The decision by school librarians to self-censor: The impact of perceived administrative discomfort

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Abstract:

Material selection is one of the school librarian's most important roles because the collection determines the types of materials to which students have access. Self-censorship occurs when a school librarian chooses not to add material to a collection for fear of a challenge. Often this fear is based on how school librarians believe their own administrators might handle a challenge, but sometimes school librarians choose to limit access to controversial materials to avoid potential hassle and publicity. In 2016, 470+ school librarians in North and South Carolina participated in an online survey, and 49 were interviewed to help determine factors that influence librarians' selection decisions. This article examines how school librarians' perceptions that administrators are uncomfortable with controversial materials impact their decision making.

Keywords: school librarians | material selection | self-censorship | school administrators | challenged books

Article:

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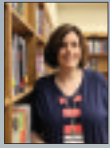
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The Decision by School Librarians to Self-Censor

The Impact of Perceived Administrative Discomfort

APRIL M. DAWKINS

Material selection is one of the school librarian's most important roles because the collection determines the types of materials to which students have access. Self-censorship occurs when a school librarian chooses not to add material to a collection for fear of a challenge. Often this fear is based on how school librarians believe their own administrators might handle a challenge, but sometimes school librarians choose to limit access to controversial materials to avoid potential hassle and publicity. In 2016, 470+ school librarians in North and South Carolina participated in an online survey, and 49 were interviewed to help determine factors that influence librarians' selection decisions. This article examines how school librarians' perceptions that administrators are uncomfortable with controversial materials impact their decision making.

THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ON THE SELECTION OF LIBRARY MATERIALS

Little research has been conducted to examine the role of administrators—particularly principals—in censoring materials in library collections. Hopkins (1995) notes that when a principal initiates a challenge, it usually results in removal or restriction of the item. Her study also explains that in those situations the relationships between the school librarians and principals is not seen as one of partnership. Zirkel and Gluckman (1997), reporting on a 1993 Kansas City case in which administrators violated First Amendment Rights, warn, "School principals and district officials must assiduously resist the temptation to quell controversy that occasionally arises concerning school library holdings by summarily removing the source of the controversy" (p. 62). In a Canadian study conducted in 1989 that surveyed 400 principals in two provinces, Rainey (1989) found that more than half of the principals believed they should be able to remove materials from the school library. Additionally, more than half believed that it was acceptable to place restrictions on content instead of removing challenged materials.

In 2016, *School Library Journal* updated its 2008 study on controversial books (Whelan, 2009). Of the random sample surveyed, 574 U.S. school librarians responded. This study found that 9 out of 10 elementary or middle school librar-

ians had chosen not to purchase material because of the potential for controversy. The results indicate that previous challenges had impacted purchasing decisions, and this impact was greater when the challenge arose from an administrator as opposed to a parent ("SLJ Controversial Books Survey," 2016).

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT = PERCEIVED PUBLIC OPINION

No previous research offers a theoretical understanding as to why a school librarian might engage in self-censoring despite believing in the right to read and having access to materials. This study proposes that the Spiral of Silence Theory might provide an explanation for self-censoring behaviors. Noelle-Neumann first proposed the Spiral of Silence Theory in 1974. Her research focuses on the formation of public opinion and why people choose to censor themselves when their opinions differ from the majority. She posits that "fear of isolating oneself (not only fear of separation but also doubt about one's own capacity for judgment) is an integral part of all processes of public opinion" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 43).

The Spiral of Silence Theory has sev-

eral key components, including fear of isolation, unwillingness to speak against perceived majority opinion, and the belief that public opinion tends to keep people in line (Weiss, 2009). Examination of school librarians' perceptions of their administrators may explain why school librarians hesitate to add controversial content to their collections. If they believe an administrator will disapprove, fail to support their decision, or even question their professional judgment, a school librarian could choose to avoid the addition of controversial content. In this study, "dominant public opinion" is measured through examination of the school librarians' perceptions of their principals' level of comfort with controversial content.

MIXED METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed methodology approach, three research questions were addressed related to selection behaviors by school librarians:

1. How do school librarians describe their own selection processes?
2. To what extent do school librarians engage in self-censorship as part of the collection development process?
3. When school librarians engage in self-censorship, what are the ways they self-censor and what factors influence their decision-making?

This study used an initial survey distributed to North and South Carolina school librarians, with follow-up interviews with some of those participants. The survey instrument was designed to collect demographic data, as well as test the usefulness of a scale to measure the likelihood of self-censorship. Of the 471 initial sample respondents, 130 volunteered to participate in the interview portion; 49 were interviewed. The interview questions included nine questions designed to elicit descriptions of the selection processes and censorship experiences of the librarians.

SURVEY RESULTS

On survey questions specific to administrative support, school librarians were asked to rank on a scale of 1–7 (with 1 being extremely comfortable and 7 being extremely uncomfortable) their comfort level with the addition of materials in several different controversial categories. They were then asked to rank what they believed to be their principal's comfort level on the same categories. The categories were based on the most commonly challenged content collected by the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom. The librarians were also asked to describe their administrators' involvement or support of their library program; administrator support was discussed in response to other questions as well. The final question of the survey asked school librarians if they believed their job might be in jeopardy if they added controversial content to the collection.

When comparing the school librarians' comfort when adding controversial content with how they believed their principals might support this addition, three areas showed the greatest differences: (1) LGBTQ content; (2) drugs, alcohol, and smoking; and (3) sexually explicit materials. In all three cases, the school librarians indicated a higher level of comfort than they expected from their principals. Based on the survey results, the librarians

JR NONFICTION

PETS

Bozzo, Linda. **I Like Greyhounds!** (Discover Dogs With the American Canine Association). Enslow, 2018. 24p. LB $22.60. ISBN: 9780766086401. Grades K-3. Information is given in these limited pages for deciding on a puppy or older dog, exercise needs, food, and playing with other dogs. Fact boxes, colored photos, index, and glossary make this a useful book for dog lovers. Thirty dogs in the series include pit bulls, collies, and dalmatians.

Jacobs, Pat. **Cat Pals** (Pet Pals). Crabtree, 2018. 32p. LB $27.60. ISBN: 9780778735502. Grades 2-5. Pictures and easy-to-understand facts and tips make this a valuable tool for the prospective cat owner including care, food, health, safety, and fun suggestions. Back matter has a quiz about cats, answers, additional books and websites, glossary, and index.

Macheske, Felicia. **Cheeky Cuties** (Guess What Pets: Hamsters). Cherry Lake, 2018. 24p. LB $28.50. ISBN: 9781634728553. Grades K-2. For students who like surprises, this animal series will enhance problem solving skills in a fun way. The last page has the answer. This title gives clues with full photos with large print clues. Included are a simple glossary and index.

Rustad, Martha E. H. **Poodles** (Favorite Dog Breeds). Amicus, 2018. 24p. LB $28.91. ISBN: 9781681511290. Grades 1-4. For children who enjoy reading about specific dog breeds, here is the perfect series for information about beagles, boxers, bulldogs, shepherds, terriers, labs, and others. Are poodles good guard dogs? Good with children? What size is best? Do they shed? (No!!) A basic glossary, additional reading, and index round out this short title.

felt they were more comfortable than administrators with all controversial areas and most comfortable with religious content. For both the school librarians and their perceptions of their principals, the average comfort level for religious viewpoint was below 4, meaning they were comfortable with this topic. School librarians believed their principals would be most uncomfortable with three types of materials: (1) violence, (2) LGBTQ content, and (3) offensive language. Interestingly, librarians believed their principals would be more comfortable with sexually explicit content than they would with LGBTQ content (see Table 1).

An examination of the range of responses in comfort levels is also important to determine whether this perception of discomfort had an impact on school librarians' own discomfort with controversial content. This can be seen in the standard deviations: the higher the standard deviation, the wider the range of responses. If the standard deviation is low for the principal prediction, then perceived principals' comfort levels did not likely explain the variation in the school librarians' comfort level (see Table 1). After examining the average and standard deviations of the comfort levels, further statistical analysis showed that as school librarians believed their principal would be uncomfortable with controversial content, their own level of discomfort rose.

The final section of the survey asked school librarians about perceptions of support they received from school- and district-level administrators, including whether they felt their job might be in jeopardy if they chose to add materials about controversial subjects to their school library collections. Interestingly, more than 94%

Table 1. Categories of Controversial Material and Comfort Levels

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Religious viewpoint (non-Christian)		
School librarian rating	2.34	1.48
Principal prediction	3.25	1.78
Sexually explicit (kissing in younger books)		
School librarian rating	4.16	1.92
Principal prediction	4.50	1.69
Drugs, alcohol, or smoking		
School librarian rating	3.73	1.98
Principal prediction	4.58	1.92
Offensive language		
School librarian rating	4.23	1.92
Principal prediction	4.78	1.73
LGBTQ content (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer)		
School librarian rating	4.08	2.11
Principal prediction	4.83	1.91
Violence (weapons, fighting, domestic or dating violence, rape)		
School librarian rating	4.36	2.07
Principal prediction	4.94	1.84

of the respondents felt supported by their school-level administrators when making decisions about their collection, with 85% feeling supported by district-level administrators.

In examining results based on their level of experience, 37.5% of the 17 school librarians with less than a year of experience felt that their job might be in jeopardy if they added controversial content to their collections. This percentage, however, decreased in school librarians with more years of experience. Only 22% of the 37 librarians with more than 25 years of experience felt their jobs might be in jeopardy. Though the perception of job security increased the longer school librarians held their positions, even the most inexperienced school librarians felt relatively safe when they chose controversial materials. However, even the small chance of losing a position based

on the decision to add controversial content to the collection might make a school librarian think twice about such acquisitions (see Figure 1).

INTERVIEW RESULTS

If a principal or school administrator expressed concern about a topic, or if the school librarians thought a principal might be unwilling to back them in a challenge, those interviewed would choose to exclude material. Several school librarians explained that their decision not to add material to the collection was largely based on their perceptions of the reactions of their principal or other school administrators. One school librarian, not speaking of herself but of others within her district, stated, "Some people just don't want to cause their principals any heartburn, so they preempt it by not ordering it." One li-

Figure 1. Comparison of school librarians' perceived job jeopardy based on experience (less than 1 year, n = 17; more than 25 years, n = 37).

brarian explained that despite the decision by her school's Media and Technology Advisory Committee (MTAC), "One of the books that was challenged was a nonfiction book and my MTAC chose to leave it on the shelf and my principal chose to override us." One school librarian explained that despite the decision to retain an item by both school- and district-level review committees, when a parent confronted district principals, the principals gave in to her demands and restricted the item so it could only be checked out with written permission. She described her feelings: "I was very, very angry about that decision. I didn't feel at the time I really had a whole lot of other choice but to do that." Without administrative support, she did not know what else to do.

Despite these responses, when asked directly about administrative involvement or support of the library program, the reactions fell into four categories:

1. Administrators who were supportive of the program but either could not or did not support it financially
2. Administrators who were supportive and provided adequate funding
3. Administrators who seemed to be supportive but were largely unaware of the library program
4. Administrators who did not support the library program

Some librarians indicated that while they felt supported by their administrators in the programs or services they provided, that support did not always extend to financing their programs at an adequate level. Several librarians indicated that without the support of their administrators, they would make different purchasing decisions. One librarian said, "If I did *not* have a supportive administration, I might think twice about what my purchases were going to be."

Some librarians indicated their administrators seemed either uninterested in or indifferent to what occurred in the library. Sometimes, the participants described the administrators as providing token, not real, support. Most disturbing were the statements from librarians who felt they did not receive support from their administrators at all.

Based on interview questions related to external factors, two factors greatly influenced the decision to self-censor: concern about community reaction and administrative support of the library. These results suggest that the Spiral of Silence Theory is a reasonable explanation for the decision to exclude material.
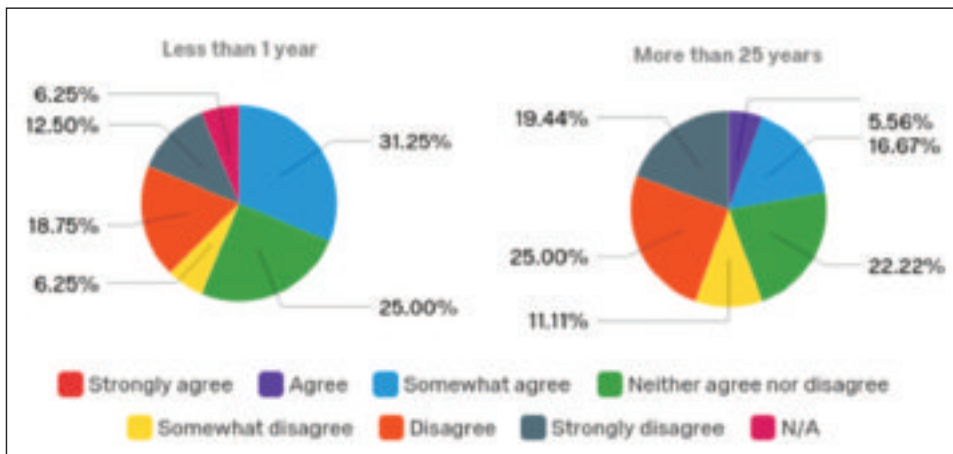
YA NONFICTION

ART: CLASSIC, GRAPHIC, AND IN-BETWEEN

Beaumont, Steve. **How to Draw Epic Fantasy Art** (Creating Fantasy Art). Rosen, 2018. 48p. LB $23.85. ISBN: 9781499466706. Grades 7-12. Beaumont, fantasy artist himself, gives step-by-step directions for drawing warriors, pirates, and the dragon's lair. He recommends that all artists keep a sketchbook handy! Included are a brief glossary, further information, and an index.

Bonser, Randall. **Comics, Graphic Novels, and Manga: The Ultimate Teen Guide** (It Happened To Me). Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. 307p. LB $34.65. ISBN: 9781442268395. Grades 7-12. From health to social issues, the series covers a range of contemporary topics. How can the reader create graphic novels? How do you read those things? These questions are answered here. Extensive chapter notes and index help the researcher.

Britton, Crystal A. **African American Art: The Long Struggle** (Art Collections). Mason Crest, 2018. 128p. LB $26.95. ISBN: 9781422239315. Grades 7-12. The updated series show beautiful prints and photographs of art from around the world. This title features African American art, from folk to modern of various mediums. Notes and a comprehensive index complete each volume.

Geddes, Hannah. **Drawing Zentangle Bugs and Butterflies** (How to Draw Zentangle Art). Gareth Stevens, 2018. 32p. LB $26.60. ISBN: 9781538208434. Grades 5-9. The Zentangle method of art begins with tangles or doodles, sometimes called "Zen-Tangle" because of the calming effect. All ages can benefit from drawing these angles and designs, then creating pictures of bugs and butterflies. Series topics use animals, birds, fantasy characters, holidays, and sea life.

School librarians may choose to exclude controversial content if they perceive their community as rural, conservative, or likely to challenge such choices. Similarly, if a principal or school administrator expresses concern about a topic or if they even think a principal might be unwilling to back them in a challenge, those interviewed would choose to exclude material. Examination of the survey data supports these conclusions as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several steps are recommended for school librarians to avoid self-censoring behaviors. Communication is key. School librarians need to initiate ongoing conversations with school-level administrators that include discussions about the purposes of a library and its collection, the freedom to read, and the role of a school librarian and principal in selecting materials.

Almost all of the school librarians surveyed indicated that they followed selection policy guidelines when choosing materials; principals, however, may not be aware of these policies and procedures. School librarians should be sure principals are aware of a district's or school's selection policy and should discuss the procedures used for selecting materials so they understand how librarians review materials for content, appeal, quality, and appropriateness. Helping principals understand that school librarians are professionally trained and qualified to select materials might also ease their discomfort.

Additionally, school librarians should discuss with their principals what the district policy is for selecting resources in controversial content areas and handling a challenge of such resources. While school librarians might believe that their principals would be uncomfortable with controversial materials, perception is not always reality. It might be awkward to ask the principal how he or she feels about LGBTQ content or offensive language, but librarians need to ask. If a principal is especially opposed to the inclusion of these resources, the librarian should work with that principal to develop guidelines for inclusion. School librarians should help their principals understand why students need access to materials that some might consider controversial.

Finally, school librarians and principals should discuss what should happen when material is questioned. A quick beginning-of-the-year review of the school's or district's reconsideration policy or guidelines will help to avoid miscommunication. This discussion should include what steps should be taken if material is questioned or if a more formal request for removal occurs. Clear communication and understanding about policy and action steps in a challenge can help school librarians avoid self-censoring behaviors and provide intellectual freedom and access for their students.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Dawkins, A. M. (2017). *Worth fighting for: Factors influencing selection decisions in school libraries* (Order No. 10257901). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1927624310).

April M. Dawkins is an assistant professor in library and information studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She earned her doctorate in library and information science from the University of South Carolina, her MLS from NC Central University, and her BA in history from Meredith College. Dawkins previously published a chapter in *School Librarianship: Past, Present, and Future* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). She was the recipient of the Robert Williams Graduate Student Research Award at the University of South Carolina for her dissertation research on self-censorship. Prior to her doctoral studies, she served for fifteen years as a high school media specialist in North Carolina.