Speaker 1:

Hello and welcome. You are in module two of Section one looking at book bans and bias. Most of the resources that you'll find linked here sort of take a deeper look at bias than is typical in the LIS world. We're not just talking unconscious bias, although that is part of it. In this discussion, we're looking at book bans and the relationship to protecting children and the ways that bias comes into play there.

In particular, we're going to be talking a bit about age appropriateness, but we'll get there in a second. I want to start this discussion as the others with a quote, something to again sort of rattle around your head as you listen to me talk a little bit more. And also as you move through some of the resources that are linked here, and again, as well as when you move through other resources in the other sections of ReadCon.

So this quote is from Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom. She gave a wonderful talk at MIT libraries and the issue of book bans came up, this was earlier on in the pandemic. We didn't have quite the same amount of data, but we absolutely had quite the discussion and upheaval around book banning already happening. The full video is linked if you want to take a look. But she says at one point in the video that book censorship, she says, "It's not about burning the books, it's about labeling the ideas. There's a short and direct line between labeling ideas as profane and dehumanizing people."

So again, this is just sort of something to frame the discussion, something to sort of ground your exploration of some of the other resources that are here. I do encourage you to listen to her whole talk and sort of get this quote in its full context. But again, we've got something that sort of boils down to that, back to that rather simple idea of book bans as an exercising or a protection and even a panic over power. It's not about burning the books, it's about labeling the ideas and therefore having control, having power over dehumanizing people. If you control how ideas are interpreted, you can also control how people are interpreted.

And we see this show up in book bans particularly that are attacking books for young readers anywhere from zero to 18. We see a lot of books, a lot of young adult literature being targeted, but all the way down to picture books. Any book that is for a minor, aimed at a minor is often fair game and is certainly an area of concern or heightened concern for parents. So when we see these parent rights groups organizing, these are often the books they're targeting because they're the exact kinds of books that you can sort of whip other parents anxieties up into a frenzy about.

And this is in part because I have my little simple equation here that libraries plus children equals terror for lots of reasons. And that terror is rooted in our social constructions around childhood, around ideas of innocence, around ideas of an expectation that children do not have knowledge, that knowledge is given to them, that they're encountering new information is like pouring water into an empty vessel as opposed to new information being something that is integrated into a child's existing knowledge, their existing expertise, et cetera.

All kinds of fun constructions and discussions about that. And you can find those discussions in childhood development disciplines in young, excuse me, early education disciplines, certainly in discussions of children's literature, constructions of childhood, and of course childhood studies can't leave that one out. But it boils down to those constructions of childhood, which again can be almost universal, particularly within the same nation, right? The same state, but can often get down to some really very specific assumptions. Specific constructions in the context of a very local community can sort of have its own expectations in and around their children.

But one thing that is threaded through those constructions is also this issue of critical distance that children because they are, maybe because they're innocent, maybe because they're simply less capable than adults, that capability, that skill is something that can only be acquired as one approaches adulthood, as one leaves childhood and approaches adulthood. All those ideas get at this issue of critical distance that children lack the capacity for critical distance from a text. And this is at the root of so much panic about the existence of different books, the existence of books with certain kinds of content that children are presumed incapable of distancing themselves enough from a book in order to not emulate a book or not be directly harmed by scary or new and frightening or violent or otherwise disturbing content in a book.

Whereas we have direct opposition to that about how books offer, offer a safe space for children to encounter frightening, scary, disturbing experiences and information about the world around them that they may not have had before. But also, we have plenty of children who when they encounter something disturbing in a book, it is in fact affirming something disturbing that has happened to them in real life rather than new information it is something that has happened to them and they are seeing a book that also represents that experience, tells them that they are not alone.

So this issue and panic over critical distance, this issue in panic that all content of a certain type is inappropriate for all children, really flies in the face of what we know to be true about child psychology, about the large, diverse and varied experiences of children, and also the fact that children are individuals with individual reading experiences and reading needs.

So this naturally leads into discussions about obscenity and age appropriateness, and this is what we see pop up the most in this sort of repeated rhetoric. Lots of talking about this is obscene. Anyone would find this obscene. This content is without question anybody seeing this content would call it obscene. It becomes or it becomes obscene when it is content to which a young child is exposed. And the issue of age appropriateness is sort of caught up in this discussion. I won't get into obscenity too much because there's a wonderful discussion from Dr. Patrick Lawrence linked below that you can check out talking about the origins and the beginnings of how obscenity as a concept came to be framed and codified in our country. And then of course used against certain books, certain authors, certain content, particularly if it was aimed at a young reading audience.

What I want to talk about is age appropriateness. This specific discussion is one that we haven't seen a ton of. It's sort of packed into other discussions, but something that sort of breaks down age appropriateness in an article, in a book chapter, et cetera, I haven't seen too much of. So if I'm wrong and you found something excellent, please do let us know so that we can link it here.

But to give a sort of reef, lay of the land of what seems to be at work here in the rhetoric of age appropriateness and this concept, this conceit of age appropriateness again as something that universal that is absent of nuances is something that can be just slapped onto any situation in which a certain book and a certain child are involved is something we need to explore. Again, something we need to explore precisely because it is that it is by not questioning it, that certain book challenges, certain book censorship gets as far as it does.

So to start, let's go ahead and say what we do tend to have the shared frame of reference we do seem to be working under. Again, it's always better to, in the specific context of a specific challenge, if someone is bandying about the term age appropriate or this is inappropriate for this age group for whatever it is absolutely vital to stop the conversation and say, "What do you mean?"

But in general, when we are talking about age appropriateness in maybe literally any other setting than a book censorship situation, we mostly mean as groups of parents, as reading adults ourselves, as educators, as librarians and other information professionals. What we mean by age appropriate, usually as a combination of a book being at the reading or word slash sentence decoding skill level of a child. And also that the content aligns with a child's social, emotional and cognitive stages. So it needs to be literally words and sentences that a reader can appropriately decode and therefore get meaning from. And then the meaning that they get, the information that they get from that decoding needs to align relatively well. It doesn't have to be exact, but a lot of kids like to read up that kind of thing. But in general, the information that they get from that decoding process should align with their social, emotional and cognitive needs, which usually is captured by a breakdown of specific developmental stages.

Now, discussions about child development, I will leave that for folks that want to take a deeper dive into that. I certainly recommend it because it is illuminating just how much disagreement there has been, that there currently is about how child development stages actually work, how much of our early understanding and what has long been used has needed to be challenged on the basis of white supremacy, on the basis of eugenicist sort of tendencies and premises, and just a whole bunch of weird stuff where it's like you'd think by now we would've figured out, "Oh, children move through this stage to this stage, to this stage, to this stage." And it's so is not that simple like most things. So I certainly encourage exploring that further if you have the time and inclination. And but in general, cognitive socio-emotional and cognitive developmental stages are, there is content that aligns better with earlier ones content that aligns better with when a child is pre-puberty versus early teens, late teens and so on.

And if their literacy education has kept up, their reading and decoding skill levels advance along those stages as well. There's also, of course, within pedagogical practices and discussions about what is appropriate to teach in terms of literacy education, that it is not just about teaching decoding skills, but also about teaching engagement with new ideas. One's own, what is it that you think about what you're reading? Not just do you understand what you're reading, but what do you think about what you're reading is also something that grows along with a child through K-12 education. And all of this sort of gets stewed into what we mean by age appropriate. It is not an exact science, it is very much an art, and of course it is very much dependent on the specific child that we're talking about. There's very little that is generalizable to all children of a certain age or even of a certain social, emotional or cognitive development stage. It really has to do with the specific context of the kid you're talking about and the book you're talking about.

We do, however, see some tools that lean in this. Certainly there are pedagogical tools that are meant to be for groups of kids, grade level appropriate. If the kiddo is working at this particular grade level, then this particular book, this particular lesson plan, et cetera, may work well for them and enhance these skills, lead them to mastery of these skills and these learning outcomes, et cetera.

And then of course the publishing industry. We've got education on the one hand, but then we've also got the producers of these books assigning grade levels. And in fact, the publishing industry has put a lot of effort into what we would call leveled reading, Step Into Reading, Scholastic reading levels, the Lexile numbers. All of that sort of folds into, all right, this book we are assigning this level of difficulty to this book both in terms of what it takes to decode it, what meaning you get from decoding it and what that content aligns with in terms of social and emotional needs at a particular stage, et cetera. All of this goes is boiled down to just a single number and there might be a range of numbers that are appropriate for again, any given kid.

So age appropriateness is fuzzy at best. How long did it take me just to explain just a few of those basics that are kind of at play in the real world of book production and use of books in classrooms and things like that? It is hard to describe succinctly because it's not a succinct thing. It's very fuzzy. It's very different overlapping things at work at the same time, and again, in the specific context of a particular kid in a particular book.

So what we're seeing in book censorship is of course an erasing of all of that nuance, an erasing of all of that complexity. And instead, age appropriateness is wielded pretty much as a cudgel to flatten complexity, flatten the complexity of individual readers. That individual readers are individuals with their own complex relationship, their own experiences, their own existing knowledge, that they're not simply vessels waiting to be filled with new information from a book they've not encountered before, but rather a book's information is integrated into their existing knowledge and framework and views about their world. So it flattens the complexity of individual readers and it also flattens reading as a practice.

The idea, thinking about the books that you have read as a kid that maybe you came back to when you were older, right? Maybe you read The Hobbit when you were in fourth grade, but then you read it again when you were in eighth grade and maybe you got something different from it, right? Reading is a complex practice. It does different things based on your different needs and your different stages of development, your different cognitive abilities and experiences. The more you learn about your world, the more that you recognize in what you are reading, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

And this is true of adults too, right? This is not just about young people who are learning about their world in its entirety, but even an adult who feels fairly comfortable in their expansive knowledge about the world will read a book when they are 27, and then read it again when they're 37, and realize that they missed a whole metaphor that now they deeply understand. This is the nature of reading. Reading is complex. It is an incredibly intricate dance between the text that has been crafted by an author and a reader who is bringing all of their emotional and social and well quite frankly, baggage, bringing all of their baggage to a book to arrive at their personal interpretation of any given text.

It is complex, it is hard to describe briefly, and there's any number of people that you can read who have tried, who have talked about this, who have written entire theories and critical lenses to be brought to interpretation, to figure out one's own positionality when looking at their interpretation of a book. So the idea that we can simply say, this book is not appropriate for this age of kid or this age of reader is kind of on its face ridiculous. What are you talking about? You have to say more words than that. I need more than what you have just said if that's going to be your justification for removing this book from access for everybody.

So we see age appropriateness being used to flatten complexity, but we are also seeing it used to implicitly categorize specifically marginalized people's existence and experiences as inappropriate. So we've got the queer people's existence and experience is conflated with sexual content and therefore inappropriate to all young readers of a certain age, or perhaps even all young readers below the age of 18.

Black people's existence and experiences are regularly described as a political agenda. Their representation, black representation is evidence of a political agenda or the representation is politically divisive. The representation of racism as an experience, as a system of oppression is described as violent or too violent, inappropriately violent for a reading age group. Or that it shames white, young, white readers. It shames them into being ashamed of being white. Another example would be the representations of the Holocaust, the existence of the Holocaust and the experiences of the Holocaust as violent and frightening and therefore inappropriate. And this of course, presumes and insists that there are no young readers in existence who have any experiences of being queer, of being black, of experiencing racism, of experiencing the impacts of the Holocaust and so on, right? This is, again, on its face does not make any sense, but if you implicitly categorize certain types of representation in a book as inappropriate, if you can get past that hurdle and get people to nod and agree, yeah, I can see how that might be inappropriate for some young readers, et cetera.

Then you've already won a huge amount of ground, right? You've almost taken the high ground in terms of being able to further an agenda that dehumanizes people. And certainly that again, flattens this complexity that says there are no readers who would find this affirming. Only young readers would only experience this as both brand new and frightening information. This would only be something that can cause direct harm because one, these kids have no critical distance from the text that they're reading, and two, they have no exposure or experience for what's being represented here because all the representations of children as innocent and blank vessels and blah, blah, blah, blah.

So there's just a lot at work here and there's a lot accomplished all at once. If you can get age-appropriate, if you can hang your book censorship on age-appropriateness, you accomplish a lot of things at once. Flattening complexity and removing the rights of young readers and also erasing the existence of young readers who have any kind of exposure, experience and needs from the representation of content that you insist is inappropriate, that you deem implicitly as inappropriate because it presents marginalized voices and experiences.

All of that, all of that is to say that age-appropriateness is probably the most direct line between saying, My kids shouldn't access this content." To saying, "No kids should access this content." And now we're back to Dr. Cottom's point about dehumanization. If it's inappropriate for certain identities and experiences to be represented in books, then it's a simple matter to say certain identities and experiences are inappropriate, period, that they shouldn't exist and in fact should be resisted, right? If you can say trans people are that trans experiences, the existence of trans people is inappropriate in books for these children, then it's not that far a leap to say that gender-affirming care for a certain age of child or for anyone is inappropriate. And now we're talking about an agenda that seeks to eliminate trans people from existence, certainly to eliminate healthy, happy, untraumatized trans people from existence. And that is a lot to accomplish by simply banning a book. It pretty much makes, if that's your goal, then it makes the time it takes to actually get a book banned extremely worth it because of how much damage you accomplish with just that one act.

So we've seen this at work historically using age-appropriateness in this way. We've seen it at work historically, but we've also seen it recently too. Folks may remember the YA is too dark debate that boiled over from Twitter into so many blog posts and a whole bunch of newspaper opinion pieces and more just a ton of back and forth. And I don't know if we got anywhere, but I do think we got everybody that was having that conversation became very more entrenched in whatever opinion they already held. I think that was probably the main accomplishment of that particular debate.

But more importantly at the heart of the entire controversy was this implicit premise that teens that are navigating racial violence or sexual assault or mental illness or whatever constitutes darkness in this discussion that these teens experiences, and by extension these teens themselves are controversial, that they are up for debate, that they are unworthy of affirmation and representation in the universal cultural good of books. And that premise in the debate itself is so much more harmful than anything any one book could possibly do.

So short and direct line between labeling ideas is profane and dehumanizing people. Dehumanizing people, we've seen it at work in these last few years, proponents of book bans insisting that black, queer, disabled and other marginalized experiences are age inappropriate, but they apparently see nothing inappropriate or detrimental about the absence of any black, queer, disabled, or other marginalized voices. So somehow a book about a black child is supposedly inherently and inappropriately more political than a book about a white child. But also at the same time, a nearly all white book collection is neither political nor inappropriate.

Now, I've said in other discussions that the contradiction is the point that focusing on how contradictory, how hypocritical, whatever, is only going to use up valuable time and energy. And it's not going to get you anywhere with the opposition because the opposition either knows this or they either know that they're being contradictory and they don't care, or being contradictory is the point because the end goal is actually more than just the books. But really the inappropriateness, the age inappropriateness, the appropriateness, contradiction is a doozy pretty much no matter how you slice it. So I understand sort of needing to sit with it for a second and be frustrated with it before being able to sort of try and have a conversation to structure processes that dismantle some of this.

So I do recommend checking out Dr. Lawrence's discussion on obscenity to getting that background information that helps you feel sort of grounded in where some of the roots of this come from. That helps you sort of work within a frame and look at some of these other resources that tug at more of these implicit assumptions that are going on within book censorship. Because if you tug hard enough, eventually they begin to unravel or they might just unravel.

So like I said before, when you hear anybody say age appropriateness, everything screeches to a halt, just pause. "Excuse me, we need to stop for a second. Could you please say more about what you mean." Right? Because just running on the assumption that everybody understands what you mean by age appropriate is again, where some of these harmful implicit ideas about certain people being inappropriate and therefore their representation in a book being naturally inappropriate and alongside a whole bunch of incorrect assumptions about child readers, young readers, teen readers, it does a whole lot of bad and we can simply disrupt it by making these folks explain themselves. Will it end the discussion? Will it stop the book censorship or the book ban in progress? Certainly not, but it can be a way to say, we are not going to assume that we are all on the same page because we're definitely not on the same page about book censorship.

So we're not going to assume that we're on the same page about anything. So when you say age inappropriate, tell me what you mean. Do I believe that there's such a thing as being inappropriate for an age or for a particular child? Absolutely, but I do not trust that what you mean is what I mean. So say more about what you mean and make these folks say out loud that they feel that all trans people are inappropriate. That all queer representation, even the holding of hands or simple expression of coming out without any kind of love interest whatsoever is inappropriate. Because then we get into that Pico case that your personal objection, your personal opinion, that this kind of existence, this kind of fellow human being does not fall within your worldview as acceptable, like whatever. That does not mean you get to take this book off of a shelf.

And with that, I'm going to close my rant. Do take a look at some of these other resources. Definitely check out Dr. Cottom's full video, check out Dr. Lawrence's book, excuse me, video on obscenity and some of the other resources listed here. And basically just don't let age appropriateness pass by without you asking a question.