

Experts: Be Open If Removing Books

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BOOKS are banned and withdrawn in other countries too, but where the National Library Board (NLB) could have done better was on the issue of transparency, experts told My Paper.

In the United States, for example, a list of Frequently Challenged Books is revealed to the public by the American Library Association. These are books that people want restricted or removed - and an open debate ensues.

Last week, it was reported that three children's titles removed by the NLB would be discarded and pulped as they were deemed not "pro-family". Since then, the issue has sparked discussion, with some local writers protesting by saying they would refuse to take part in activities involving the NLB.

The decision to pull out certain books while they are undergoing review is understandable, but the process should be transparent if a book is withdrawn, said Assistant Professor Chang Yun-Ke, from the Division of Information Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

"If a particular book has been withdrawn, it would be nice to make it transparent so the public will have no doubts," said Dr Chang.

In an earlier reply to My Paper, NLB mentioned that books are regularly discussed by librarians from across the 24 branches and the senior management of Public Libraries, headed by the Chief Librarian.

Eugene Tan, an associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University, said the NLB could be more mindful of its role as a public library which is meant to be a "repository of knowledge, a safe place for learning about competing ideas and values".

"NLB's withdrawing of some titles drew a lot of brickbats as some perceived it to be engaging in moral policing," he said. But he acknowledged that the library was caught between "a rock and a hard place".

"This is an issue where people have competing and conflicting interests. If they withdraw the books, they would be criticised. If they don't, they would be deluged with complaints from other stakeholders," he added.

Dr Chang mentioned that every library, including the NLB, has its own Collection Development Policy that guides its review of books. Factors, such as the community that the library serves and where funding is coming from, are considered, she said.

"The public will want a reason for the removal and we don't want to assume that the public will reject that reason," she said.

Prof Tan said that it would have helped if the library were more forthcoming. "People expect the custodians of the library to be more open, transparent and consultative... (Based on what

happened), NLB could have a more robust process to better engage the different stakeholders.

"Part of the heightened tensions in this episode is the perception that NLB capitulated to some stakeholders, and that a bad precedent has been set," he added.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser said that the library could consider using ratings, as in the case of broadcast media materials. This could take the form of a rating system, with inputs from a committee with broad representation.

The Straits Times reported yesterday that NLB had pulled out three more books from its shelves, apart from the three it had revealed earlier.

NLB said that the three books it had mentioned had been removed after "customer feedback". The other books had been withdrawn after internal reviews.

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