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What do the Young People Think? Responses to the Censoring of Roald Dahl

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Abstract

In 2022 and 2023, children's publisher Puffin released a set of Roald Dahl children's titles significantly revised to take account of the sensibilities of contemporary readers. The announcement was met with widespread opposition, with high-profile writers including Salman Rushdie having their say on the matter. Following the overwhelmingly negative media-led response, which almost entirely characterised the revision as censorship, the publisher changed tack: it would retain the revised versions under the Puffin imprint, but also offer for sale the 'classic' versions under the Penguin imprint. In all the media coverage, young readers themselves were not consulted, or if they were, their responses have not been made public. There appears to be very little published empirical work with young readers themselves, on this specific issue or on censorship of children's literature more generally. Since Dahl is one of the best-selling and simultaneously most-attacked writers of literature aimed at children, we wanted to investigate the views of young readers on the censorship of children's literature, focussing on this recent re-writing of Roald Dahl books. To that end we conducted eight discussion workshops with 73 teenage students in three UK schools. We report on our findings and conclude that these young readers display a high level of insight and sophistication in their understanding and analysis of the censorship debate overall, and the censoring of Dahl in particular.

Keywords Roald Dahl · Censorship · Young people · Reader responses

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Introduction

In 2022 and 2023, children's publisher Puffin released new editions of the work of internationally famous children's author, Roald Dahl. All of Dahl's children's titles were significantly revised to take account of the sensibilities of contemporary readers: 'language related to weight, mental health, violence, gender and race has been cut and rewritten' (Cumming et al. 2023 np). The reason for the re-writes is implied in the following small-print message which appears tucked away at the bottom of the copyright page of the new editions:

> Words matter. The wonderful words of Roald Dahl can transport you to different worlds and introduce you to the most marvellous characters. This book was written many years ago, and so we regularly review the language to ensure that it can continue to be enjoyed by all today.

Puffin and the Roald Dahl Story Company made the changes in conjunction with Inclusive Minds, an organisation 'that works with the children's book world to support them in authentic representation, primarily by connecting those in the industry with those who have lived experience of any or multiple facets of diversity' (Anon nd-a np). Inclusive Minds say that while advising on older titles is not their main interest, their advisers 'can provide valuable input when it comes to reviewing language that can be damaging and perpetuate harmful stereotypes' (Anon nd-a np); the wish to remove 'damaging' and 'harmful' stereotypes was evidently the motivation for Puffin's revisions. Over the years, Dahl's books have often been criticised and challenged, on various grounds, including racism in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Eplett 2016), and misogyny in *The Witches,* which is number 22 in the ALA's list of most banned books 1990–1999 (Anon nd-b). Dahl adaptations have also been criticised: the 2020 film of *The Witches* has been widely attacked for its portrayal of limb difference, for which actress Anne Hathaway publicly apologised (BBC 2020).

The UK newspaper the Daily Telegraph broke the news of the re-writes (Cumming et al 2023), detailing every change made to The Twits, The Witches, Matilda, George's Marvellous Medicine, James and the Giant Peach, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Fantastic Mr Fox, The BFG, The Enormous Crocodile, Esio Trot. The announcement was immediately met with a torrent of opposition, with high-profile writers including Salman Rushdie having their say: 'Roald Dahl was no angel but this is absurd censorship. Puffin Books and the Dahl estate should be ashamed' (Rushdie 2023 np). Often-banned YA author Judy Blume said: 'I think if Roald Dahl was around, you would be hearing what he thinks about that.… Kids still love the books, and they love them the way he wrote them' (Blume in Hailu 2023 np).

The then U.K. Prime Minister (2022–2024) Rishi Sunak weighed in:

> Sunak's official spokesperson said: "When it comes to our rich and varied literary heritage, the prime minister agrees with the BFG that we shouldn't gobble-funk around with words. I think it's important that works of literature and works of fiction are preserved and not airbrushed". (in Rawlinson et al 2023 np)

Words of support for the revisions were comparatively thin on the ground, famous author Joanne Harris being one of the few who spoke positively, via social media platform X:

> Note to anyone who needs it today: Publishers updating a book—with the approval of the author's estate—to ensure its saleability is not censorship. It's just business. The Government forcing publishers to edit or suppress books to promote its own agenda? That's censorship. (Harris 2023a np)

But later on the same date, Harris appeared to implicitly 'approve' of Dahl in his original form: 'But one thing I know: I did not grow up thinking all bald women were witches, or all fat people evil (and anyway one of James's aunts is thin and one's fat and they're both obnoxious). Because books are not read in a silo' (Harris 2023b np).

Following the overwhelmingly negative media-led response, which almost entirely characterised the revision as censorship, the publisher changed tack: it would retain the revised versions under the Puffin imprint, but also offer for sale the 'classic' versions under the Penguin imprint. An announcement on the Penguin website said:

> We've listened to the debate over the past week which has reaffirmed the extraordinary power of Roald Dahl's books and the very real questions around how stories from another era can be kept relevant for each new generation (Anon 2023).

This decision might be seen as a probable win-win for the publisher, pleasing those vocal and influential adults who spoke against the changes, while also hoping to please those parties who felt some of Dahl's words could do harm.

In all the media coverage, young readers themselves were not consulted, or if they were, their responses have not been made public: the opinions of powerful or influential adults on both sides of the argument were the trigger for the proposed changes, and for the eventual back-track. The general tendency of commentators and scholars to ignore the very readers whom children's literature is aimed at was noted by David Rudd as far back as 1992. And yet, understanding the attitudes and experiences of young people might 'help shape better policies and practices that support freedom of expression while also ensuring that their interests and needs are considered' (Lakuš et al 2024 p4).

On the question of censorship specifically, conducting focus-group work with children aged nine to twelve, Natasha Isajlovic-Terry, and Lynne McKechnie (2012) say, 'very little is known about what children themselves think about this topic' (p38). Occasionally, *parents* are heard from, as in Ashley Boyd and Janine Darragh's work with a parent-teacher book club (2019); but there is very little published empirical work on censorship with young readers themselves. Therefore, we wanted to hear from young readers. Since Dahl is one of the best-selling and simultaneously most-attacked writers of literature aimed at children, we focussed on this recent occurrence of censorship, albeit being of course aware that censorship of children's literature occurs in many different forms, and affects a very wide range of writers.

Our research aim was to investigate the views of young readers on the censorship of children's literature, focussing on the re-writing of Roald Dahl books in 2023, with the objectives of (1) reviewing extant discussion of censorship in children's literature, especially in relation to Roald Dahl, (2) collecting the views on censorship from a sample of young readers, and (3) analysing the data from 2 in light of the literature review in 1.

Roald Dahl and Censorship

As Peter Hunt (1997) contends, censorship can be seen as any act of intervention, in the continuum between the liberalisation and restriction of reading, because both positions include monitoring and selection, enacting a tension 'between benevolent control and fearful repression' (Hunt 1997, p103). Puffin's initial decision to re-write Dahl's titles and remove from sale the un-revised versions, but then to allow both edited and un-edited versions to be on sale, demonstrates this tension vividly.

Hunt (2001) notes two constructions of childhood at work in this continuum of intervention: to support and/or make accessible a book assumes that children read with subtlety, interpretation and understanding, and that censorious intervention might well do more harm than the book could do, a view also taken by YA author Melvin Burgess (nd), and scholars such as Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer (2003), Rudd (1992), and Heather Worthington (2012). Following that line of argument is the view that, via various forms of control, adults may stifle a child's development: children 'have special need of knowledge as a resource to make sense of new things' (Nodelman and Reimer 2003, p102), and books can offer this knowledge. Reading can, furthermore, be therapeutic, it is often argued, helping young readers to approach difficult topics or even life experiences in a 'safe space', as Worthington (2012, p124) notes with regard to Dahl's *Matilda* (Dahl 1988). Engaging with troubling or frightening stories 'may lead to exorcising fears, as much as implanting or reinforcing them' (Coates 2018, p.23). To ban, restrict, or revise children's books may therefore, in this argument, hinder a child's intellectual and emotional growth.

On the other hand, to re-write, challenge or ultimately ban a book assumes that children will be harmed or negatively influenced in some way by what they read, and thus need to be protected (Davila 2022 p384; Hastie 2018; Hunt 2001). Worthington (2012, p133) even argues that some of Dahl's fiction seems to condone lawbreaking and might act as a 'negative influence', implying that certain children might be encouraged to commit crime. Lakuš et al (2024 p4) similarly argue that 'censors assume that protecting students from certain topics will prevent undesirable behaviour'.

Because this construction of childhood holds that children are impressionable (Hunt 2001; Miller 2014), and unable to negotiate their own reading of a text, adults feel they should control children's books as they control children (Hunt 2001). Furthermore, childhood might be seen as subversive or dangerous to the status quo, and therefore needing to be restrained and restricted (Nodelman and Reimer 2003, p101). As Persis Karim (1999, p62) argues, 'Obviously, the danger is not in the actual act of reading itself, but rather, the possibility that the texts children read will incite ques-

tions, introduce novel ideas, and provoke critical inquiry'. An un-revised version of *The Witches,* for example, might cause a young reader to think about the various ways in which adults seek to control or even harm children in the real world (Curtis 2014). Karim would clearly approve of the opportunities such literature affords, but, equally, some adults might fear this opening-up of insights.

David Hastie (2018 p24) argues that decisions over censorship are made according to which ethical discourse is considered most valid at any given moment. When texts are re-written, the reasons often given, as with the Dahl re-writes, are that the texts contain ideas and language that have become outdated and abhorrent; and so that particular form of censorious control can be positioned as a progressive act, *not stifling*, but in fact freeing that text from its own built-in stifling tendencies. This enactment of what publishers might call 'updating' has been seen in examples ranging from Enid Blyton's Famous Five books (Guðmundsson 2012) Hugh Lofting's Doctor Doolittle books (Dominus 2006), R.L. Stine's Goosebump*s* series (Tinoco 2023), and Roald Dahl himself—as is well-known, Dahl revised elements of *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory.*

This book's racism is seen in Dahl's depiction of the Oompa-Loompas as African pygmies, rescued by Willy Wonka from their impoverished native existence, showing them as childish and inadequate without his patronage. Dahl's attitude to the criticism of *Wonka* was initially hostile: Layla Eplett (2016) writes that Dahl strongly objected to the NAACP's responses to the book, likening their attitude to Naziism. Dahl's experience working in Tanzania for Shell Oil and then commanding indigenous Askari solders in World War Two (Dahl 1986), might contextualise his perspectives and perhaps explain, while not excusing, his initial inability to see his own prejudices.

Nonetheless, Dahl eventually revised the book for the 1973 publication. He said,

> I created a group of little fantasy creatures.... I saw them as charming creatures, whereas the white kids in the books were... most unpleasant. It didn't occur to me that my depiction of the Oompa-Loompas was racist, but it did occur to the NAACP and others.... After listening to the criticisms, I found myself sympathizing with them, which is why I revised the book. (Dahl in West, 1997, p110)

Furthermore, modern sensibilities are ever-more alert to prejudices and inequalities, a context which Puffin were clearly aware of. Movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, for example, have raised public awareness of important issues around harmful narratives—#MeToo is a survivor-led movement against sexual violence which gives a platform to those affected by gender-based violence, especially women; and Black Lives Matter calls for justice and the authentic representation of Black lives and experiences. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) argues that books may serve as 'windows' (p1) into other experiences, and 'sliding glass doors' (p1) that enable young readers to step into different worlds and empathetically engage with diverse lives. But, if those 'windows' are negatively tinted, or too narrow, the reading experience may do harm (García 2023 in Corbett and Phillips 2023).

Perry Nodelman (1992), re-thinking his 1992 oppositional stance on censorship, acknowledging that negative stereotypes may in fact harm young readers whose own

identity is devalued by negative and/or inaccurate depictions, says, 'why proceed with publishing insensitive and inaccurate stereotypes if you have been made aware of them and have the option of getting rid of them?' (Nodelman 2020 np). The Dahl re-writes might thus be seen as removing insensitive and inaccurate stereotypes, keeping his texts more aligned with modern sensibilities around diversity and inclusion.

However, as we have seen in the reactions to the Puffin revisions, *re-writing well-known texts* is easily characterised as oppressive and unhelpful censorship and may be widely opposed. Rudd (1992 p185) argues for the historical value of the original text: 'it is my contention that we often sell children short by denying them this historical perspective, and that, in the end, the repeated updating of books can undermine their appeal.' Working with original texts, allowing teachers, parents, and young readers to critically examine them, may support progressive initiatives, such as that carried out by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, (Cilip) the UK's library and information association, in their work on 'decolonising collections [and] balancing that historical perspective in their collections'. (Shaffi 2023 np)

Dahl himself worried about posthumous revisions to his work. In a conversation with the British artist Francis Bacon he said, 'When I am gone, if (re-writing) happens, then I'll wish mighty Thor knocks very hard on their heads with his Mjolnir. Or I will send along the "enormous crocodile" to gobble them up' (Alberge 2023).

Finally, Dahl's biography may be a contributing factor to the sensitivity that has attended his fiction for children. For example, his well-documented anti-semitic comments about Jewish people (Coren 1983) eventually led his estate to issue an apology in 2020: 'The Dahl family and the Roald Dahl Story Company deeply apologise for the lasting and understandable hurt caused by some of Roald Dahl's statements' (anon 2020). Perhaps, as Hephzibah Anderson (2023 np) says, 'Read enough along these lines (there's more out there) and the sprightly horror of Dahl's narratives no longer slips down quite so easily.' But, as we have already noted, like Dahl himself, young readers have not been consulted as to what changes to Dahl's work, if any, would be desirable, and this article seeks to address this omission.

Methodology

In May and June 2024, we worked with 73 16 or 17 year-old students, in eight separate year-12 A-Level English classes, in three schools in southern England, to discuss the Puffin re-writes and associated issues around censorship in children's literature. The activities we negotiated with the schools were approved by the respective Heads of the English as entirely appropriate for their students' studies: we thus did not impose any unwanted or inappropriate material upon the participants. We discussed carefully with the Heads of English what would be the most productive approach, and settled on a four-stage method, which would triangulate (Denscombe 2001) the data collection well. We would conduct workshop-type sessions in the students' usual English timetabled class in their usual rooms. In all cases we followed the same four-stage pattern:

Firstly, we gave a short talk to the class about the key considerations around censorship in the world of children's literature: the content of this talk was drawn from our literature review as provided above. The students then worked in small groups, reading and discussing the edits made to *The Witches* and *Matilda*, in their own way without prompting by the researchers or teachers. We printed and handed out sheets which listed all the edits, as published in the *Daily Telegraph* article (Cumming et al. 2023). The small group discussion is a familiar, unthreatening staple of classroom work (Greene and Hogan 2005 p.237) and can 'create settings in which diverse perceptions, judgements, and experiences concerning particular topics can surface' (Lindlof, 1995, p.174),

Next, we engaged the whole class in a 'follow-up' discussion, asking the students to report back on what they had discussed freely in their small groups. We promoted feedback by asking each small group what their key discussion points had been, referring to the Dahl edit sheets where helpful, but offering as little of our own input as possible, and actively *discouraging* contributions from the classroom teachers (who remained present throughout the sessions, as part of our ethics agreement). We were aware that it is possible that participants could be influenced by other group members, perhaps following what appears to be a consensus; or that the presence of their teachers might inhibit expression. Some students were, of course, more talkative than others, but we strove to give everyone a chance to voice their thoughts. Finally, we gave out a questionnaire, to be completed anonymously. We wrote a combination of types of questions (Bell 2000; Denscombe 2001) which would allow the participants to offer individual depth to the discussions.

Thematic data analysis is our chosen approach to rendering the data useful for our objectives, because 'the goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue' (Maguire and Delahunt 2017 p.3353). Another helpful definition in such analysis is provided by Lydia DeSantis and Doris Noel Ugarriza (2000 p.363): 'A theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole.' Our research and data-analysis methodology is a 'bottom-up or inductive one that is more driven by the data itself' (Maguire and Delahunt 2017 p. 3354) which, in turn, suggested that a 'data reduction' approach (Huberman and Miles 1994; Maguire and Delahunt 2017) would be appropriate. This sequence moves the data from its bulky, unprocessed state into usable chunks which can be more helpfully presented and discussed.

The first step in this process is 'analytic coding' (Denscombe 2001, p. 211); and, as in Moira Maguir and Bridt Delahun's research (2017 p.3354), 'we developed and modified the codes as we worked through the coding process.' To minimise the risk of the researcher 'pre'-coding by subjective selection of data elements (Silverman 2005), categorising of the discussion transcripts and questionnaire data was allowed to develop from the data itself, by firstly noting every substantive comment made by each respondent and then coding those comments. These initial codes were continually modified until we were satisfied that they made sense in terms of the key points respondents were themselves raising. The codes were then collated into 'sub'-themes for each school and then into 'master' themes for all the schools combined. We finally organised the master-themes into two categories in order to make discussion manage-

able for this paper, under the titles: 'Re-writes Acceptable', and 'Re-writes Unacceptable'. In summary, the theme-building process looks like this: raw material → identification of substantive comments → codes → sub-themes by school → collation of all sub-themes into master themes → discussion categories.

David L. Morgan and Andreea Nica (2020) state, in the explanation of their 'Iterative Thematic Inquiry' method, that themes will inevitably be produced 'right from the beginning' (p.3) of the research process, because of researchers' aims and preconceptions: 'those preconceptions… will affect the collection and interpretation of the data' (p. 4). We thus took care to assess our own embedded understandings around the central topic, acknowledging that even our introductory talk to the students was structured on some key aspects we selected, and that we had necessarily written the questionnaire before we went into the schools, thus potentially influencing how the students discussed the Dahl re-writes. Nonetheless, with these reservations in mind, we believe our analytical process to be data-led and rigorous. We are also sensitive to the risk of what Silverman (2005, p.211) calls 'anecdotalism', the use of a few carefully selected extracts from the data to 'prove' an argument. However, the nature of this study is such that there was, from the start, no hypothesis to defend: the data has been examined, rather than utilised in the service of a preferred view or set of views.

Our 73-student cohort is a convenience sample, insofar as we wanted to work locally, and its composition was simply dependent upon the makeup of the participant schools' A-level English groups. The total number of students was entirely a function of the class sizes in the schools we visited. Overall, the sample was predominantly white, and majority female. We also note that our participant students are older than the probable average age of a young person reading Dahl for the first time. Silverman (2005) points out that 'qualitative researchers… seek out groups, settings and individuals where… the processes being studied are most likely to occur' (p. 48), and we and the school teachers felt that our workshops would be of relevance, interest and significance to their students. Lakuš et al (2024 np), whose interesting study provides an insight into the understandings and attitudes of 13- and 14-year-olds, say 'respondents had trouble understanding the concept of censorship', whereas we and the school teachers felt that these A-Level students would be well equipped to tackle the complexities of the debate. In one school, the question of censorship had already been explicitly talked about, in relation to an A-Level text, *Passing* by Nella Larsen. Furthermore, our participants had all read some Dahl in their own younger years, and thus were familiar with the un-revised versions.

We feel that the responses are sufficiently diverse to be of value to the discourse around censorship in children's literature, although of course we acknowledge 'not in a way that tries to attain the scope of a universal law' (Lindlof, 1995, p.57). The three schools were suburban/semi-rural, as opposed to inner city. Further research might usefully repeat the four-stage pattern in schools set in different types of community, across different age ranges.

Findings and Discussion

- Re-writes acceptable

Opinions in the 'acceptable' category were far less prominent and less determined than those in the 'unacceptable' category, overall. On this side of the debate, in drilling down into the participants' comments, we found many that delicately balanced priorities. For example, while there were 58/73 positive responses to the questionnaire item 'Is there an example of a revision you would personally allow?', those answers almost always included a proviso. Questionnaire respondent 36 answered that in *The Witches* the change of 'queer' to 'strange'[1] would be allowed because of 'how language is used and meaning changes over time.' But that same respondent also said: 'Books should provide a wide range of perspectives to equip a child with knowledge to interpret the world. If a child is restricted in what they read it may be harmful.' In answer to the question **'**Do you think the revisions are helpful?' 32/73 said yes, but of those 32, 21 qualified their reasons with thinking such as, 'Whilst the revisions do edit out some language that is deemed offensive in the modern day, the censoring of certain words or phrases also removes potential discussions between children, parents, and teachers as to why they are offensive and harmful' (respondent 14).

In making this point, the respondent echoes the thinking of Nodelman and Reimer (2003, p. 102), that the censoring of literature may impede a child's intellectual development.

Theme: Stereotypes and Inclusivity.

Inclusion was the most mentioned reason for acceptable revisions, and supports Bishop's hope that children's literature might 'change our attitudes towards difference' (Bishop 1990, p. 2). The shift from 'mother' and 'father' to 'parents'[2] in *Matilda* (Dahl 2023) was the most mentioned approved-of change, for example this from discussion 6: 'I suppose it's because some people… might not have parents, but they might have a family. You know, they might have, might grow up with aunts, uncle. So it's a bit more inclusive. They're kind of subtle changes.' Questionnaire respondent 13 made a similar point, but also added a reservation:

> Some revisions, for example changing 'mother' and 'father' to 'parents' to be more inclusive and relevant to today's families, is considerate and helpful but doesn't hinder the story. However… removing some descriptions of Miss Trunchbull is unnecessary as it takes away from the characterization and Dahl's vivid storytelling.

[1] *The Witches* 2022 revised edition p18 and p38

[2] *Matilda* revised edition 2023 p1

Dealing with stereotypes was seen as another good reason to make changes to the texts. Changes that removed sexism, racism, homophobia, rudeness, and insensitivity, were all cited as acceptable, as in this from discussion 4:

> … there are some certain descriptions, like witches have slightly larger nose holes than ordinary people like it brings in, like racial issues and stuff. And it's like the way that a child might perceive someone like, based on this book that they've read. And it's like, yes, if it says old people who have no hair, like old witches, some children might internalise that, but some may not. But I feel like overall, completely removing that[3] isn't necessary, but definitely sort of cutting down maybe on, like, negative stereotypes is OK to some extent as long as it's not like completely detracting from the value of the story.

Or this from discussion 5:

> It's quite interesting because some of the language is quite, it's what's quite graphic, quite explicit, which I think for children's literature maybe should be removed, like she wore heavy makeup and had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out[4]. I think that's quite, but maybe a bit harsh.

Revisions to remove offensive or sensitive language were also cited as acceptable. From classroom discussion 2: 'Some of the changes seem a lot more appropriate when they're swapping out offensive language for inoffensive language, because obviously children will, they'll read a word they might not know what it means, and then they'll repeat it, and that can be an issue.' Respondent 14, as with many others, agreed that *some* revisions could be helpful, and that some language could be 'extremely negative'. This point was also raised during an exchange in classroom discussion 2:

Speaker 5

I think in general, I think majority is like a bit silly. I feel like some of them, OK, I can understand to an extent if it's causing offense or like it's not up-to-date with the time….

Speaker 7

> Oh, absolutely. There's I think, that's like one where I recognise the words been swapped out is now a recognised slur.

[3] *The Witches* 2022 p32

[4] *Matilda* 2023 p31

The students here are discussing 'bunch of midgets' being changed to 'a bunch of squirts'[5] in *Matilda,* recognising that the word 'midget' is now an ableist slur for people of restricted growth. Note that speaker 5 also adds the reservation that not all the revisions were seen as helpful. In the discussions and the questionnaire there was an overall agreement that authors should be sensitive to modern day issues that Dahl and other authors would not have considered in the past, as in this from discussion 8: 'Obviously it's fiction, but that's the information that they are receiving about the world. So I think, yeah'. Respondent 37, for example, said, 'I think they should keep with the times as it's expected to use inclusive language to allow for more representation which could prevent mental health issues later in life'. However, almost all added their reasoning, again showing their grasp of the complexities of the debate, for example: 'Yes, because that would show it is a modern book and therefore is much better than changing an old book' (respondent 9). Respondent 69 said 'inclusion is always important but should not be used at the expense of showing difference.' These and many other thoughtful considerations, again highlight the subtlety with which our participants were able to approach the debate.

Theme: Risk of Harm

In answer to the question 'Can reading books potentially be harmful for young people?' 47/73 said yes. The 47 felt that books might be harmful in certain circumstances, and changes to the original text can therefore be acceptable because the rewrites can do good. We may align this feeling with the perspective of the publisher, Puffin, in making so many changes to the books. 'Harm' was not always firmly defined in the questionnaire returns or the classroom discussions, but there was a general view that imitation of inappropriate language, upset to a reader, or the adopting of negative attitudes and behaviour could be caused by some of Dahl's writing, as argued by Worthington (2012); and then the revisions would be approved of.

Questionnaire respondent 3, for example, wrote that a book 'may influence (children) how to think or act—particularly if they have an interest in a certain character and start to idolise them'. Respondent 2 allowed that a phrase in *Matilda* ('shut up you nut') should be revised (to 'Ssshh! Not yet![6]) 'because it could promote children to be rude to each other for unnecessary reasons.' Several participants considered that potential harm would depend upon the child reader, and the availability of parent or teacher support to explain and discuss the content of a book. Respondent 47 said, 'if content is not properly explained (it) could be harmful to young people who are more impressionable.' Respondent 22, added an insightful explanation of the delicacies of this aspect: 'Depends on the individual child and their situation as some home situations are not as stable and some themes could fundamentally upset a child, or they could even look for a role model in the book if they're not receiving that at home etc.' Respondent 16, amongst several others, noted that parents should have the option to choose if their child 'should read the original or the revised version' of the Dahl books, which is exactly what Puffin ultimately decided to make possible. The above

[5] *Matilda* 2023 p250

[6] *Matilda* 2023 p56

shows an openness to thinking about the potential effects of Dahl's writing, and an acknowledgement of the need for new publications for children to be 'current', but we saw mainly a *reserved* approval of the changes made to the Dahl books.

We now move on to discuss the themes in the 're-writes unacceptable' category.

- Re-writes unacceptable

Theme: Context and education

This master-theme was represented across all the questionnaires and all the classroom discussions. It was also the most strongly felt and discussed aspect of the whole debate, reflecting how the participants viewed the need for children to be aware of the history of texts, and the educational value of reading the texts in their original form. As we have seen above, *some* changes were often seen as allowable: in answer to the question 'In principle, do you think children's literature should ever be censored?', 56 respondents offered specific suggestions for changes they would allow. But, countering those views, when it came to qualitative responses in the questionnaire and the discussions, there was a firmness of opinion that the re-writes were largely undesirable and likely to be more harmful than the original content of Dahl's books, reflecting the arguments of Burgess (undated), Nodelman and Reimer (2003) and Worthington (2012). Many comments argued that the original context should be taken into account when assessing Dahl's books, participants noting that effectively removing *context* is itself a harmful act. For example, this well-reasoned exchange from discussion 5 (referencing a revision in *Matilda* of '... cried the mother, turning white' to '... turning quite pale'[7]):

> Speaker 6
>
> You kind of think that almost of the changes were unnecessary because it's kind of removing them off the context from the book and a lot of the storyline because for for example, there's changing things like 'turning pale'' and it's most likely because she was scared something or she was sick and it's kind of removing part of the storyline which is just kind of overcomplicating the child's understanding of what's going on. I also kind of think that, a lot of them, they're kind of just using them to like, try and change things just to fit in with, kind of, society's norms and what children should think, when in reality it's just not really necessary to do that.
>
> Speaker 8
>
> And I think if I had, like, a child, I'd let them read the classics because I wouldn't want them to be sheltered and not know about these issues. And following on from what E- said I think it's, like, it's quite important just to keep it as it is. Even though, like, society's kind of changed from when they were written, it's

[7] *Matilda* 2023 p56

> quite important just to, like, have people have this awareness of what life used to be like and how people used to write.

Respondent 45 also spoke to the aspect of context, but then also added that balancing note we have seen across the study:

> I think a lot of the censorship is an attempt to modernise what honestly can't be modernised. Roald Dahl books exist with a historical context that they can't really be detached from. BUT some of the changes ARE necessary—swapping the more inappropriate words out is an OK thing.

Connected to this sort of thinking was the argument, seen over and over, that children could learn from the original texts. This point made in discussion 8 indicates how the issue of the Dahl re-writes resonated with other aspects of the participants' study:

> Much older books, they might have even more, like, horrific language in it. But you don't look back at that and think ohh we need to change it so that more people can read it. You look back at it and yeah, I realise the context of that situation when it was OK… When you study like *Of Mice and Men*, obviously there's words that you don't read in that book when you're reading out loud because you're not trying to promote people to say those sorts of, like, slurs and words. You read it because you realize that back in those days, that is what would happen, and that is what people would write and read and think.

Participants in discussion 6 also pursued this line of thought:

> Speaker 3
>
> And you can only recognise if you're exposed to it. You can't...
>
> Speaker 6
>
> Exposed to it. Exactly. We can learn it from all. Yeah, this could bring about a generation of ignorance if, like, there's really tight censorship. I do agree.

This suggestion from discussion 5 was also typical of the thinking across all the schools:

> But I don't think we should be, like, changing literature, that is quite… I think it's quite important to have this exposure for children because that's how they can learn. I think rather there should be more of, like, a disclaimer about it than changing it completely.

This comment from respondent 23 also argues that the re-writes can hinder learning, as argued by Nodelman and Reimer (2003), Rudd (1992) and others: 'It simply obscures history and limits our knowledge of the past. We should teach people that

those ideas are wrong but still allow people to access it so we don't forget the past.' Interestingly, there were many comments that indicated approval of the decision Puffin made to keep *both* versions of Dahl's books in circulation, for example this from discussion 7: 'It would be interesting to like, buy the new ones and then compare them cause I've got all the old Roald Dahl books. It's quite interesting'. And this from discussion 1:

> But then I also think we need to, like, keep the original there, like they need to acknowledge that as well because it is quite a, it's a reflection of how things were at the time as well, and that's why you should acknowledge that exists.

Several participants were concerned that the re-writes might actually make things worse, by mis-directing attention. Referencing the change in *Matilda* of 'mothers' and 'fathers' to 'parents' (which we noted some participants favoured) and how children use names, this point was made in discussion 4:

> They would just name them or say ohh, that's mum. That's dad. They wouldn't, they don't think about the pronouns in the same way that the censors might. I don't think it was actually intended to be a negative thing, but censoring it makes it sound like it's a negative thing to specify someone as a certain noun.

The same point was made in discussion 5 (a different school from discussion 4):

> So I also think it's wrong, like, to hide the meaning of the things because when you're reading a book and you say something about gender and like they change it like father for parents or like mother for parents. It looks as if something was wrong with the gender.

Theme: Respect the author and the text

A participant in discussion 3 echoed Dahl's own opposition to posthumously revising his work: 'I feel like [Roald Dahl] would fight them on some of these points.' A feeling of respect for the author's artistry and the authenticity of the original text was expressed in the discussions across all three schools, with 132 separate substantive comments in the questionnaire alone, and many mentions in the discussions. This is well exemplified by this from discussion 5:

> It's quite disrespectful to Roald Dahl because he, you know, obviously is dead and he can't do anything about it and he probably wouldn't want his books to be changed. And I just think, I just think it's quite kind of degrading to him.

From a different speaker in discussion 5, this well-articulated argument:

> It is disrespectful because there's a good chance that they've spent a very, very, very long time, like, taking like one sentence or a word that's completely perfect and it's, like, apparent in these books, like, they're the reason that we love them so much because they're so well written. And I think just changing the

> words, it does take a, you know, a bit of the spirit of the book away. And I think it's just wrong.

Another clear example of this thinking was from questionnaire respondent 24, in response to the question 'Do you think the revisions are helpful?': 'They help to remove negative connotations of Dahl's work, but some remove the intent/effect of the original words, damping the text's bite and vitality that Dahl is known for.' This argument was also made in discussion 3, referring to a change in *Matilda*[8]:

> I think if we want these books to keep them being enjoyed by the next generations, maybe some of the changes do need to be made. But like the line, 'the bingo afternoons left her both physically and emotionally exhausted', like, I think that's funny and they just completely removed it. But it's *supposed* to be quite funny that, like, a game of bingo completely exhausts her! And I just think that wit and that sharp edge is kind of removed.

Some participants noted that some changes were not skilfully done, altering the style of the book away from Dahl's, and not even making a useful revision, for example:

> It was one that was, 'I don't give a Tinkers toot' changed to 'I don't give a flip'[9], which I feel… doesn't really read or track with the sort of language being used around it, and it sort of loses its character and I feel like it doesn't really serve the purpose to be changed (discussion 2).

Many comments argued that the revisions often simply spoiled the books: for example, this from respondent 33: 'In *The Witches,* the removals just seemed to ruin the images meant to be created…Many removals were unnecessary'.

Theme: What's the point?

There was a significant feeling that many of the Puffin changes were simply not needed. Many participants could not see the logic of the change, for example, from discussion 7, referencing a change in *Matilda*: 'I'm confused why they've changed matron to nurse[10] because I know that, like, matron used to be like an old fashioned word for a nurse, but I don't get it.'

Respondent 35 spotted inconsistency in the revision approach, referencing changes made to *The Witches*: 'There is a lot of unnecessary censorship which in itself connotes that words like 'fat'[11] are bad, however 'skinny'[12] stays…' A point often made in the discussions and the questionnaires was that young children would not notice the problematic element that the publishers have identified as needing a re-write. For

[8] *Matilda* 2023 p72

[9] *Matilda* 2023 p164

[10] *Matilda* 2023 p338

[11] *The Witches* 2022 p67

[12] *The Witches* 2022 p281

example, in discussion 1, talking about why a reference to Matilda using a knife and fork at the dinner table[13] has been completely removed from the revised text by the publisher: 'This might be a bit far fetched, but it might be something on like knife crime or something like that, but as small children, I don't think that's really a prevalent problem for them.' Similarly, in discussion 8 one participant said, 'You're not really looking into it that much and like reading between the lines because you're just reading it for the fun of it.'

There were also some firmly made points in response to the questionnaire item 'Do you have any final thoughts about the censoring of children's literature?'. These demonstrated an opposition to the revisions because they seem detached from the real world, as the participants saw it: respondent 45 said, 'children aren't being harmed by Roald Dahl books—if censorship needs to happen in children's literature, then the real problems should be focussed on.' Along these lines, respondent 57 argued that 'children will inevitably grow and hear or maybe experience the language and scenarios that are censored, so I don't think it should be censored in the first place.' Respondent 10 said, 'what is being censored is words that the children will eventually learn anyway.'

Theme: The role of parents' and adults

Finally, this master theme largely spoke against the revisions of Dahl, arguing that parents and other responsible adults (but not politicians or publishers) should decide what their children read. From discussion 1: 'There shouldn't be as much censorship from, like, governments and stuff like that.… if it's written for a child, it shouldn't be that bad anyway. And it's I think it should be more, like, more parental responsibility.' Respondent 27 and others suggested that parents and teachers should be consulted: 'I don't think it should be solely one group who has the final say. A balance of guidelines from teachers and parents (who) are more specialised than the average politician.'

Another thread of reasoning was that parents will know their children best and would be the best judges of what is suitable reading, with 49/73 saying that parents should have the final say in what their children read: 'It's quite an individual thing. How, like, you know how your child's going to react to a certain book. I mean, you know how impressionable they are and what they're like outside of books' (discussion 3). Associated with this thinking is the preference that, ideally, parents and/or teachers should take part in discussing the context of the original texts with their children: for example, respondent 61, tending against the revisions, nonetheless argued that 'it depends on how well the child is educated on negative language/stereotypes for it to make a negative impact.'

This was also connected to ideas around allowing children the freedom to read, and freedom of speech (of the author to tell their story in their own way), for example this point from discussion 1: '… if somebody makes a piece of work, it shouldn't be changed by somebody else because they don't agree with it or the message that is behind it.'

[13] *Matilda* 2023 p58

Echoing this point, respondent 50 worried about the influence of political correctness: 'The revision is a tool to politicise what is an apolitical children's story. Despite Dahl's views, he does not make the villains in his novels "real", or as in real life.' An even stronger point along these lines was made by respondent 14, reacting to the awareness that books are often banned in the USA, and also linking their thoughts to wider issues, which we have covered in other themes above: 'Censorship can easily dissolve into fascist ideas regarding children's literature, i.e. America, and it also removes an element of discussion between children and adults about the literature if problematic ideas are just glossed over and disregarded.'

This kind of reasoning is very typical of the way that our participants were able to identify and connect a range of related aspects of the overall debate, balancing quite firm resistance to the revisions, and censorship broadly, with feelings that children do need guidance and support when reading certain material.

Conclusions

This research aimed to investigate young readers' perspectives on the recent revisions of Roald Dahl's works, and more broadly the implications of censorship in children's literature. Our objectives were informed by the literature review, which showcased the critical dichotomy between the perceived benefits of revising texts for modern sensibilities and the potential risks of altering works from their original forms.

Our findings demonstrate that the boundaries between support for and opposition to revisions are not strictly binary. In fact, our participants' responses were indicative of a sophisticated interrogation of the issues at play, mirroring in many instances the thoughts of adult 'experts' in the field, as outlined in our literature review sections above. Our participants indeed displayed the qualities that those who favour a liberal approach to children's literature would attribute to young readers: subtle interpretation and critical thinking (Hunt 2001).

The findings highlighted a tension in the debate: while many participants acknowledged the need for sensitive edits to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes, they also emphasised the importance of maintaining the integrity and spirit of Dahl's storytelling. There were strongly expressed concerns, especially around the loss of authenticity (Dahl's style, as well as the originality of the text as an historical artefact), the educational value of context, and a general discomfort with the act of censorship as they saw it, which overall outweighed the approval for some revisions.

Aligning with thinking across the media commentary and scholarship, our participants conveyed that revising literature might have both liberating and constraining consequences. Their insights underscored Bishop's (1990) belief that literature serves as a valuable means for children to encounter diverse viewpoints and understand the historical contexts from which these narratives emerge, thus contributing to their cognitive and emotional development. They often felt, as Rudd (1992) argues, that re-writing literature may impede that development. They also saw that revising texts which contain currently unacceptable language and depictions effectively hides those elements, and removes the possibility for discussion of *why* these elements are now seen as unacceptable. On the other hand, they also argued that exposing children

to harmful language and negative depictions might itself do harm. The delicacy of this discussion is perhaps best summed up by the comment of participant 69 who said 'inclusion is always important but should not be used at the expense of showing difference.'

The decision by Puffin to print both revised and original versions of Dahl's books reflects an attempt to navigate this awkward landscape. Our participants supported Puffin's eventual decision insofar as they believe preservation and accessibility of the original texts is crucial not only for appreciating their historical significance, but also for fostering informed discussions between children and adults regarding the underlying themes within these works. Dependent upon the reader and their environment, such informed discussions would be more beneficial than making the changes to the books, especially as many changes were seen as unnecessary. However, in the wider debate, they certainly supported the position that writers and publishers of *new* books should be taking into account the range of prejudices that may lead to the perpetuation of negative and harmful stereotypes, echoing Nodelman (2020) and Corbett and Phillips (2023).

Of course we acknowledge the limitations of our participants' life experience and learning, reflective of their ages and stage in the English education system. Future research might investigate further how young people understand and connect subtle aspects such as author style, genre, humour, and the role of the publishing industry in the censorship debate, all of which topics were raised in our workshops. These young people are not 'experts' in the fields of children's literature or censorship, but they are clearly able to thoughtfully interrogate the scenario and materials we presented them with. We therefore hope this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on censorship in children's literature, emphasising the importance of listening to young readers and acknowledging their perspectives in the conversation surrounding literary revisions in particular, and censorship in general.

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Declarations

Ethical approval This study conformed to Bournemouth University's ethics standard: our approval code is ID 53833. All participants in this study received information sheets which described the nature of the research, and they gave explicit consent that their anonymised responses could be used in publications and conference presentations. All participants were informed that they could cease participation at any time they chose. The Heads of English of the schools at which the research was carried out also signed a consent form as a 'gatekeeper', (available to view on request) and were fully informed of the ethical considerations surrounding the research project. The usual classroom teacher was also present in the room whilst the workshops were conducted and was prepared to provide any necessary pastoral support following the research, if such should be needed. The research also referred to BERA revised guidelines for educational research (BERA, fifth edition 2024).

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