

OLA IFC Tuesday Topics September 2021: Libraries, Censorship, and Critical Race Theory

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



Libraries, censorship and critical race theory

Books addressing racism and older titles criticized for racist content were a notable addition to the American Library Association's [2020 list](#) of book challenges. For example, "Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You" and "Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice" are on the Top 10 list this year. A majority of titles on the [2019 list](#) of book challenges featured [LGBTQIA+ characters or content](#).

This is a very clear shift in focus; in addition to the two nonfiction titles about race, three works of fiction by Black authors ("All American Boys", "The Hate U Give", and "The Bluest Eye") made the list. Also, "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Of Mice and Men" were challenged due to racial slurs and stereotypes in the books.

This new list, side by side with the previous Top 10, reflects a national controversy in K-12 schools. The often-heated discussion revolves around whether and how teachers should address the issues around racism in the United States. In particular, there is a movement to [ban teaching about topics such as systemic racism](#) as it exists in the present day. Racism may have existed in the past, these critics say, but now teachers are describing white students as oppressors and making them feel guilty and ashamed.

On the other side of the debate, many educators argue that it's important for students to understand that U.S. social institutions -- including schools, the criminal justice system, healthcare, and more -- still perpetuate racism today. The purpose is not to make white students feel guilty but to help them see that it's not simply a few individuals with racist beliefs that are the problem. Instead, everyone has a responsibility to work to change these flawed systems that support white supremacy.

Critics of this type of teaching often use the phrase "critical race theory" (CRT). CRT is a framework for legal analysis that considers how racism is embedded in legal systems and government policies. One example is

redlining, when financial institutions discriminate based on race, targeting mostly-nonwhite neighborhoods as financially risky and charging more or refusing loans on demographics alone. While K-12 schools generally do not teach critical race theory as it was first conceived -- for law students, as a legal framework - “CRT” has become a shorthand for any teaching about systemic racism, bias, or simply the existence of racism in the present day.

Eight states have passed legislation addressing the issue. According to the Brookings Institution, this legislation mostly bans “the discussion, training, and/or orientation that the U.S. is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression” (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). The laws include discussions about gender as well as race.

While Oregon has not passed a similar law, the debate is certainly happening, around new [history and civics standards](#) as well as around the [firing of a superintendent](#) who championed equity issues, school board members in Newberg [banning Black Lives Matter and pride flags](#), and the increasing number of race-related titles and programs challenged in Oregon libraries last year, and in libraries around the U.S.

In the [“2021 Annual Report On Challenges to Intellectual Freedom in Oregon Libraries & Schools”](#), released in August, there are several examples relevant to the discussion on race and racism. One library received an anonymous phone call from “a local educator” about an author program featuring YA authors Jason Reynolds and Jenny Torres Sanchez. The caller was upset that the library was “promoting harmful ideas” including the idea “that racism actually exists in America”. On the other hand, several of the challenges came from patrons or library staff members who objected to racism in several [Dr. Seuss titles](#), for example, which came to national attention when the publisher decided to stop reprinting them.

It will be important to watch this evolving discussion to see how it impacts school curriculum and challenges to library programs and materials. Library staff, especially school library workers, may feel pressure to self-censor when it comes to planning programs or buying books about topics related to race. We will also need to continue to grapple with intellectual freedom issues related to what to do when books -- whether they are classics or recently published - contain racist imagery, stereotypes, and other objectionable content.

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