

## **The Highs and Lows of Weeding a School Library Collection**

### **By: Lindsay Carriere**

I began my teacher-librarian journey in 2017, with enthusiasm and gusto, and one library additional qualification course under my belt. I was taking over a two-year-old library opened by an experienced teacher-librarian who was retiring. My goals were to continue the journey transitioning the library to a learning common while connecting with staff and students and establishing collaborative teaching and learning relationships. Weeding a brand-new collection was the furthest thing from my mind. Now fast forward five years, two and a half of these years during a global pandemic, I find myself somewhat stuck in the same place, somewhat further behind from where I started, feeling somewhat lost and overwhelmed despite the growth and gains we made in the first two and a half years.

I figured that while circulation was limited to whole class [scheduled visits](#) during the pandemic, rather than student-run [open book exchange](#), it would be a good time to re-acquaint myself with the collection, weed it, and begin an equity audit; two librarian practices that were new to me. Weed your collection, what does that even mean? My initial experience with weeding or weeds of any kind dates back to my hospitality days when the idiom “in the weeds” meant that one couldn’t keep up with the rush of work, in a server’s case, unable to keep up with taking orders, visiting new guests, and bringing out food (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). I still have nightmares about this. Weeding, in the horticultural world means “to remove unwanted plants from the ground” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). So, what do weeds and weeding have to do with libraries? Do any of these idioms relate? Interestingly, meaning can be derived from both definitions with regard to weeding one’s library collection. Falling behind or becoming out of hand and removing unwanted items lend themselves well to weeding a library.

Why do we weed? We do it to slim down a collection, to remove dated, unused materials that are overwhelming space on shelves, or to replace old unused books with newer, more current material. We weed to ensure the collection reflects not only our users, but a diverse global identity that ensures that a variety of voices, and biases are reflected (Canadian School Libraries, 2022). We weed to make sure that our books are culturally appropriate and don’t spread falsities or not factual misinformation. And finally, we weed damaged material (Bogan, 2020, June 7).

### **Feelings and Emotional Responses**

I have a love-hate relationship with weeding. I find it cathartic to cleanse the shelves and put lost books back into place. There is something about books lined up neatly and organized that brings me joy and tranquility. It’s like “The Home Edit, Library edition”, without the rainbows, because that’s no way to organize a library. However, the process of finding new ways to showcase material is enjoyable. I also love

reacquainting myself with the collection, coming across books I'd forgotten about and thinking of ways to get them into patrons hands. What drains my soul is how time consuming and overwhelming the process can be. We have nearly 14,000 books in an elementary library that I manage on my own. The stacks pile up in corners and bins, and the process feels never ending. I am definitely guilty of hanging on to things and have a hard time throwing books away. Deciding what stays and what goes without censoring a collection<sup>1</sup> is somewhat of a heavy burden. Nobody likes making those tough decisions.

## Community Reactions

Terrence Luther Cottrell reviews the implications and “worries” of weeding a public library and speaks of the emotions that coincide with the act of throwing books away. He writes, “There have been too many images, both fictional and factual, where people have witnessed book removal coupled with human atrocity” (Luther Cottrell, 2013, p. 98). Right away I'm flooded with images of books being burned and people punished for wanting to form opinions of their own (Bradbury, 1981). There is this feeling of discomfort to throw away books even those with inaccurate information (Luther Cottrell, 2013). I know every staff member or student witnessing my weeding process has stopped me and asked for the books to have in their own classrooms or questioned why I am removing them altogether.

Sometimes I can ease the discomfort of seeing 500 plus books in bins ready to be tossed by donating back to classrooms. If I weed duplicate copies from the collection these can be redistributed. Kindergarten loves to have books outside, so some of the less damaged picture books become outdoor library books, a program I fully support. Books that have water damage really shouldn't be given to classrooms as mold can grow and spread and become hazardous to that classroom. Sometimes I discreetly discard them in the cloak of darkness in black garbage bags to avoid these uncomfortable conversations.



Don't get me wrong, conversations are important. Educating staff and students on why the weeding and auditing processes are important in ensuring our collection is current, diverse, factual and in good condition is a valuable learning experience. It can help them weed their own classroom libraries. I keep some badly damaged books to

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<sup>1</sup> Censoring a collection could be as simple as throwing out or adding books based on what I deem quality literature, or as complicated as selecting and weeding books based on lists or biases from groups who deem some authors or titles inappropriate. A whole paper could be written on this topic alone.

show students what not to do with their books when I give September library orientations. Cottrell explains that “telling users that libraries are not museums, and that libraries are living organisms that change as culture changes is a step toward building understanding” (Luther Cottrell, 2013, p. 98).

When tweeting about my weeding journey, it was interesting to engage in the conversation from other librarians who also share a love-hate relationship with the process. Canadian School Libraries joined in the discussion by sharing useful tools to help guide the process, which I loosely summarized above. And when put to 80s pop rock anthems, how can you not “Just Weed It” (Canadian School Libraries, 2022).



(LaGarde, 2013)

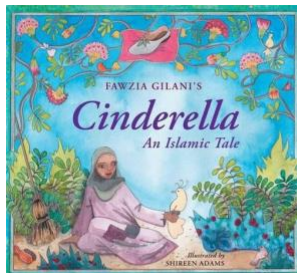
While chatting with our board library support team who visited my library personally to check out the learning commons and model how to cull the collection, we spoke about the outright resistance many librarians had to getting rid of books. I wondered if I myself had any biases when weeding, and whether or not I would have a hard time “throwing books away”. In short, yes, I do. I apparently am a hoarder. But

Disney, and Elsa more specifically have taught me to “Let it go, let it go, don’t hold on to it anymore...”

Weeding a library is apparently a hot topic that generates a lot of controversy. While researching for this paper, I was made aware of librarians and patrons actively trying to “save books,” and there are many who chastise groups for “censoring” collections or throwing away perfectly “good books”. Again, the discomfort and fear of what throwing books away triggers in the human subconscious is real. I myself received the comment, “first world problems” after tweeting a picture of books removed from my collection. Of course, being a reflective person, I immediately thought I was doing something wrong.

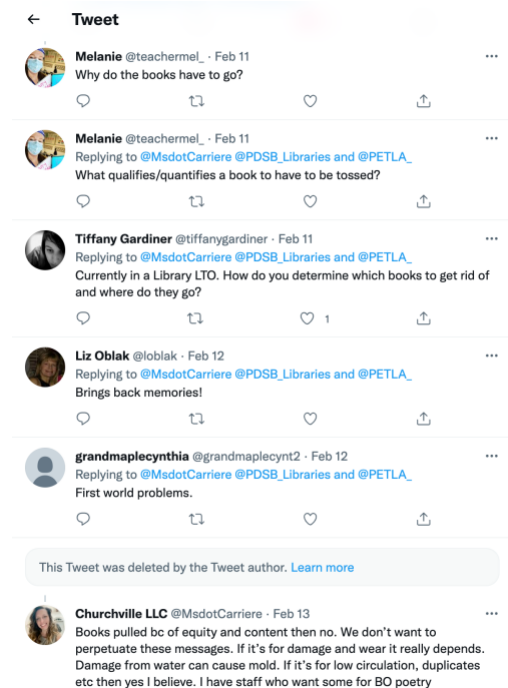
## Self-Reflection and Equity

Weeding involves a lot of self-reflection in order to not let your own biases interfere with what stays and what goes. My collection had pristine fairy tale books published in the early 1990s, in beautiful condition. And a fairy tale never goes out of fashion, right? The fact that the books were pristine, almost mint condition proves that they were never taken off the shelves, and likely never circulated; reason number two for removing them from the collection. As we move forward in time many things change, language and imagery included. And what may have been relevant or acceptable in one era or time period, likely doesn’t hold true in the present. And while the fairy tale story might not have changed too much over time, there are newer versions that are actually being taken off the shelves, and versions from different cultures that are even more desirable to our users. For example, *Cinderella: An Islamic Tale* by Fawzia Gilani-Williams. I can’t keep this book on the shelf! It is taken off the checked in book cart before it can be reshelved.



(Gilani, 2010)

While it’s important to get rid of the damaged and erroneous books, it’s also valuable to weed your school library collection through an equity lens. Be aware of your own biases and privileges and ensure your collection offers multiple perspectives (Canadian School





Libraries, 2022). Ask yourself questions when deciding whether or not to keep certain material. A few questions teacher-librarian Rabia Khokhar, ((Khokhar, 2020), suggests:

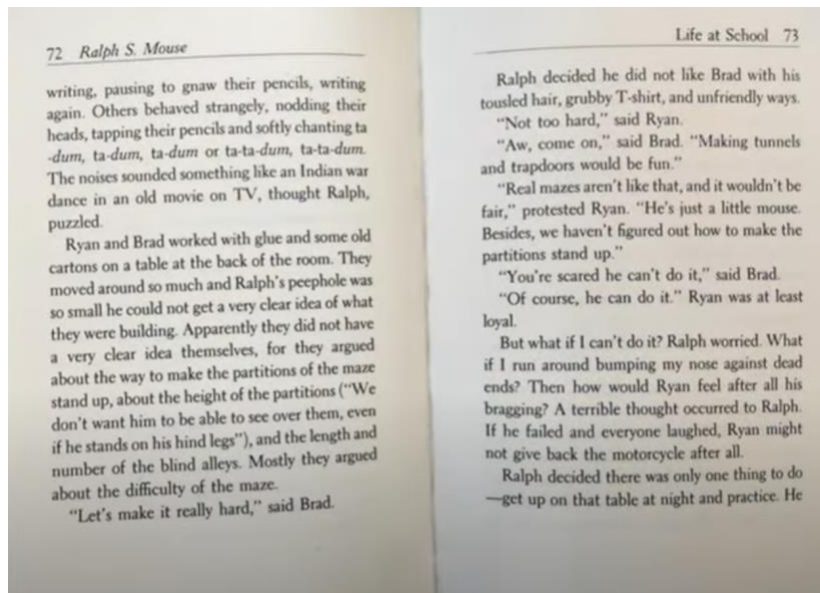
- When I look through my entire collection through an inclusive lens whose perspective is there? Whose is missing?
- When I look through my entire collection through an equity lens whose story and perspective has historically been centered? Who has told this story and information?
- How are people represented? Communities 'positioned' and which 'gaze' is the text from?

Sometimes what was considered "canon" does not hold true in the present day or the present school. Literary canon can impede weeding projects as librarians and educators get hung up on what is considered to have educational value. This is an equity issue. In Western society, literary canon has often been decided by traditionally educated, privileged white men, (Bates, 2013, April 25), excluding many voices and experiences from these selected texts. It is important to set aside privilege, bias, and experiences when deciding what literary academic experience we provide our students. This is especially relevant when weeding and supplementing novel sets for literature circles. Weeding these sections of libraries and book rooms in schools can stir pots and cause conflict or distress on educators who rely on this literature for their programs. Sometimes you have to be the "fun police" when wearing your teacher-librarian hat, whether you're shutting down a Netflix recess viewing party or challenging and removing books.

As a Caucasian, second generation Canadian of European descent, it's likely that biases and ideologies will creep into my selections of what stays. It is important to be critical of a book, and not hold on to it because it was a childhood favourite, or a book considered canon when I was in school. Aside from the fact that my childhood was decades ago, our biases from our own childhood and traditional school experiences should not be reflected on our library shelves nor determine whether or not a book should stay.

Now I find myself weeding my personal collections at home and in my sleep. I pulled a childhood favourite from the bookshelf to read to my daughter one night. This week's choice was *Ralph S. Mouse* by Beverly Cleary (Cleary, 1982). It was a regular night of dynamic storytelling until I got to page 72. This was when Cleary had Ralph compare the strange noises in the classroom to "an Indian war dance in an old movie on TV" (Cleary, 1982, p.72). Suddenly all the reasons we weed books come screaming back to me. I flip to the front to check the publication date: 1982. That was 30 years ago. Now I'm questioning every Beverly Cleary book I have in the house and potentially at school. We mourned her loss last March and celebrated the real estate this literary legend took up on library bookshelves (Rawls, 2021, March 27). Could I really be throwing away the books written by the same woman who said, "if you don't see the book you want on the shelf, write it?" (Jean-Pierre, 2021, March 27). I have a quick

conversation with my daughter, who asked me why I stopped reading, about the inappropriate language, and we finish the chapter.



(Cleary, 1982)

I know I have *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* as a novel set at school. That was published in 1965 (Cleary, 1965)! I returned to school the next day and contacted my support team at the school board who are actively creating a document to help librarians weed with an equity lens. Based on the evidence, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* and *Ralph S. Mouse* have to go. In my opinion the easiest books to weed are those that are outdated with misinformation or use terminology and imagery that is considered offensive. I would have had a hard time removing *Ralph S. Mouse* from a collection, until I read page 72. As curators of knowledge and information we have a duty to ensure that we don't circulate erroneous content or words and language that can cause harm to any reader. It is our job to read and weed books that have the potential to reinforce stereotypes.

Now I am surveying the 900s with a keen eye. I made sure to be extremely critical of our Indigenous section to ensure that we weren't perpetuating old stereotypes and misinformation. Some books are obviously dated and offensive, while others aren't as blatant. For example, the series *Aboriginal Canadian Communities* is in question for use of the word "Aboriginal" as well as for insinuating that Indigenous people are Canadian. This series was published in 2017 and purchased in 2018 from our Indigenous vendor Goodminds. While researching this terminology, I learned a great deal about the word and its use. A report from Queen's University explains that the negative connotations come from its use in government policy and whenever it is used as a noun or as belonging to Canada (Queen's, 2022). Using a collective term to describe all Indigenous people is also problematic. The series in question doesn't use Aboriginal as a noun throughout the book, Canada is never described as owning the groups in focus aside from the series title that considers Indigenous groups as

“Canadian Communities.” Each book in the series gives specific details and information about that specific group (e.g., Iroquois Community, Salish Community). Do I weed this series completely, thus rendering our 971 section empty, or do I include a note on the front explaining how language evolves until we have better books to replace this content? Time to call on our Indigenous resource team!

A respected teacher-librarian with whom I worked on my specialist course advised to remove offensive books but use them for teaching purposes to demonstrate exactly why we remove them and can’t let them circulate. He suggested using them as a tool to model how language and history evolves (Ngo, personal communication, March, 2022). So now I have my collection of damaged weeded books and my collection of harmful weeded books to use as teaching tools. Donating these types of materials, regardless of condition, only perpetuates the messages we no longer want circulating. There is no question, these books cannot and should not remain in the collection.

## Physical Space Considerations

One final observation, reason, or goal for weeding your collection is the space it frees and the promotion of circulation. This took some reading and discussing with other librarians before understanding how having fewer books in a collection actually promotes circulation.



(Bogan, 2022)

Initially, when books are crammed tightly on shelves, students don’t have access. They cannot browse easily or quickly, and will likely avoid those sections altogether (Khokhar, 2020). Secondly, fewer shelves frees up space for more relevant programming or furniture such as dynamic seating, work areas, inquiry prompts, makerspaces, or computer based research spaces (Bogan, 2020). I am also intrigued with the new trend to display books more dynamically, facing forward to allow students visual access to material thus increasing circulation (Bogan, 2022). You can’t choose what you can’t see.

What I have learned from my research and weeding experience is that there is no better time to start than today. If you have been thinking about weeding your collection but are burdened by time constraints or concerns about making tough decisions or stirring pots, you can do this, and you need to do this, take it one day at a time! Ask for help and lean on your support teams. Sometimes just starting the conversation is helpful in opening your mind to new ideas around what should go. From when I began writing this paper and began my weeding journey, I already feel as though I want to dig deeper, do more, and make more changes. Remember that libraries evolve, and so should the material inside them!

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