

Volume 27, 2024
ISSN 2165-1019

Approved July 2024
www.ala.org/aasl/slr

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

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

- x RQ2: Which controversial topics

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

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?

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 sr many Amenlon

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

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 surv

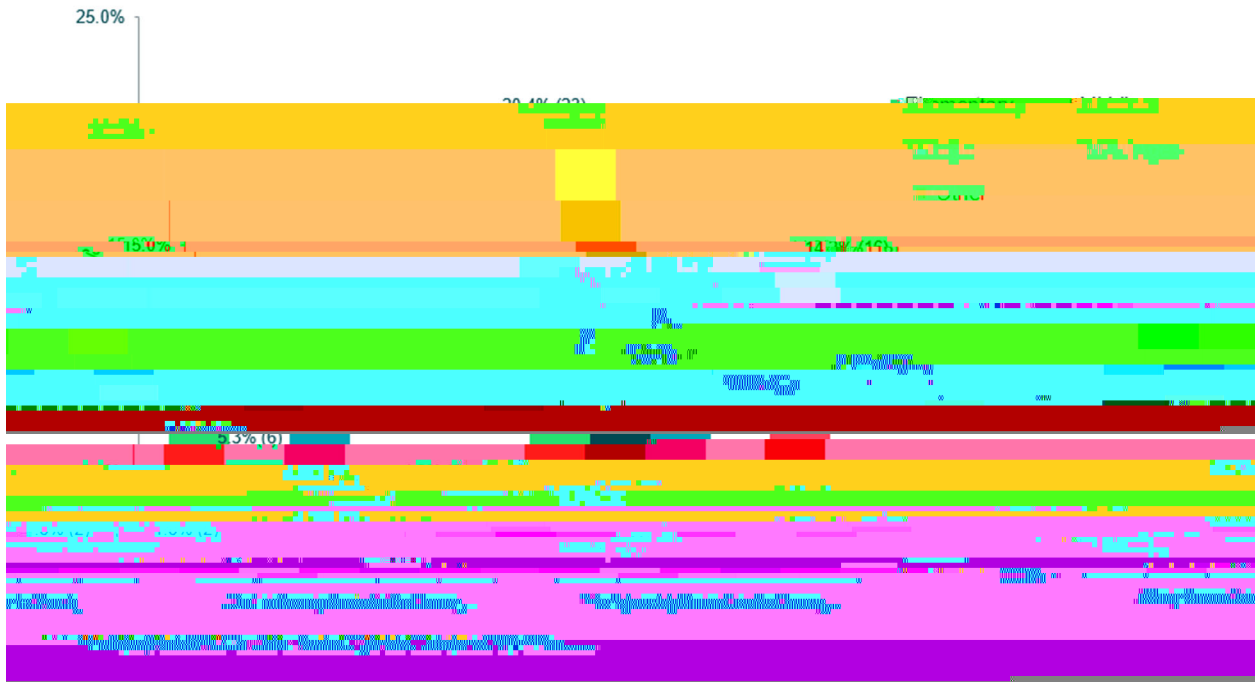
Table 1

School Librarians' Experience with Challenges (n=113)

	Within most recent 12 months		Prior to most recent 12 months	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent

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.

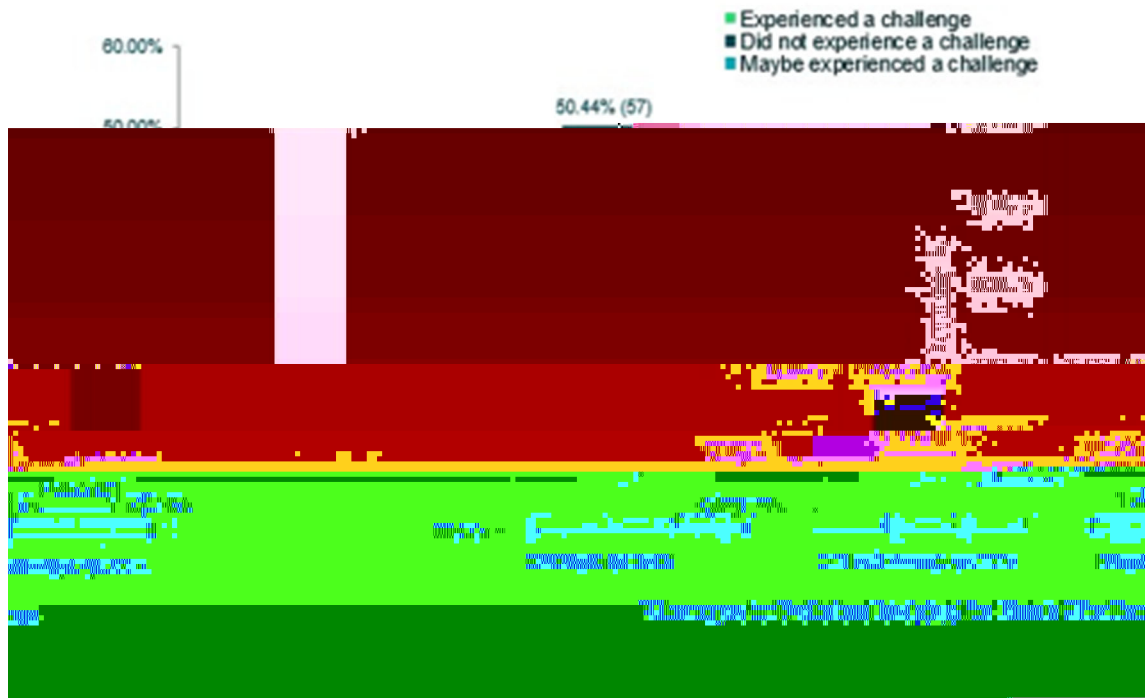
Table 2

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 curren	

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.

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

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 iden

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

Dawkins, 2017; Rickman)

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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

