

To Add or Not to Add: An Examination of Self-Censoring Behaviors among School Librarians

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Abstract

The American Library Association (ALA) reported an “unprecedented” number of book challenges in 2022 (ALA, 2022b), resulting in nationwide media coverage and increased awareness of censorship attempts. However, these numbers represent only censorship attempts from external entities, such as parents and the general public; some librarians engage in censorship themselves in the form of self-censorship. This mixed-methods study examined the extent to which the recent increase in book challenges and bans has influenced the self-censoring behaviors of school librarians when selecting books for their collections and the controversial topics they are most hesitant to include in their library collections. Findings indicate that although the majority had never experienced a challenge, participants expressed increased hesitancy to add books potentially perceived to contain controversial material and that they weighed the effects of controversial subject matter more often in the most recent year compared to previous years. Despite the nationwide increase in challenges, few had revised their collection development policies. Topics and book characteristics they are most hesitant to add to their collections include sexual content, abortion, profanity, and self-harm/suicide. Participants who had not experienced a challenge were less likely than those who had experienced a challenge to purchase materials with potentially controversial topics, particularly books with sexual content or LGBTQIA+ characters.

Introduction

Censorship attempts on books in school libraries have been increasing, with the American Library Association (ALA) reporting an “unprecedented” number of book challenges in 2021 and 2022, breaking records from previous years (ALA, 2022b). ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) released book challenge data for 2022, noting 2,571 individual titles were challenged, an increase of 38% compared to the number of titles challenged in 2021. The origin of most challenges has changed. Before 2021 most challenges involved one person challenging one title, but since 2021, the majority of challenges involved one person challenging multiple titles (ALA, 2023a).

The published cases represent only reported challenges; most book challenges likely go unreported (ALA, 2023b; Friedman & Johnson, 2022). One rarely reported censorship phenomenon is a “silent” (Huston, 2003, p. 242) version: self-censorship. Self-censorship occurs when a librarian chooses to censor—for example, remove from the collection or not buy—library materials that may be perceived as controversial without undergoing a formal reconsideration process. This self-censorship often occurs as a “self-defense mechanism” (Bellows, 2005) to avoid a potential challenge that could create community conflict (Dawkins, 2017). Librarians may also perceive their censorship efforts as an attempt to “protect students” from items they “personally judged unacceptable or controversial” (Rickman, 2010, p. 2). Self-censorship is problematic because it violates core tenets of librarianship’s commitment to intellectual freedom and limits library collections, denying access to books that diverse student bodies need to process their changing worlds.

As a result of this wave of book challenges and bans, school librarians are expressing growing concerns about adding or keeping materials identified as controversial in their collections. Participants of *School Library Journal*’s “2022 Controversial Book Survey” indicated they weighed the effect of controversial materials more often than in previous years. Their reasons included an increase in books with controversial materials being published and an overall increase in the vocalization of community members (Yorio, 2022). Additionally, school librarians have been facing threats of criminal charges over their collections; these threats sometimes lead librarians to “quietly remove” books or refrain from purchasing books with controversial content to avoid backlash or punishment (Hixenbaugh, 2022).

Recent reports from the popular press and professional library literature indicate an increase, or at least an increase in the admittance of, self-censoring behaviors among school librarians. School librarianship researchers have noted a visible absence of scholarly work on self-censorship, especially when compared to studies on censorship in general (Bellows, 2005; Steele, 2018; Williams, 2020). This study was intended to add to the limited body of scholarly work exploring self-censorship in school libraries by answering the following research questions:

- RQ1: To what extent, if any, has the recent increase in book challenges and bans influenced self-censoring behaviors?
- RQ2: Which controversial topics are school librarians most hesitant to include in their collections?

Literature Review

Censorship

Multiple definitions for censorship exist, each with their own subtle nuances. ALA defines *censorship* as “the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups, or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous” (ALA, 2007), as well as “a change in the access status of material, based on the content of the work and made by a governing authority or its representatives” that can “include exclusion, restriction, removal, or age/grade level changes” (Pekoll, 2021). Dawkins defined *censorship* as “the removal of materials from a collection based on an intent to protect the reader from objectional material” (2017, p.6). Bellows (2005) explained that some censors wish to enact their will and be the voice in determining what is appropriate according to their standards. Similarly, Friedman and Johnson (2022) asserted that censorship attempts have primarily been a power struggle over what information is available in school libraries and classrooms. Oppenheim and Smith further elaborated that censorship “has been present throughout recorded history...used by individuals and groups to prevent and control the creation, access and dissemination of ideas and information...for many different reasons, whether it is the suppression of a culture, to stretch the understanding of a reader or to retain power” (2004, p. 159).

A book challenge is “An attempt to have a library resource removed or access to it restricted, based on the objections of a person or group...thereby restricting the access of others. Challenges sometimes lead to censorship” (Magi & Garner, 2015). Book challenges can take the form of formal written complaints as well as informal verbal complaints, and these challenges originate from myriad entities. ALA annually collects data on formal book challenges and publishes statistics identifying which general entities initiate these challenges. Since the ALA OIF began collecting data in 1990, parents and patrons as separate entities have historically initiated most requests for reconsideration. Other challenges, although significantly fewer, originate from a board/administrative body, librarians/teachers, political/religious groups, elected officials, and students (ALA, 2020). Librarians/teachers comprise 1% to 5% of entities formally challenging books each year. Because these challenges are formal, they do not constitute self-censorship (ALA, 2020). Since 2021 organized efforts by elected officials and advocacy groups at the local and national levels have surged. These efforts are in the forms of new legislation, intimidation tactics, the mass distribution of book lists with titles to be challenged or banned, and/or submitting reconsideration requests (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; ALA, 2023c).

ALA also identifies the institutions where the challenges occur: public libraries, school libraries, schools, academic, and occasionally special and prison libraries. Between 1990 and 2009, schools received the most challenges, followed by school libraries and public libraries. Between 2014 and 2020, public libraries received the most challenges (ALA, 2020). For the first time

since ALA began recording book challenges in 1990, school libraries received more challenges than any other type of library in 2021 (ALA 2022a).

Each year ALA publishes a list of the ten most challenged books of the previous year in all library types and includes the reasons challengers cite. Between 1990 and 2009, the most frequent reasons cited for challenges included violence, sexually explicit content, and offensive language. Although these topics continue to be the most frequently cited reasons, in recent years an increase in challenges citing racial content and LGBTQIA+ content has occurred (Aucoin, 2021; ALA, 2020). For example, the challenges and bans on LGBTQIA+ books more than doubled from 1990 through 2019 (Aucoin, 2021). Aucoin's (2021) analysis of ALA's most frequently challenged/banned books from 1990 through 2019 concluded books published for young adult audiences have been the most frequently challenged titles compared to books published for children and adults within that 30-year time period.

Professional Guidelines on Intellectual Freedom and Censorship

ALA promotes intellectual freedom and embraces an anti-censorship stance. The organization defines *intellectual freedom* as “the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction” (ALA, 2007). At the heart of ALA's values are four statements upholding library principles: (1) *Libraries: An American Value*, (2) *Library Bill of Rights*, (3) *ALA Code of Ethics*, and (4) *The Freedom to Read Statement*. ALA asserts that opposition to censorship is critical to ensure libraries provide access to materials to all members of the community (Dawkins, 2017). ALA also published *Access to Resources and Services in the School Library: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights* as a guideline for school libraries. That document encourages school librarians to resist censorship attempts and ensure access to a variety of resources free of restrictions (ALA, 2014).

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of ALA, endorses the four statements, and these ALA statements often appear in the selection policies of school libraries (Dawkins, 2017). In 2017 AASL revised its *National School Library Standards* with intellectual freedom remaining a critical component in the framework for school libraries. The standards book also identified intellectual freedom as a right of each learner, as “Learners have the right to choose what they will read, view, or hear” for the purposes of “develop[ing] the ability to think clearly, critically, and creatively about their choices rather than allowing others to control their access to ideas and information” (AASL, 2018, p. 13). In the *School Librarian Preparation Standards*, a document guiding school librarian certification preparation programs, AASL in collaboration with ALA and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) specified the necessity for school librarian certification candidates to “model and promote the ethical practices of librarianship, as expressed in the foundational documents of the library profession including the American Library Association Code of Ethics and the Library Bill of Rights” (ALA, AASL, & CAEP, 2019, p. 68). Despite efforts to teach the importance of information access in librarian preparation programs, Shupala (2006) has contended that school librarians need additional exposure to the topic.

Intellectual freedom is a concept also recognized among international library associations. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) School Libraries Section Standing Committee published updated *School Library Guidelines* in 2015. These guidelines recognize intellectual freedom as being a critical component of the school library program and beyond, noting “intellectual freedom and access to information are essential to effective and responsible citizenship and participation in democracy” (Schultz-Jones & Oberg, 2015, p. 61). In the executive summary, the IFLA Section of School Libraries has acknowledged, however, the complexity of developing international guidelines for school libraries, as “All guidelines represent a compromise between what we aspire to achieve and what we can reasonably expect to achieve (p. 7). In its *IASL Policy Statement on School Libraries* the International Association of School Librarianship has identified the school library program as “a vital instrument in the educational process,” with an emphasis on promoting intellectual freedom as one component of its educational function (1993).

Collection Policies and Intellectual Freedom

Certified school librarians are trained in collection development. This training ideally should include information on intellectual freedom. However, learning experiences and certification standards vary considerably by country and, within the United States, by state. A well-developed collection should include resources “for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves” (ALA, 2019). Collections should be diverse and contain content by and about a wide array of people and cultures to authentically reflect a variety of ideas, information, stories, and experiences. Of course, not every person working in the capacity of a school librarian has earned their certification, as hiring criteria vary by location. Book challenges and self-censoring behaviors can occur regardless of one’s certification status. Ideally, school librarians select materials for their collections by considering their students’ educational and recreational reading needs, and they often consult with teachers, read book reviews, and examine professionally compiled lists to develop balanced collections (Johnson, 2018). Selection and censorship, however, are distinctly different. Asheim’s landmark 1953 article distinguished the difference between censorship and selection by explaining that selection is positive. It is an process by which the librarian identifies reasons for a book’s inclusion. In contrast, censorship is rooted in negative intentions as the librarian seeks reasons for a book’s exclusion. When censorship—particularly self-censorship—occurs, students’ educational and recreational reading needs are “silenced” (Freedman & Johnson, 2000, p. 357).

Collection development policies (also known as acquisitions policies, materials selection policies, and selection policies) provide guidelines for selection and deselection of collection resources. Selection procedures can reduce the effect of personal bias and ensure balanced, diverse collections (IFLA, 2001). Collection development policies also guide librarians when deciding “what, where, and how” resources are made available to learners (Dawkins & Eidson, 2021, p. 1). Policies should be continually reviewed, updated, and publicly accessible (AASL, 2018). The IFLA *School Library Guidelines* specify “The policy should establish the method for reconsideration of resources consistent that is with the principles of intellectual freedom and of children’s right to know. The policy should also identify the responsibility of school librarians for resisting efforts to censor materials, no matter the source of calls for limiting resources or access to resources” (Schultz-Jones & Oberg, 2015, p. 34). Despite the importance of collection

development policies, the 2022 *School Library Journal* Controversial Book Survey reported only 49% of the 720 respondents had a formal collection development policy (Yorio, 2022).

Self-Censorship

Self-censorship differs from censorship because an internal entity, the librarian, censors as opposed to an external entity, such as a parent or patron. Librarians refraining from purchasing materials they perceive to be controversial is one type of self-censorship (Rickman, 2010; Williams, 2020). Self-censorship can also occur after materials are purchased. Dawkins (2017) coined the term “*ex post facto* self-censorship” to describe acts such as removing, redacting, transferring, labeling, and otherwise restricting materials after they had been purchased and added to the collection but without following a formal reconsideration process.

Legitimate factors often require librarians to be highly selective when purchasing materials. These factors can include small budgets or lack of physical space. Librarians also have legitimate reasons to remove materials from the collection, such as a material’s age, physical condition, or lack of relevance to the curriculum. What distinguishes self-censorship is the intention behind the act. Self-censors purposefully exclude or limit access to materials without undergoing a formal reconsideration process. Processes and policies are ignored, and critical conversations about the book’s contents do not occur. This censorship violates the basic tenets of librarianship and directly limits access to socially inclusive collections, thereby prohibiting student access to information necessary to process their ever-changing life and curricular experiences (Huston, 2003; Williams, 2020).

Self-Censorship in School Libraries

The scholarly literature specifically examining self-censorship in school libraries is sparse (Bellows, 2005; Steele, 2018; Williams, 2020). Steele noted, “While the literature on censorship is vast and varied, there is a need for research specifically on the phenomenon of librarians acting as censors” (2018, p. 41). A scan of scholarly research indicates even fewer international studies exploring self-censorship. Predominant themes addressed in both scholarly literature and professional literature include the frequency of self-censorship, reasons cited for self-censorship, factors contributing to a librarian’s decision to self-censor, and topics school librarians tend to censor more frequently.

Why Do School Librarians Self-Censor?

A question that has often been at the forefront of research regarding self-censorship is, “Why do librarians self-censor?” Studies in the United States (Bellows, 2005; Dawkins, 2017; Fiske, 1959; Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Rickman, 2010) and in New Zealand (Moodie & Calvert, 2018) have concluded self-censorship can occur as a preemptive measure to protect oneself from a potential challenge. In Australia (Dillon & Williams, 1994) and in the United States (Cordell, 2010; Whelan, 2009) researchers identified parental backlash and community pressure as factors contributing to a librarian’s choice to engage in self-censorship. School librarians will sometimes refrain from purchasing potentially controversial items based on their community’s values,

especially if they live in rural or conservative areas (Dawkins, 2017; Garry, 2015; Moeller & Becnel, 2020). Studies in the United States and elsewhere have also revealed that school librarians may self-censor based on internal value judgments when they personally believe a book is not appropriate for their library collection (McNicol, 2016; Oppenheim & Smith, 2004; Rickman, 2010; Williams, 2020).

How Common is Self-Censorship Among School Librarians?

Due to the lack of reporting, the lack of research, and the overall stigma associated with self-censorship, which the profession perceives to be a “secret, quiet, shameful practice” (Moeller & Becnel, 2020, p. 526), gaining a complete understanding of the pervasiveness of this behavior is quite difficult. Because no formal challenge has occurred, the act of self-censorship is not reported, and data is not collected, so formal records do not exist (Whelan, 2009), unlike when external entities formally challenge books. Of the studies published in both professional and scholarly literature, conclusions about the extent to which school librarians self-censor have varied.

Oltmann (2018) surveyed 287 school librarians across the United States, and approximately two-thirds admitted to removing materials from their library collections for reasons not consistent with values articulated in ALA statements. In a survey of 98 Israeli school librarians, 69.0% of school librarian participants in religious schools censored materials compared to 33.3% in non-religious schools (Yitzhaki, 2001). Both Dawkins (2017) and Becnel and Moeller (2020) conducted interviews with school librarians in the southeastern region of the United States, with participants admitting to avoiding the purchase of controversial materials to prevent book challenges. Coley (2002) and Bellows (2005), both working in the southern part of the United States, conducted collection analyses of school libraries’ online public access catalogs; both concluded the majority of the libraries owned significantly fewer than expected controversial titles, and thus the school librarians may have been engaging in self-censorship.

Conversely, other studies have concluded self-censorship among school librarians is an infrequent practice. Rickman (2010) surveyed 1,069 American school librarians and concluded only a small subset (4.8%) engaged in self-censoring behaviors. In a study similar to Coley’s (2002), Owen (2007) conducted a collection analysis of 13 high school libraries in northeastern United States and concluded approximately 30% of the collections provided evidence of self-censorship. Tudor, Moore, and Byrne (2003) analyzed 90 high school library collections, concluding that the majority of school libraries had the number of controversial books expected based on their enrollment and district size.

A few studies noted the disconnect between values and practice. In a New Zealand survey, 56% of 80 school librarian participants spoke in favor of promoting intellectual freedom while simultaneously admitting to not purchasing graphic novels for their library collections (Moodie & Calvert, 2018). Similarly, in interviews with 31 school librarians in the United States, participants expressed the need for books with LGBTQIA+ content to be included in collections, while many also confessed to not adding the needed content to their collections (Oltmann, 2016). McNicol (2016), based on the results of a survey of 96 librarians in the United Kingdom, concluded a statistically significant difference between participants’ stated beliefs about

intellectual freedom and their actual practice. While participants supported intellectual freedom in theory, they did not necessarily apply it in reality.

Which Factors Affect Self-Censoring Behaviors?

Multiple factors have been identified as affecting a librarian's decision to engage in self-censorship. Perceived support, or lack thereof, has been identified as a contributing factor to self-censoring resources that may be controversial in their communities. Librarians have either refrained from purchasing or removed titles from collections without formal reconsideration procedures if an administrator expressed concern or initiated the challenge (SLJ, 2016), or if they perceived a lack of administration support (Dawkins, 2017). However, school librarians who find support from professional organizations such as ALA and AASL are less likely to self-censor their collections, providing evidence that membership in a professional organization "may have an important role in supporting librarians in [censorship challenges] through information and awareness raising, or through direct or peer support" (McNicol, 2016, p. 339).

Findings from studies examining the relationship between experience or certification and a librarian's decision to self-censor have varied. Hopkins (1991) and Dawkins (2017) each found that for many American school librarians, experiencing the process of a challenge was difficult, stressful, and often resulted in apprehension about future purchases. According to Rickman's 2010 survey and Dawkins' 2017 survey of American school librarians, those who were early in their careers or with fewer years of experience were more likely to engage in self-censorship than those with more years of experience. Additional findings from Rickman's research suggested school librarians without formal certification or who were currently enrolled in a certification program were more likely to engage in self-censorship than certified librarians. Garry's (2015) analysis of 60 American high school library collections identified a statistically significant relationship between a librarian having a certification specific to school librarianship and the number of LGBTQIA+ resources within the collection, and interviews with some of the librarians provided additional evidence. Lukenbill and Lukenbill's 2007 survey of librarians in Texas identified both education and certification as factors contributing to a school librarian's decision to not censor. Conversely, results from McNicol's 2016 survey of librarians in the United Kingdom indicated no statistically significant relationship existed between the level of education or the number of years of experience and a librarian's decision to self-censor.

Examinations of age level of the learners served and self-censoring behaviors have also revealed varying results. Multiple studies in both the professional and scholarly literature have concluded school librarians serving younger students were more likely to censor than those serving older students. McNicol (2016) concluded school librarians serving pre-school students were more likely to self-censor and least likely to provide diverse resources than those serving primary and secondary students. The 2008 and 2016 *School Library Journal* surveys revealed elementary school librarians, followed by middle school librarians, were more likely to refrain from purchasing materials they identified as controversial, and were more likely to use content labels than their high school counterparts (SLJ 2016; Wheelan, 2009). Conversely, Rickman's (2010) survey findings revealed a statistically significant relationship between serving secondary students and practicing self-censorship; this relationship was absent among the elementary or middle school librarians in Rickman's study.

Which Topics Do School Librarians Censor?

The most commonly self-censored topics closely align with the controversial topics that are challenged the most often. School librarians have consistently expressed hesitancy to purchase materials with sexual content (Oltmann, 2018; Williams, 2020; Yitzhaki, 2001), violence (Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Yitzhaki, 2001), profanity (Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Oltmann, 2018), racism (Hixenbaugh, 2022), religion (Yitzhaki, 2001), and LGBTQIA+ content (Dawkins, 2017). These topics or characteristics align with Aucoin's (2021) analysis of the most frequently banned/challenged themes as reported annually by ALA from 1990 through 2019. Although not a topic, format has also been examined, with librarians in New Zealand (Moodie & Calvert, 2018) and in one of the United States (Becnel & Moeller, 2020) expressing hesitation to purchase graphic novels.

Methods

Professional library associations and the popular press are reporting record numbers of censorship attempts from external entities, and both professional and scholarly literature have noted that research on self-censorship among school librarians is sparse (Bellows, 2005; Steele, 2018; Williams, 2020).

This mixed-methods study examines the extent to which the recent increase in book challenges and bans has influenced the self-censoring behaviors of school librarians and the controversial topics they are most hesitant to include in their library collections. For this study, the term "school librarian" refers to anyone working in the capacity of a school librarian, both certified and not certified, as neither group is immune from challenges nor self-censoring behaviors.

Sample

Participants were recruited via multiple social media channels targeting school librarians and two electronic discussions for school librarians, including one international platform. The reach for the study was quite extensive due to the high membership numbers in each of these groups, and the exact number of people receiving the survey link is unknown. The final sample included 113 school librarians, with 103 from North America, two from Australia, two from Africa, two from Asia, and four from Europe.

This convenience sample consisted of 33 respondents serving at the elementary level (approximately ages 3 to 10), 23 serving at the middle-grade level (approximately ages 11 to 13), 27 serving at the high school level (approximately ages 14 to 18), 7 respondents indicating they served all ages, and 23 respondents selecting "other" ages.

Of the 113 participants, 79 indicated they were professionally certified school librarians, while 34 respondents indicated they were either working towards their certification, did not hold a professional certification, or indicated an "other" response but did not specify further.

Data Collection

The survey consisted of 15 questions with a mix of multiple-choice and scale ratings, with spaces allowing for optional comments, and two open-ended questions. Three local school librarians pilot-tested the survey to ensure reliability, providing feedback on instructions and questions, and offering support and critiques for survey improvement. The final survey consisted of questions to gather the following types of information: demographic data, experiences with challenges, perceptions about controversial materials, and perceptions about their own purchasing decisions.

To understand which potentially controversial topics school librarians were most hesitant to purchase, the survey presented respondents with 16 topics. These topics were selected based on previous research from a survey conducted by *School Library Journal* (2016) and an analysis of the most frequently challenged/banned topics as reported by ALA and analyzed by Aucoin (2021). The complete survey is in the Appendix.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics and statistical tests using SPSS Statistics analysis software. The chi-squared test was used when the variables to be compared were categorical. A chi-squared test of independence is used to determine “if the relative frequencies within the categories of one variable are associated within the relative frequencies of a second variable,” while a chi-squared goodness-of-fit test is used to compare observed frequencies to the distribution (Carlson & Winquist, 2018, p. 571). When statistical significance was found between variables during a chi-squared test of independence, the effect size was also calculated.

In addition, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to compare survey questions that asked for a numerical response. The Kruskal-Wallis H test is a nonparametric alternative to the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and can be used to compare means against three or more categorical variables (Carlson & Winquist, 2018).

Participant location was originally considered as a variable, but because 91.2% of participants resided in North America and the remaining 8.8% on four other continents, the location variable could not be successfully compared through statistical tests.

Open-ended survey responses were manually coded via Qualtrics Text iQ, identifying relevant themes in participant responses through inductive coding. Inductive coding was selected as it allowed us to analyze the open-ended questions by identifying patterns or themes that were then compared with existing literature and personal experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

This mixed-methods study was intended to contribute to the limited body of scholarly work exploring self-censorship in school libraries by examining the extent to which the recent increase in book challenges and bans has influenced the self-censoring behaviors of school librarians when purchasing materials and the controversial topics they are most hesitant to include in their library collections.

RQ1: To what extent, if any, has the recent increase in book challenges and bans influenced self-censoring behaviors?

Research Question 1 examined (1) participants' experiences with and perceptions of book challenges, (2) their purchasing decisions, and (3) changes (or lack thereof) to policies, procedures, and practices in their libraries.

Book Challenges

Experiences With Book Challenges

Participants were asked if they had experienced a book challenge within the most recent 12 months (question 5) and also whether they had experienced a book challenge at any time prior to the most recent 12 months (question 7). Of the 113 respondents, approximately one-quarter had experienced a formal book challenge within the most recent 12 months, only slightly more than those experiencing a challenge prior to the most recent 12 months. Approximately two-thirds had not experienced formal challenges during each reporting period. When reflecting on the most recent 12 months, 8.8% of respondents indicating they “maybe” experienced a challenge and several provided an explanation to clarify their answers. Four (3.5%) explained they had received an informal complaint rather than experiencing a formal book challenge. For example, one respondent said, “We have received complaints, but no formal challenges.” Another said, “Not an official one but parents have complained to the school board...”. Two respondents (1.7%) stated they removed a book without undergoing a reconsideration process, with one respondent noting, “The district pulled books for review without official challenge paperwork.”

Of the 31 (27.4%) librarians who experienced a challenge within the most recent 12 months, almost half of them experienced a challenge for the first time. Conversely, 12 (10.6%) respondents reported the opposite: experiencing a challenge prior to the most recent 12 months but not during the most recent 12 months. Thirteen (11.5%) respondents reported experiencing a challenge both during the most recent 12 months and prior to that time frame. Half of the respondents reported not experiencing a challenge within the most recent 12 months and had also not experienced a challenge any time prior to that. Table 1 provides the frequency of challenges for the two time periods.

Table 1*School Librarians' Experience with Challenges (n=113)*

	Within most recent 12 months		Prior to most recent 12 months	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Experienced a challenge	31	27.4%	30	26.5%
Did not experience a challenge	72	63.7%	75	66.4%
"Maybe" experienced a challenge	10	8.8%	7	6.2%
Did not respond	0	0.0%	1	0.9%

When comparing age level served, approximately the same number of those serving at the elementary (8.0%), middle (5.3%), and high school (8.8%) levels experienced a formal challenge during the most recent 12 months. A higher percentage (20.3%) of elementary school librarians reported not experiencing a formal challenge during the same time period. (See Figure 1.)

A chi-squared test performed on the categorical variables determined no statistically significant relationship between the age level served and experience with challenges in the most recent 12 months ($X^2=7.16$, $df=8$, $p=0.52$).

Figure 1

Age Level Served by Experiences with Challenges within the Most Recent 12 Months



Outcome of Challenge(s)

Participants who experienced a book challenge within the most recent 12 months were asked to provide the outcome of the challenge through an open-ended response (question 6). Responses were coded inductively based on the theme of each. Table 2 identifies the themes and frequencies.

Table 2*Results of the Book Challenges*

Outcome of Challenge	Frequency
Book was retained in the collection	10
Book was removed from the collection	10
Book is still currently under review	5
Book was relocated	3
Student was redirected to a different book (individual censorship)	2
Permission slip was required to check out book	1
Decided to challenge policies instead	1

Comfort Level With Challenges

Respondents rated their comfort level in responding to a book challenge from 1 (not comfortable) to 5 (very comfortable) (question 14). Overall, the mean comfort level was 3.5, or around moderately comfortable. A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine whether there was an effect between the comfort level in responding to a book challenge and experience with challenges within the past 12 months. The results indicate no statistically significant relationship, $H(2) = 1.13, p = 0.57$.

*Purchasing Decisions**Refraining From Controversial Materials Purchase*

Participants were asked if, in the most recent 12 months, had they refrained from purchasing a book because it contained content that might be considered controversial (question 8). During the most recent 12 months, 46.9% of the 113 respondents admitted to not purchasing a book because the book contained subject matter that might be considered controversial, compared to 43.4% who did purchase content that might be controversial. (See Figure 2.)

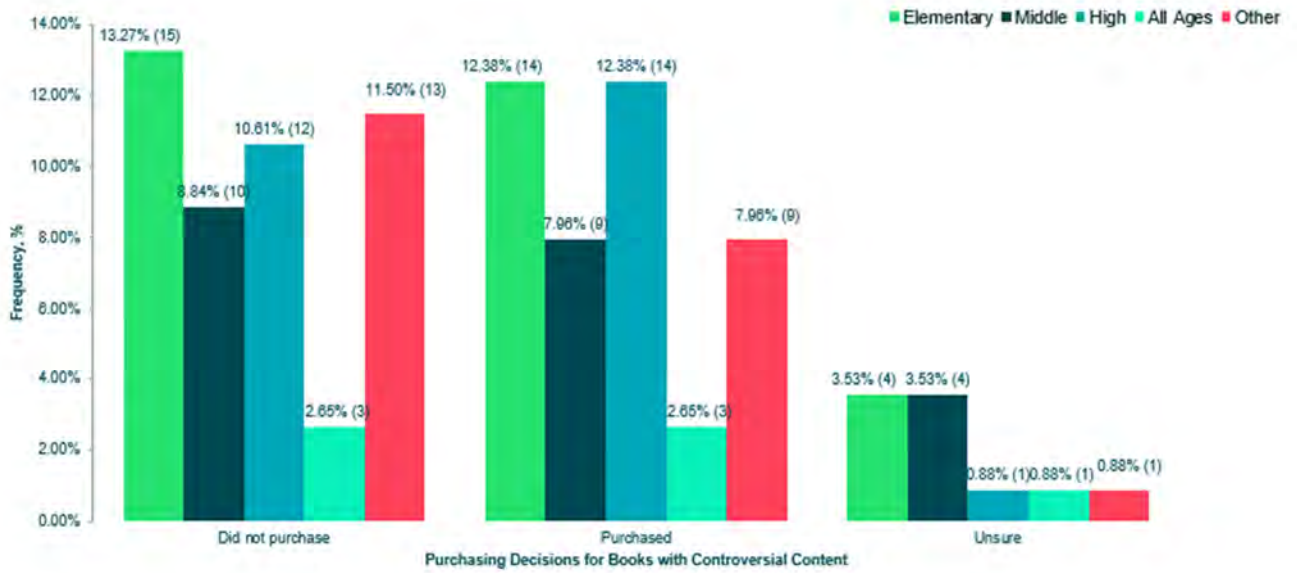
Eleven (9.7%) respondents stated they “maybe” passed on purchasing potentially controversial items. One respondent indicated they had historically felt confident in purchasing “books with controversial topics that are relevant to my school and community without hesitation, but now I find myself second guessing some future purchases.” Another noted, “I try to not use potential controversy as a selection criterion. There are usually other reasons that materials are not appropriate for our collection than simply controversial subject matter.”

Regardless of age level served, participants were as likely to purchase controversial materials as they were not to purchase these resources. For example, 13.3% of elementary school librarians chose not to purchase controversial topics in the most recent 12 months compared to 12.4% of elementary school librarians who did purchase materials that might be controversial. No

statistically significant relationships were identified between age level served and an increased hesitancy to purchase controversial materials ($X^2=4.65$, $df=8$, $p=0.79$).

Figure 2

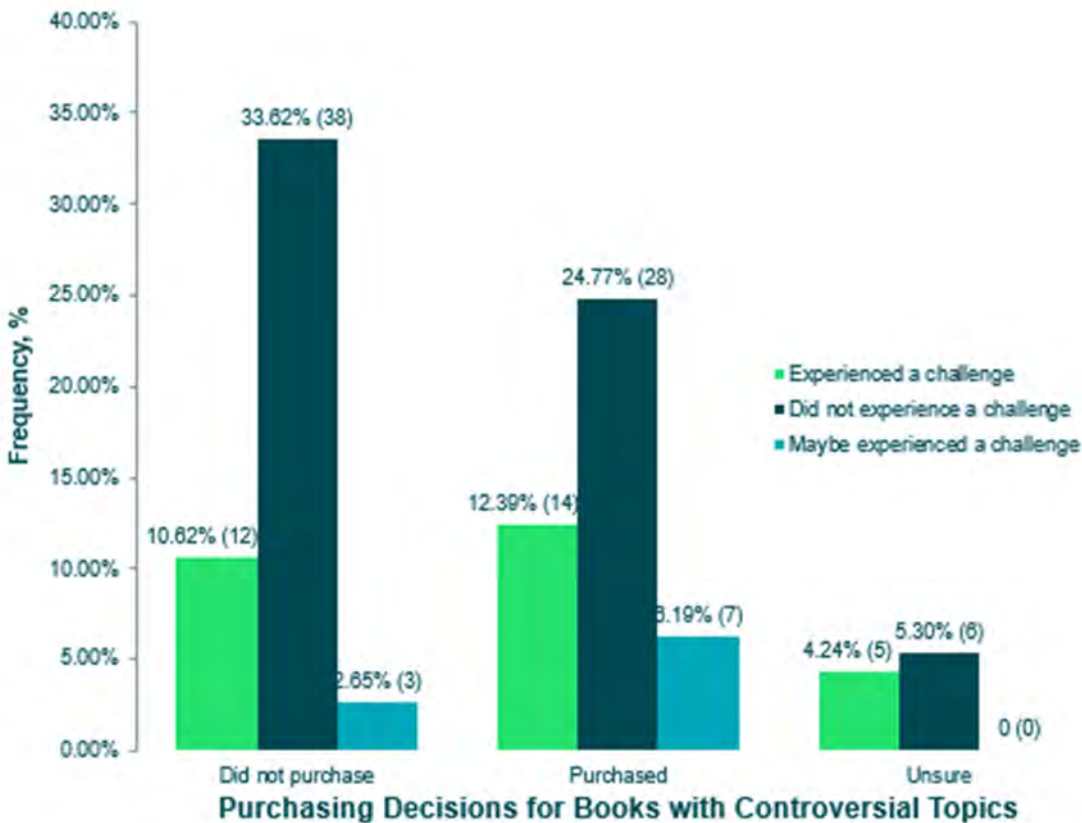
School Librarians Choosing to Not Purchase Controversial Topics in the Most Recent 12 Months by Age Level Served



These results were also examined in comparison to experience with challenges in the last 12 months. Of the 53 participants who decided not to purchase titles identified as controversial, 22.6% (10.6% of total respondents) had experienced a challenge within the last 12 months, while 71.6% (33.6% of total respondents) had not experienced a challenge. Conversely, of the 49 participants who did purchase controversial materials within the past 12 months, 28.5% (12.4% of total respondents) reported experiencing a challenge within the last 12 months compared to 57.1% (24.7% of total respondents) who did not experience a challenge. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3

School Librarians Choosing to Not Purchase Controversial Topics in the Most Recent 12 Months by Experience With Challenges in the Most Recent 12 Months



The relationship between experience with challenges within the last 12 months and the decision to refrain from purchasing controversial materials was not statistically significant according to chi-squared tests of independence ($X^2=6.00$, $df=4$, $p=0.20$).

Comfort Level With Purchasing Controversial Materials.

Respondents rated their comfort level with purchasing controversial materials from 1 (not comfortable) to 5 (very comfortable) (question 13). The mean comfort level was 3.3 (moderately comfortable). The average comfort level decreased slightly to 3.1 for those who had experienced a challenge within the most recent 12 months and was higher at 3.4 for those who had not experienced a challenge within the last 12 months.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine whether there was an effect between the comfort level with purchasing controversial materials and experience with challenges within the

past 12 months. The results indicate no statistically significant relationship, $H(2) = 1.75$, $p = 0.42$. Participants were invited to provide additional comments about purchasing controversial materials, and the few comments provided suggest that overall the respondents continue purchasing materials. One respondent noted, “Personally, I am comfortable adding controversial materials, but if faced with a challenge, our faith may dictate otherwise.”

Weighing Effect of Controversial Subject Matter

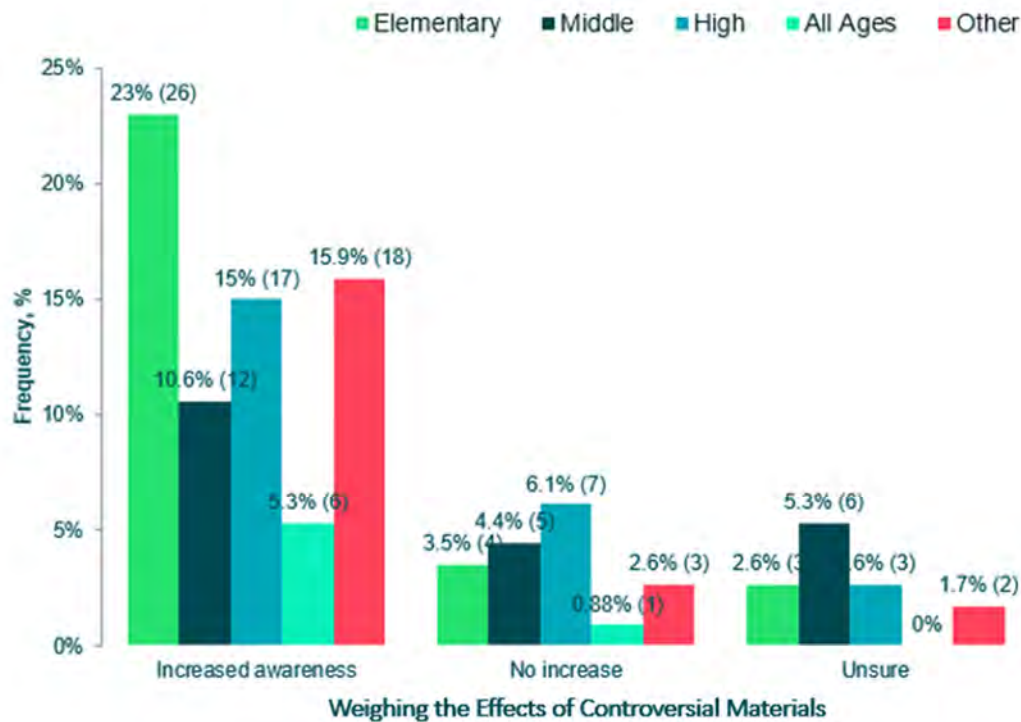
Participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which they weigh the effect of controversial subject matter of books now compared to previous years (question 9). Almost 70% of participants indicated they weigh the effect of controversial subject matter more often now than in previous years, compared to the 17.7% who did not. (See Figure 4.)

Another 12% chose “maybe.” One participant who selected “maybe” clarified, “It’s always been on my mind, but a little more often now,” following up with “I’m opening myself up to being more willing to take risks than in the past.” Participant comments in response to this question varied. The number of “maybe” respondents who indicated they are more careful about adding to their collections was approximately the same as those who wanted to ensure they add more controversial topics to their collections. One respondent commented, “Because there seems to be so much attention around the subject of book banning and book challenges I seem to be waiting for my time to come. I don’t necessarily shy away from those controversial topics, but I am certainly more aware and cognizant when making selections for the students.” Another noted, “We have a local bully right now who is politically motivated. I am already past retirement age, so I feel comfortable taking some of the heat for the high school librarians in the community.”

School librarians working at the secondary level were less likely than those working at the elementary level to weigh the effects. This was not a statistically significant relationship according to the chi-squared tests of independence ($\chi^2=9.15$, $df=8$, $p=0.33$).

Figure 4

Weighing the Effects of Controversial Materials by Age Level Served



Changes in Purchasing Decisions

Respondents were asked to rate their purchasing decisions now compared to one or two years ago on a scale from 1 (not comfortable purchasing controversial materials) to 5 (very comfortable purchasing controversial materials) (question 15). Overall, the mean was 2.73, indicating a slight hesitancy to purchase controversial materials. A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine whether there was an effect between the changes in purchasing decisions and experience with challenges within the past 12 months. The results indicate no significant relationship, $H(2) = 1.19, p = 0.55$.

Fifteen participants provided open-ended responses to further clarify or explain their perspective and comfort level with purchasing decisions. These open-ended responses were coded according to the overall theme of the response, and frequencies were noted. (See Table 3.) Coding open-ended responses further indicated increased hesitation for some librarians to purchase potentially controversial books. One respondent claimed, “This might make me a coward, but I scrutinize

my selections a little more thoroughly because I want to avoid a challenge as much as I can.” Another said, “My budget is small so I’m going to choose good, but safe books.” However, some other respondents’ comments indicated an increased tendency to purchase controversial materials. For example, one respondent wrote, “As for my purchasing decisions now vs. earlier, I have added more [potentially controversial materials] merely because, as I have become more familiar with our collection, I see how we were lacking in many subjects.” Another said, “Parent pushback used to scare me, but my job is to serve the students in my school and provide them with a diverse collection that helps give meaning [to] the real world issues they are facing. Instead of shrinking away in fear, I’m even more determined to find high quality books from many perspectives. I’m thrilled publishing companies are starting to take the risks, and I need to support that so it continues.”

Table 3*Changes in Purchasing Behaviors*

Coded Theme	Frequency
Increased hesitancy to purchase controversial materials	8
Purchasing decisions have changed for other reasons (new age level, new administration, etc.)	4
Increased tendency to purchase controversial materials	3
Follows policy when purchasing	2

Practices, Policies, and Procedures

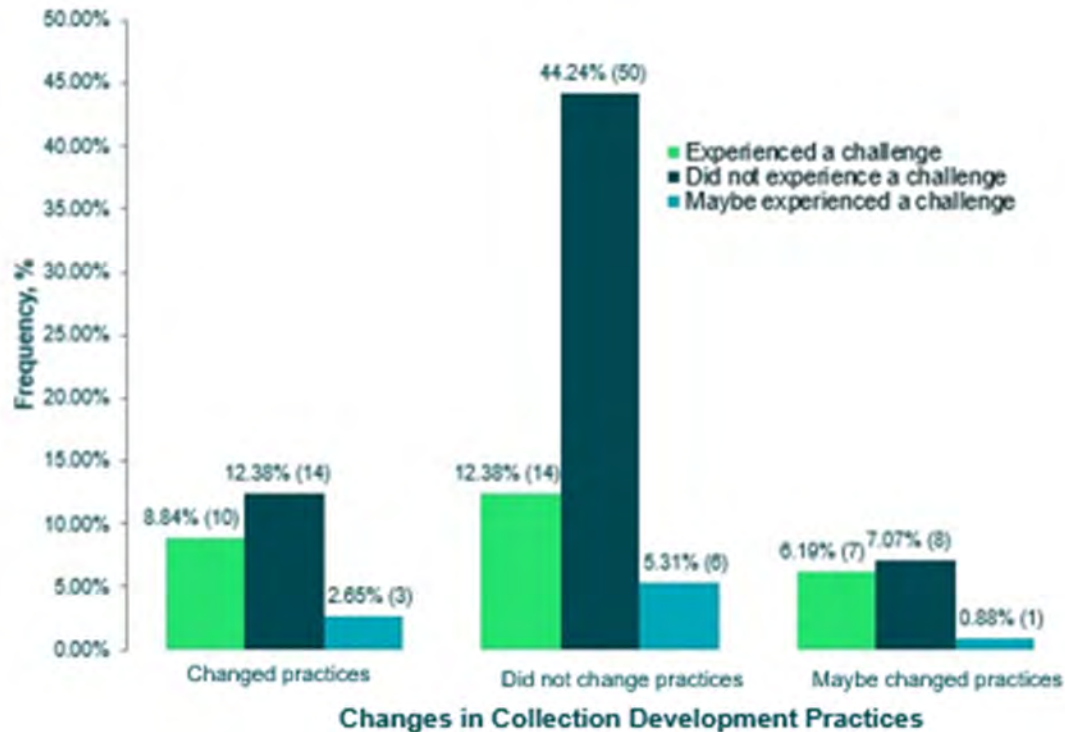
Change in Collection Development: Selection Practices

Respondents were asked if they had changed collection development selection practices within the most recent 12 months to specifically avoid a potential challenge (question 11). Of the 113 responding school librarians, 23.89% changed their selection practices to avoid a potential challenge compared to 61.94% who had not changed their practices. An additional 14.15% indicated they may have changed their practices but no clarification was provided. (See Figure 5.)

A chi-squared test of independence was conducted between experience with challenges and whether or not respondents changed collection development selection practices within the last 12 months. These relationships were not statistically significant ($\chi^2=5.88$, $df=4$, $p=0.21$).

Figure 5

School Librarians Changing Collection Development Practices to Avoid a Challenge Within the Most Recent 12 Months by Experience with Challenges



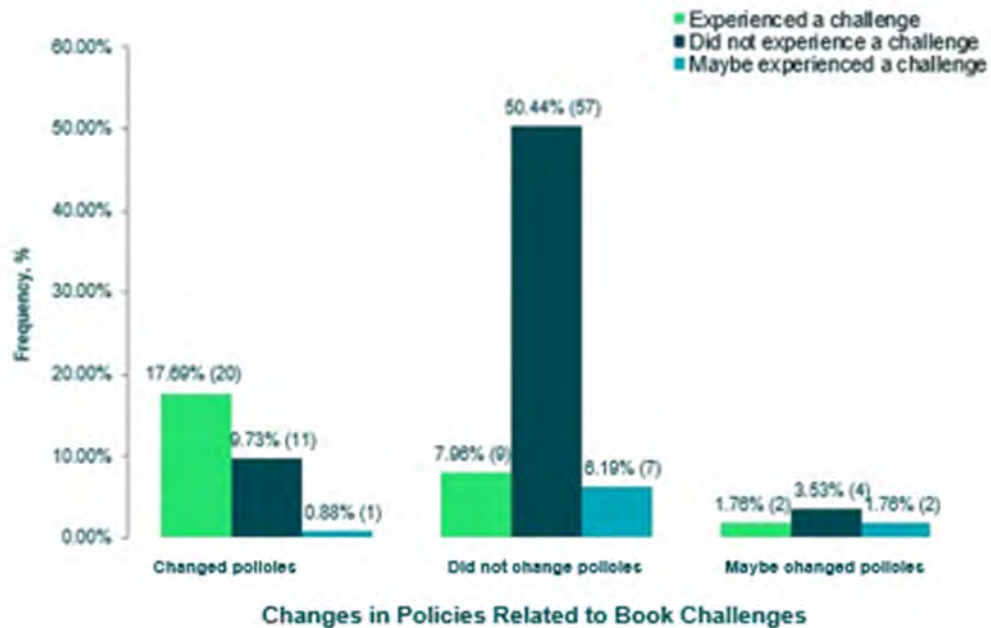
Change In Collection Development: Policies and Procedures for Book Challenges

Respondents were also asked if they changed any policies or procedures specific to the process of a book challenge within the last 12 months (question 12). Of the 113 respondents, 28.31% claimed they did change policies and procedures related to a book challenge within the most recent 12 months compared to 64.6% who did not change policies or procedures, and 7.07% who were unsure. It is unknown if the changes occurred before or after the challenge.

Again, this relationship was examined by also looking at a respondent's experience with a challenge within the past 12 months. (See Figure 6.) We conducted a chi-squared test of independence and found the relationship between these variables was statistically significant ($X^2=30.94$, $df=4$, $p=0.000003$). Because the variables had three categories, Cramer's phi was used to determine the effect size. Calculating the effect size helps to describe the "magnitude of a study's results" (Carlson & Winqvist, 2018, p. 6). The association between experience with challenges in the past 12 months and changing policies specific to book challenges was determined to have a large effect size ($\Phi= .37$), indicating there is a strong relationship between these two variables.

Figure 6

School Librarians Changing the Policies and Procedures Related to the Process of a Book Challenges Within the Most Recent 12 Months by Experience with Challenges

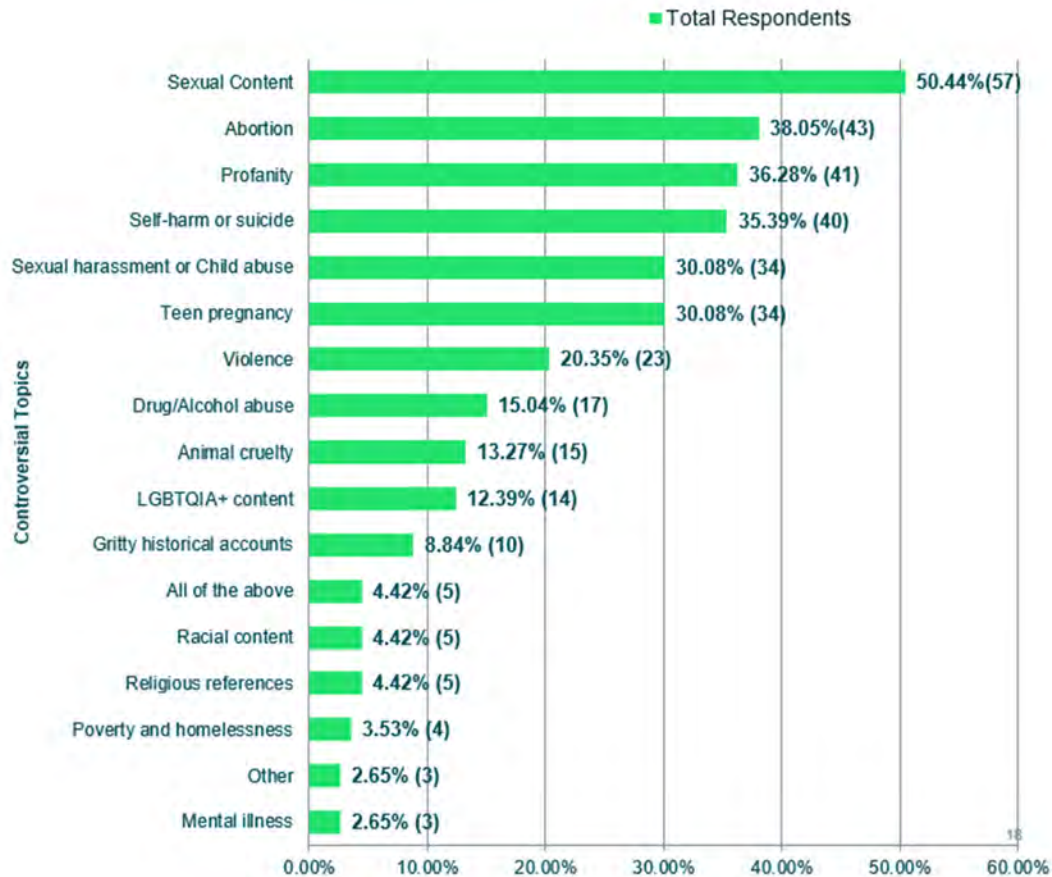


RQ2: Which controversial topics are school librarians most hesitant to include in their collections?

Research Question 2 examined perceived controversial topics participants expressed hesitation about adding to their collections, the factors they consider when considering purchasing controversial materials, and the relationship between a participant's previous experiences with book challenges and their hesitancy to purchase controversial materials.

Controversial Topics

The survey presented participants with 16 topics identified by *School Library Journal* (2016) and Aucoin (2021) as being the most frequently banned/challenged topics (question 10). Participants selected topics they were hesitant to add to their collections. Of the 113 respondents, 50.4% were most hesitant to purchase books that may contain sexual content. Books featuring mental illness were least likely to be identified, with 2.6% expressing hesitation. Figure 2 lists the topics in order of frequency.

Figure 2*Controversial Topics School Librarians are Hesitant to Purchase for Their School Libraries**Experiences with Challenges and the Inclusion/Exclusion of Controversial Materials*

Chi-squared tests of independence were conducted to compare experiences with challenges with participants' hesitancy to purchase each controversial topic. Only two topics were found to have a statistically significant relationship with participants' experiences with challenges: LGBTQIA+ content ($X^2=5.86$, $df=1$, $p=0.02$) and sexual content ($X^2=7.38$, $df=1$, $p=0.01$). Those respondents who had not experienced a challenge were less likely to purchase these controversial topics than those who had experienced a challenge. Relationships between each of the other topics and participants' experiences with challenges were also tested and determined to not be statistically significant according to the chi-squared results.

Of the 44 optional, open-ended responses participants provided about which topics they would be hesitant to purchase, five specifically mentioned LGBTQIA+ and five specifically mentioned sexual content. The majority of comments identified general factors influencing their purchase decisions, as listed in Table 4.

One participant explained the inability to purchase LGBTQIA+ materials because “Zimbabwean government is against LGBTQ+ activities and programmes. They are carried out in secret locations but if you are caught you can be arraigned before the courts and sentenced.” Another wrote, “I think I would have some parents protest if I tried to add LGBTQ+ books to our collection,” indicating parents played a role in collection development decisions. Finally, one participant explicitly claimed they previously but no longer self-censor LGBTQIA+ materials because of administration support, stating, “I self-censored books with LGBTQ+ content until about 8 years [ago] because I knew I wouldn’t be supported by my administration. Then the admin changed, and I felt freer to purchase them. Now I have more than 30 years at my school and so am not really scared of what could be done to me. I can always retire.”

Of the five who mentioned sexual content, four noted “explicit” or “graphic” content being the issue. One respondent observed, “It’s hard to generalize those topics. Sexual content could mean anything from a kiss to touching to oral sex. There are shades of gray and I work within those. But just a mention of any of the above won’t keep me from purchasing.”

Factors Participants Consider When Purchasing Books With Controversial Topics

As previously mentioned, participants had the opportunity to provide comments about the 16 topics. Their responses revealed multiple factors influencing the purchase of controversial topics, including age-appropriateness of the book, the context of the topic/content within the book, organization or school considerations, reactions from parents, and possible consequences based on government restrictions. These open-ended responses were coded based on the themes identified. Table 4 provides the frequency of each theme.

Table 4

Factors Considered When Purchasing Controversial Materials

Coded Theme	Frequency
Age of students is a factor when purchasing controversial materials.	22
Context of the potentially controversial content within the book is a factor when purchasing materials.	8
Organization (school) is a factor when purchasing controversial materials.	4
Parents are a factor when purchasing controversial materials.	2
Government is a factor when purchasing controversial materials.	1

Many participants indicated they make decisions about controversial topics based on what they perceive as being age-appropriate for their libraries. One participant observed, “Most hard topics can be boiled down to something appropriate for most age groups” and another stating, “As long as topics are handled in an age-appropriate way, most of these topics are fine in an elementary library.” Another indicated they consult professional resources claiming, “I don’t feel that any

topics are inappropriate, but I refer to professional reviewing sources for [their] perspective on age appropriateness.”

Respondents also mentioned the context and overall presentation of the controversial subject matter is important. One respondent said, “While I don’t shy away from adding books based on controversial topics, I do consider how that content is presented/developed in a story.” Another observed, “Everything requires context. Any of the above topics portrayed in a gratuitous ‘because I can’ manner is just inappropriate. That said, every topic above is a current reality for some of our students, so in the context of, ‘how to live through this trauma and move on with life,’ these are appropriate.”

Discussion

This study examined the extent to which the recent increase in book challenges and bans may have influenced self-censoring acquisition behaviors of school librarians, and it identified the controversial topics school librarians are currently hesitant to purchase for their library collections. Due to the overall increase in awareness and media coverage of book challenges nationwide, this study provides a timely examination of possible self-censorship occurring in school libraries.

RQ1: To what extent, if any, has the recent increase in book challenges and bans influenced self-censoring behaviors?

Book Challenges

As ALA has reported, libraries in the United States have experienced an “unprecedented” number of book challenges (ALA 2022). The majority of this study’s participants had not experienced a challenge during the most recent 12-month period nor prior to that time frame. Half had never experienced a challenge. However, when comparing the number of respondents who had experienced a challenge *within* the most recent twelve months against the number of respondents who had a challenge *before* the last twelve months, we found that the number of respondents in the two groups was approximately the same. Although the increase in the frequency of challenges was not substantial, the number does indicate a rise in challenges, which suggests an increase in book challenges among participants, reflecting the nationwide increases reported by Friedman and Johnson (2022) and ALA (2022b).

Purchasing Decisions

When considering titles for purchase, more than two-thirds of participants claim they approach purchasing decisions with an increased scrutiny compared to previous years in response to the increased media attention surrounding book challenge and school libraries. Their expressed comfort level with purchasing controversial materials indicated they have become slightly more hesitant in doing so. This finding aligns with *School Library Journal*’s most recent “controversial books” study, where 82% of surveyed school librarians reported weighing the effects of adding controversial topics to their collections (Yorio, 2022), a drastic increase from

that publication's 2016 study in which only 29% of respondents weighed the effect of controversial subject matter (SLJ, 2016).

This scrutiny does not necessarily result in participants completely refusing to purchase materials identified as controversial. Slightly fewer than half admitted to not purchasing a book specifically because the book contained subject matter that might be considered controversial. Those participants who did refrain, however, may have been engaging in self-censoring behaviors, as one frequently identified reason for self-censoring is to avoid a potential challenge (Dawkins, 2017). If librarians have not yet experienced a challenge and are nervous about that process, they may be more likely to engage in a self-censoring behavior: by not purchasing controversial materials in an attempt to prevent a challenge from occurring.

Multiple self-censorship studies, both professional and scholarly, have explored the frequency with which school librarians self-censor, and the results have varied considerably. This study further adds to the varied findings within school library research. The majority of these studies, using surveys (Oltmann, 2018; SLJ, 2016; Whelan, 2009; Yitzhaki, 2001; Yorio, 2022), interviews (Becnel & Moeller, 2020; Dawkins, 2017), and collection analyses (Bellows, 2005; Coley, 2002) have concluded self-censorship is a common practice among school librarians both in the United States and internationally. Considerably fewer studies have found the practice is uncommon (Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023; Owen, 2007; Rickman, 2010). Future research should use a triangulation mixed-methods design "to simultaneously collect both quantitative and qualitative data, merge the data, and use the results to understand a research problem" (Creswell, 2005, p. 514)." This suggest design could involve working with one group of participants, analyzing their collections, interviewing them, and surveying them about attitudes and behaviors.

Practices, Policies, and Procedures

Slightly more than one third of respondents revised at least part of their library's collection development policy within the most recent 12 months. Approximately one quarter of respondents had revised their selection policies with the intent to avoid a challenge, and slightly more than one quarter had revised their procedures and policies specific to book challenges. Although a higher percentage of the group as a whole did not change their policies, participants who experienced a challenge within the past 12 months were more likely to have changed their policies at within the same time period.

Unknown is whether these policies were changed before or after these librarians experienced a challenge. Other unknown factors include the entity instigating the challenge (administrator, parent, community member, etc.), the extent to which the policies had been revised, or if the "changes" were actually to create a policy where none existed before. To promote intellectual freedom, collection development policies that include both selection procedures and reconsideration procedures have long been identified as essential for school librarians (Schultz-Jones & Oberg, 2015) and to help protect school librarians in the event of challenges (Yorio, 2022). In addition, schools with board-approved written policies were more likely to retain a book as a result of a challenge (Hopkins, 1991). Additionally, the absence of a formal policy can increase behaviors of self-censorship (Dawkins, 2017).

Perspectives on Controversial Topics

The second research question explored the controversial topics that school librarians are most hesitant to purchase. Sexual content, abortion, profanity, and self-harm/suicide were the four most frequently identified topics. Some of these topics aligned with previous self-censorship studies and reports, including the hesitancy to purchase materials with sexual content (Oltmann, 2018; Williams, 2020; Yitzhaki, 2001) and profanity (Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Oltmann, 2018). However, other topics identified in previous self-censorship studies and reports were not as frequently selected by the participants in this study. These include an increased hesitancy to purchase books featuring violence (Moeller & Becnel, 2020) and LGBTQIA+ content (Dawkins, 2017; Garry, 2015). Additionally, the findings from this study do not align with Aucoin's (2021) analysis of themes and characteristics of ALA's most frequently challenged/banned books from 1990 through 2019: violence, sexually explicit, offensive language, drugs/alcohol/smoking. Because identification of the topics relied on self-reporting, using a triangulation mixed-method design might eliminate or at least reduce the possibility of self-reporting bias.

Aucoin's (2021) analysis of the themes most frequently cited for banning/challenging books concluded that sexually explicit content ranked the second-most frequently cited reason for books being banned/challenged for each decade, 1990 through 2019, with violence being the most frequently cited theme. Seemingly, a shift is occurring. In 2022 all 13 titles on ALA's Most Challenged Books of 2022 list (ALA, 2023d) were challenged on the basis of "sexually explicit" content, and none were cited for violence. In 2021 sexually explicit content was cited as a reason for banning/challenging nine of the 10 titles identified, and only one book was cited for violence (ALA, 2023f). In this study, participants identified sexual content as the topic they are most hesitant to add to their collections. Interestingly, participants who had not experienced a challenge were statistically significantly more likely to avoid purchasing titles identified as having sexual content than were respondents who had experienced a challenge.

Experiences with Challenges and the Inclusion/Exclusion of Controversial Materials

Current book challenges are often aimed at marginalized and underrepresented voices, and recent trends show an increase in challenges to LGBTQIA+ content (Dawkins, 2017; Garry, 2015; ALA, 2023d; ALA, 2022c; Hixenbaugh, 2022), as well as an underrepresentation in school library collections of books with LGBTQIA+ characters and situations (Garry, 2015; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013; Oltmann, 2015; Tudor, Moore, & Byrne, 2023). Fewer than 13% of participants indicated they were hesitant to add LGBTQIA+ content to their collections, yet a statistically significant relationship between adding LGBTQIA+ content and a librarian's experience with challenges was identified. Participants who had not experienced a challenge were less likely to purchase LGBTQIA+ titles than participants who had experienced a challenge. Additionally, discussions of LGBTQIA+ materials appeared in open-ended responses more frequently than any other topic. One possible explanation for the discrepancy and self-reported low hesitancy to purchase LGBTQIA+ materials may be that LGBTQIA+ materials are sometimes self-censored on the basis of other reasons rather than their inclusion of LGBTQIA+ content. For example, seven titles on ALA's Most Challenged Books of 2022 list (ALA, 2023d) were challenged for "LGBTQIA+ content," and each title was also challenged on the basis of "sexually explicit" content. Whelan (2009) has posited that librarians conflate LGBTQIA+

content with sexual content, thus identifying the reason for collection exclusion as sexual content and not LGBTQIA+.

Factors Participants Consider When Purchasing Books With Controversial Topics

The survey instrument did not provide an opportunity for participants to explain their reasons for feeling hesitant to add and/or for not adding specific topics to their collections. Previous studies have identified school librarians engage in self-censorship to prevent challenges (Bellows, 2005; Dawkins, 2017; Fiske, 1959; Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Moodie & Calvert, 2018; Rickman, 2010), to avoid conflict within the community (Cordell, 2010; Dillon & Williams, 1994; Whelan, 2009), to align their collections with community values (Dawkins, 2017; Garry, 2015; Moeller & Becnel, 2020;), fear of job termination (Dawkins, 2017), fear of public scrutiny and/or criminal charges (Hixenbaugh, 2022), and/or to use internal value judgements when excluding resources (McNicol, 2016; Oppenheim & Smith, 2004; Rickman, 2010; Williams, 2020).

Even though the survey did not specifically ask about reasons for hesitancy, reasons were revealed in the optional comments section following the identification of topics participants are hesitant to add to their collections. Respondents identified internal and external factors they consider when purchasing controversial materials. Internal factors (that is, factors relating to the work itself) include the age-appropriateness of the work and context of the potentially controversial topic/content, and external factors include the school (school values, administration support (or lack of it), teachers, and students), parents, and the government.

When identifying topics they are most hesitant to include in their collections, participants commented that the age-appropriateness of the work and the context in which a topic is presented is critical. Some participants noted consulting professional reviews and resources to determine if a book is appropriate. From our perspective, though, the word “appropriate” can be problematic. It is subjective: what one person considers appropriate for a young reader or themselves, another person may deem inappropriate. Dickinson (2007) discussed the necessity of clearly defining “appropriate.” When a book is identified as age-appropriate, does appropriate refer to reading level, interest level, intellectual level, and/or emotional level? Although publishers often assign a book’s reading level and intended grade level for its audience, the librarian makes the decision to include the book in the collection. If a publisher identifies a nonfiction book about a potentially controversial topic as being appropriate for the reading level of the students served, and said book is well-reviewed and has won awards, but the librarian decides to exclude it from the collection citing age-appropriateness and/or context as the reason(s) for exclusion, then the librarian is potentially censoring by determining what is appropriate according to their personal standards (Bellows, 2005; Oltmann, 2018).

Respondents also identified their school climate, parents, and the government as external factors contributing to their hesitancy to select and possibly eventual decision to exclude certain controversial topics. School librarians have reported instances of their administrators ignoring policy, and parent-led advocacy groups have been pressuring administrations to circumvent policy. Additionally, proposed legislation at the state level in some states has suggested pressing criminal charges against (Hixenbaugh, 2022) and/or revoking educator certifications of librarians

and teachers who provide access to materials that politicians have identified as “material harmful to minors” (Tolin, 2023).

Preventing and Mitigating Actions Against Intellectual Freedom

How can school librarians and school library educators prevent and/or mitigate the detrimental consequences of these actions? Dickinson has noted that the responsibility of the librarian during the reconsideration request process “is to act as informed counsel for the district in the matter of selection, to gather data about the resource, and most importantly, to defend the use of established policy and procedures.” Dickinson had also expressed the view that librarians inadequately and/or insufficiently explain the roles and responsibilities of the librarian and library program, and as a result, “This lack of shared knowledge about selection comes back to haunt library media specialists when there are challenges to instructional materials” (2007, p. 29). School librarians can work to change stakeholder perceptions about the purpose of the school library program and the role of the school librarian and, thus, the importance of intellectual freedom in this context. School librarians must be transparent about and advocate for the profession, as well as develop and maintain positive relationships with stakeholders (Everhart & Mardis, 2014; Lewis, 2020).

School library professionals must continue working within the field to support one another, continuing to emphasize intellectual freedom in certification curriculum, offering professional development on the topic for both certified and non-certified school librarians, and advocating for themselves and the students they serve.

These acts, however, are insufficient when faced with these new laws that take book selection out of the hands of educators, including school librarians. School library professionals must also extend advocacy beyond the field of librarianship, connecting and engaging in meaningful discourse with multiple stakeholder groups by sending messages that resonate personally with those stakeholders (Church, 2020; Everhart & Mardis, 2014). Studies focusing on administrators’ and parents’ perceptions and experiences might offer insight into how to reduce the number of challenges and gain support for intellectual freedom in schools.. Additionally, studies exploring the self-censorship decision-making process of school librarians can fuel future avenues of growth through education opportunities and can also be used as practical guides for librarians to self-assess their personal collection development decisions for self-censoring behaviors.

Limitations

The sample size for the study was small, and the majority of participants reside in the United States. Self-reporting bias is a concern in survey research as responses are limited to the information participants provide and their perceptions about their own behaviors and attitudes. This study may also be subject to possible self-selection bias as participants chose whether or not to participate. Using social media and electronic discussion lists limited respondents to those who choose to or who are able to access these communication modes. School librarians who had not experienced a challenge or who are less concerned about challenges in general may have opted out of the survey. Additionally, this study focused on pre-emptive self-censorship in the context of acquisitions for the collection and not “*ex post facto* self-censorship.” Exploring

librarians behavior related to removing, redacting, transferring, labeling, and otherwise restricting materials might generate different conclusions about self-censoring behaviors in school librarians (Dawkins, 2017) and warrants further study.

Conclusion

Self-censorship has been called “a secret practice [that is] the least obvious but arguably the most powerful and pervasive form of censorship which is informal, private, and originates with the decision-maker” (Dillon & Williams, 1994, p. 11). Gaining a detailed understanding of the prevalence of self-censorship is difficult because of the secrecy often involved in this practice. Also, findings from research on self-censorship vary considerably, with multiple reports, both scholarly and professional, indicating school librarians are engaging in self-censorship (Becnel & Moeller, 2020; Bellows, 2005; Coley, 2002; Moodie & Calvert, 2018; Oltmann, 2018), and others concluding school librarians are not doing so (Owen 2007; Rickman, 2010). Findings from this study suggest participants have developed an acute awareness of the issue and are exhibiting an increased hesitancy to purchase materials perceived to be controversial.

Hill (2010) has suggested that librarians do not “understand or realize the long-term cost of self-censoring.” Huston (2003) has alleged that self-censorship is more dangerous than a challenge because when self-censorship occurs, no discussion about the book occurs; patrons are never presented with the information necessary to think critically about the issue. Ultimately, the decision to engage in self-censorship harms students the most, as they are often left without the voices of story protagonists with identifies readers share or plots exploring experiences that may help students cope with their own lives.

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Appendix A: School Library Self-Censorship Research Study

1. Which of the following best describes your position?
 - School librarian
 - Paraprofessional
 - Other: [text box]

2. If you live in the United States, please type your state. If you live outside of the United States, please type your country. [text box]

3. Which of the following best describes your certification level?
 - I am a certified librarian.
 - I am working towards my certification.
 - I am not certified.
 - Other: [text box]

4. Please select the age group that best describes your library.
 - Ages 3–10 (Elementary PK–5)
 - Ages 11–13 (Middle grades 6–8)
 - Ages 14–18 (High School grades 9–12)
 - All ages
 - Other: [text box]

5. Have you experienced a book challenge within the last 12 months?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe: [text box]

6. If you have experienced a book challenge within the last 12 months, what was the result of the book challenge? (Was the book removed? Did the book stay in the collection?) [text box]

7. Did you experience a book challenge prior to the last 12 months?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe: [text box]

8. In the last 12 months, have you refrained from purchasing a book because it contained content that might be considered controversial?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe: [text box]

9. Do you find yourself weighing the effect of controversial subject matter more often than you did one or two years ago?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe: [text box]

Optional Comments: [text box]

10. Which topics you do feel are inappropriate for your library? Select all that apply.

- Animal cruelty
- Sexual content
- Sexual harassment or child abuse
- Poverty and homelessness
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Mental illness
- Abortion
- Teen pregnancy
- Racial content
- Gritty historical accounts
- LGBTQ+ content
- Profanity or vulgar language
- Violence
- Self-harm or suicide
- Religious references
- Other, please specify [text box]
- All of the above
- None of the above

Optional Comments [text box]

11. There has been an increase in national attention to book challenges in the media recently. In the last 12 months, have you changed your collection development selection practices to avoid a potential challenge?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe: [text box]

Optional Comments [text box]

12. In the last 12 months, have you changed any policies or procedures related to the process of a book challenge?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe: [text box]

Optional Comments [text box]

13. Using the following scale, rate your comfort level with purchasing controversial materials, with 1 being not comfortable, 3 being moderately comfortable, and 5 being very comfortable.

1 2 3 4 5

14. Using the following scale, how comfortable are you responding to a book challenge, with 1 being not comfortable, 3 being moderately comfortable, and 5 being very comfortable?

1 2 3 4 5

15. Using the following scale, how would you rate your purchasing decisions now compared to your purchasing decisions one or two years ago, with 1 being not comfortable, 3 being moderately comfortable, and 5 being very comfortable?

1 2 3 4 5

Optional Comments [text box]

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