortable reading about, in particular sex (especially homosexuality). They were less concerned about swearing or violence in books. Teenagers' attitudes towards books about drugs were interesting; most wanted to ensure that the books available to them did not advocate drug taking. Although they did not want to be preached to, they were keen that teenage books provided a strong moral message.

Despite the fact that teenagers claimed that restrictions such as age certificates on films had the effect of making them more determined to see or do things which they were not supposed to, the majority were happy to accept age restrictions on books in their school library. They felt that the reasons for these had been explained to them and they accepted why they were necessary. They were less tolerant of restrictions on Internet access within schools because they believed that filtering was arbitrary and prevented them looking for legitimate information.

Teenagers believed that they could be affected by books in both positive and negative ways, perhaps even without them realising it. However, they disagreed about whether fiction or non-fiction was the most powerful. They also disagreed about whether books were more or

less influential on behaviour than films. More concern was expressed about computer games.

A number of teenagers argued that books should be judged on whether they were a good story, rather than on whether the content was controversial. However, many saw great value in books about controversial issues; they felt they could learn about life and how they might deal with problems by reading such books. Fiction was felt to be as, if not more, important than non-fiction because it was through novels that teenagers could learn about emotion, motivation and the long term impacts of decisions rather than just the basic facts. Novels could also be a way to open up a discussion about such issues.

It was clear from these discussions, that although they may not be aware of the meaning of words such as censorship and intellectual freedom, the teenagers involved in this research were clearly aware of the issues involved. Most presented mature, considered views, acknowledging the difficulties, but arguing forcefully for their right to exercise control over their own reading.

5. Commentary

Many of teenagers involved in this research could be argued to be more competent readers than many of their peers. However, based on this sample, the clear message is that teenagers want guidance about which books to read, but not censorship. They want information about a book's content to inform their reading choices, but do not want to be told whether or not this makes a particular book suitable for them. It therefore makes sense to argue for greater involvement of teenagers in reviewing and recommending books, perhaps leading to peer guidance on book covers and/or in bookshops and libraries. This also indicates that librarians and booksellers need to be more careful about the way in which they provide guidance than some seem to be at present. Refusing to sell or loan a book to a teenager is not the best approach.

Teenagers want to be taught how to make informed decisions. Many said they appreciated that this is something their parents tried to do. If the reasons for restrictions were adequately explained to teenagers, they were generally happy to comply. Unsurprisingly, they found apparently arbitrary decisions more objectionable. Internet censorship in schools is currently extremely crude. It is ridiculed by students who are easily able to circumvent the system and causes difficulties for those who wish to carry out legitimate research.

Teenagers appear to be well aware of the potential power of books, with many considering this to be greater than the power of films. They are sensitive to this and aware of the possible impact of books on other readers, especially those younger than themselves.

Many teenagers have a strong moral code about issues such as drugs and they believe that the books available to them should support this. Teenagers also require books which they can relate to; they like to feel the author understands their situation.

The fact that the content level and reading age of a book are not always equivalent was pointed out by a number of teenagers. This could lead to difficulties for more able readers who sometimes experienced difficulties obtaining suitable titles. Librarians working with teenagers need to ensure that their stock contains a range of titles suitable for various combinations of emotional maturity and reading age.

Many teenagers would welcome the opportunity to read and discuss books which deal with controversial issues such as drugs and violence with the school curriculum. Those who already read such titles feel they deserve a wider audience and would like the chance to discuss the issues raised.

There is potential to involve parents in their children's reading, even amongst this older age group. A number of teenagers said they share, and talk about, books with their parents. This could help to make parents more informed and more confident about advising their child about suitable reading material.

In summary, this research has suggested the following:

- To help both teenagers and their parents, books for teenagers should include guidance on the cover about the incidence of sex, violence, drugs, swearing etc
- Teenagers themselves should be involved in reviewing books and offering guidance on their suitability.
- Librarians and booksellers should ensure they offer teenagers guidance, not unexplained restrictions.
- Libraries for teenagers need to ensure that their stock contains a range of titles suitable for various combinations of emotional maturity and reading age.
- More opportunities to read books dealing with controversial issues within the curriculum should be explored.
- Efforts need to be made to involve parents in their teenager's reading, making them more aware of the content of books and better able to offer informed advice to their child.
- Internet filtering in schools needs to be re-examined. It is currently extremely unhelpful and unsophisticated.
- Rather than focusing on restricting access, it is imperative that teenagers are taught how to make informed choices about the information they gather from the Internet and the books they chose to read.

References

McNicol, Sarah (2005a), Attitudes towards intellectual freedom and censorship amongst school and children's librarians [available at

http://www.ebase.uce.ac.uk/docs/censorship_report.doc].

McNicol, Sarah (2005b), Censorship Practices and Access to Information: Interviews with School and Children's Librarians [available at

http://www.ebase.uce.ac.uk/docs/censorship_report.doc].

Appendix A: List of books used in focus groups

A Child Called It, Dave Pelzer, London, Orion, 2001 (0-75283-750-8)

Come Clean, Terri Paddock, London: HarperCollins, 2004 (0-00-717247-8)

Looking for JJ, Anne Cassidy, London: Scholastic, 2004 (0-439-97717-7)

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, Mark Haddon, London: Vintage, 2004 (0-099-45025-9)

Sugar Rush, Julie Burchill, London: Young Picador, 2004 (0-330-41583-2)

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, John Boyne, Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2006 (0-385-60940-X)

The Love Guru's Guide to Sex, Tina Radziszewicz, London: Piccadilly Press, 2005 (1-85340-850-6)

Junk, Melvin Burgess, London: Penguin, 1997 (0-14-038019-1)

Doing It, Melvin Burgess, London: Penguin, 2004 (0-141-01803-8)