

Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Research Proposal

Lu Bolehin Mereka Baca Itu? / You Let Them Read What?: Constructing a Culturally Relevant Recommendation for the Selection and Censorship of Children's Literature by Parents in Indonesia

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Abstract

The censorship of children's literature is a hot topic in the Global North, but many fail to recognize how accepted it is as a practice in other countries. Indonesia is one country where the excessive censorship of children's literature by parents is a common and well-accepted practice. The acceptance of such practices can be typically explained by widespread cultural and religious conservatism in Indonesia. Unfortunately, this often results in Indonesian children developing close-minded beliefs and values because of minimal exposure to cultures and ways of living different from their own.

The project will synthesize current scholarship in literary studies, library sciences, and developmental psychology in a literature review to identify theoretical and empirical perspectives on the censorship of children's literature. Through a qualitative analysis of attitudes towards censorship in Indonesian news articles and through identifying the availability of children's literature in Indonesian bookstores, schools, and libraries, the project also aims to consider cultural perspectives that may influence personal censorship practices by Indonesian parents. Ultimately, the project seeks to create a culturally-relevant recommendation for Indonesian parents on how to approach traditionally censored literature with their children to optimize moral and empathetic development.

The findings of this project will likely cover gaps in censorship research relevant to collectivist countries because of its specific consideration of Indonesian culture in making recommendations. Furthermore, this project will contribute to countering the narrative of excessive censorship as a means of protecting children, a sentiment that can be harmful when done in excess. Lastly, this project will provide a novel and holistic approach to understanding censorship by linking research in the fields of developmental psychology, literary studies, and library sciences. These three fields are rarely integrated in censorship research, allowing my project to fill a research niche in holistic censorship scholarship.

Introduction

When you grow up in a country with heavy censorship, it is often difficult to grasp the extent of the censorship you experienced in your childhood. I always believed that I understood the extent of censorship in my country as my parents never limited my access to books. However, after moving to Toronto for university, it has become evident how censored children's books are in Indonesia surrounding topics such as sexual health, queerness, and other topics deemed too "controversial" by the Indonesian government and society.

Background

For the purposes of this paper, I will be dividing censorship of children's literature in Indonesia into two categories: institutional censorship, conducted by the governments, educators, and publishers, and personal censorship, conducted by parents. This paper will specifically focus on personal censorship in Indonesia. Personal censorship in Indonesia is mainly rooted in cultural conservatism and religious ideologies. Notions of sexual purity and limitations on violent content are still widely promoted within the education and legal system. (Harsono, 2024) This results in the prevailing belief that children should not be exposed to sexual health, queerness, or other similarly "controversial" topics to prevent the formation of supposedly "sinful" ideologies.

This paper will focus on personal censorship because, even in the global North, most anti-censorship organizations, like PEN America, focus their efforts on influencing governmental policy. Though this initiates long-term change, it results in a lack of resources for parents to use when approaching censored children's literature with their children. This is especially pressing for countries like Indonesia, where there has been a rapidly growing sentiment in favor of censorship, and a lack of nationally relevant scholarship on literature to counter such sentiments. (Tribunnews, 2019)

Research Objectives & Questions

The primary objective of my research is to create a culturally-relevant recommendation for Indonesian parents on how to approach traditionally censored literature with their children. My research aims to tackle the aforementioned gaps in research relevant to Indonesia by synthesizing current scholarship in library science, literary studies, and developmental psychology to answer three primary questions:

1. Under what standards should we be censoring and selecting literature for children?
2. What are the impacts of children's literature on moral formation and empathy in a developing child? Does the censoring of certain topics aid or diminish such development?
3. How can we approach traditionally censored topics with children in an age-appropriate manner within Indonesia's cultural context?

Methodology

My research methodology will consist of literature reviews and qualitative analyses. The literature review will be divided into scholarship on literary studies and library sciences, and scholarship on developmental psychology. The goals of the literature review in each field is further elaborated in my timeline.

The first type of qualitative analysis I intend to do is a thematic analysis of the language used by Indonesian news articles when discussing censorship. I intend to do this manually in the first week of my research period. The limited amount of news coverage on the censorship of children's books in Indonesia makes this feasible to do within a week.

The second type of qualitative analysis I intend to do is analysing the availability of children's literature with supposedly controversial topics in bookstores, libraries, and schools in Indonesia. I will be personally visiting each location and taking note of the children's books available, to see if certain themes arise with regards to the availability of books. The three themes I am particularly interested in investigating are queer books, books discussing sexual themes, and violence in books. Bookstores and libraries in Toronto will be used as a comparison point for the availability of these books. Because local Indonesian books tend to be heavily censored and sanitized by publishers and the government, I will be specifically focusing on English books that are imported into Indonesia that may have supposedly controversial content.

Training/ Certifications Needed

No trainings or certifications are required for my research.

Research Location

I will be in Jakarta, Indonesia for my research. This makes it easier to consult with Indonesian librarians and other experts about the language and rhetoric used in Indonesian news articles about censorship. It would also allow me to personally visit major bookstores, schools and libraries to observe what kinds of books are sold, with Toronto's bookstores as a comparison point for censorship!

Research Ethics Board

My research does not require REB approval.

Timeline

Date	Task	Notes
May	<p>Pre-research period preparation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will be contacting schools that I intend to visit before I fly back to Indonesia. The schools that I have identified as of now are listed in the July 7-26 section of the timeline <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This will involve preparing a letter in English and Indonesian, as well as finding relevant contacts through friends and other connections • I also intend to familiarize myself with qualitative research methods before my research period to gain a better sense of how I intend to collect and process my data from my field work • I will be flying back to Indonesia before the research period begins so that I am adequately recovered from jet lag before beginning research work 	
June 16-22	<p>Identifying attitudes on the censorship of children's books in Indonesia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope: Scholarship and news articles written in Indonesian between 2015-2025 about the censorship of children's literature • Focus: Language and rhetoric surrounding the justification of censorship • I will also visit bookstores and libraries in Jakarta to figure out what kinds of books aren't made available, or otherwise censored, to the public <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Online databases of Toronto's bookstores and libraries will be used as a comparison point 	<p>List of bookstores/libraries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Library • Kinokuniya • Periplus • Gramedia • Foreword Library • POST Santa

<p>June 23-29</p>	<p>Literature review (censorship of children’s literature)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline: Literary studies and library studies • Scope: Scholarship on censorship between 1990-2025 • Focus: To understand current theoretical perspectives on the efficacy and ethics of censorship and prizing in children’s literature 	<p>Scholarship I am interested in include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “‘Not Censorship but Selection’: Censorship and/as Prizing” by Kenneth Kidd (2009) • “Children’s Literature in Education” by Kerry Mallan (2017) • <i>Should We Burn Babar?</i> By Herbert Kohl (1995)
<p>June 30 - July 6</p>	<p>Literature review (morality formation and the psychology of censorship)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline: Psychology • Scope: Empirical research published between 2000-2025 • Focus: Attitudes surrounding censorship and the relationship between morality/empathy formation and censorship 	<p>Empirical research I am interested in include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Political censorship feels acceptable when ideas feel harmful and false” by Emily Kubin, Christian von Sikorski, and Kurt Gray (2024) • “How Could Children’s Storybooks Promote Empathy? A Conceptual Framework Based on Developmental Psychology and Literary Theory” by Natalia Kucirkova (2019)
<p>July 7-26</p>	<p>Surveying school libraries in Indonesia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As most schools in Jakarta start the new school year in late July, I will be using the last week of my research to 	<p>Deliverables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final research paper • Research poster • Summary of research and actionable ways to

	<p>personally visit school libraries and gain a sense of what books are available to children in schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I intend to visit schools that are diverse in terms of funding, religious affiliation, and dominant cultures within the school. Some schools I have identified include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Anglo Chinese School Jakarta</i> (international school, methodist affiliation, primarily Chinese-Indonesian, ~20,000 CAD tuition fee) ○ <i>Sekolah Perkumpulan Mandiri</i> (national plus school, no religious affiliation, primarily Chinese-Indonesian and Indonesian, ~8,000 CAD tuition fee) ○ <i>Jakarta Intercultural School</i> (international school, no religious affiliation, primarily Chinese-Indonesian and White expats, ~70,000 CAD tuition fee) ○ The above list is a non-exhaustive list. During my pre-research period, I will attempt to identify national schools that have English books in their library as well • Online databases of Toronto's bookstores and libraries will be used as a comparison point to ascertain the availability of children's literature in Indonesian schools 	<p>implement the research, aimed towards Indonesian parents (to be published online)</p>
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	<p>Constructing a culturally relevant recommendation on how Indonesian parents can approach censored literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using the results of my research, I will construct a culturally relevant and evidence-backed recommendation on how Indonesian parents can select literature and facilitate nuanced discussions to best promote the development of empathy and morality in their children	
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Resources & Support Needed

Dr. Joanna Krongold will support my research through online meetings each week to review the progress of my research. She will provide feedback on the breadth of resources used and my critical analyses, as well as pose questions for me to consider in my research. She will also provide feedback on the feasibility of the recommendations I produce on how parents can approach censored literature with children.

No external organizations will be involved in my research.

Potential Impact

Many resources fighting the censorship of literature are produced by North American organizations, focusing on ideals of individual freedoms to encourage resistance against censorship. However, due to the collectivist nature of Indonesian culture, appeals to individual freedoms fail to encourage an exploration of banned literature by Indonesians. A culturally informed approach to research surrounding censorship is necessary to impact countries outside of North America, which this study aims to do. Though this paper is specifically focused on censorship in Indonesia, the findings from this study could be generalizable to other countries in Southeast Asia that have censorship practices rooted in religion and conservatism.

This study will also contribute to countering the narrative of excessive censorship as a means of protecting children. Long term, this paper aims to serve as the basis for constructing online resources that aid Indonesian parents in further educating themselves on the negative impacts of excessive censorship and how they can approach conversations about supposedly controversial children's literature with their own children.

Lastly, this paper will provide a novel and holistic approach to understanding censorship by linking research in the fields of developmental psychology, literary studies, and library sciences. Though scholarship on censorship exists in all these fields, theoretical perspectives from literary and library sciences are rarely integrated with empirical findings from developmental psychology. As such, this will allow the recommendations produced in this paper to be both theoretically and empirically backed by research from a variety of fields.

Budget

My budget proposal has been included in a separate document.

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