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# Attitudes of Israeli High School Librarians Regarding Library Censorship: Preliminary Findings

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*The study sought to determine the attitudes of high school librarians in Israel, a country whose population is characterized by modern western outlook and norms on one hand and deeply rooted tradition and conservatism on the other. A questionnaire including, besides demographic questions, 17 statements concerning censorship, was mailed to 442 schools (two-thirds of the population) and yielded 187 usable replies, a 42.3% response rate. A positive correlation was found between the librarians' attitude regarding censorship, both in principle and in practice, and the sectorial affiliation of their school: librarians in the orthodox sectors displayed greater agreement with censorship, probably striving to conserve traditional values.*

## Introduction

The school librarian is actually a mediator between students and the world of knowledge contained in the library. Strict supervision and censorship of a collection's contents may block students' access to important and needed information, while total absence of censorship can expose students to contents objectionable to their parents and teachers. The literature reports numerous cases of attempted internal and external censorship of a library's collection content and their handling by librarians. The attitude of school librarians towards censorship in principle essentially determines their manner of coping with censoring attempts, i.e. compliance with or rejection of them. No comprehensive study has yet addressed the Israeli school librarians' attitudes towards collection censorship and associated factors. Such a study may contribute to the formulation of a general policy concerning censorship, an issue of double importance since the advent of the Internet age.

## Research Objectives

The objective of the study was to examine the attitudes of high school librarians in Israel, a country characterized by a unique blend of western modernity and culture and tenacious tradition. It was hypothesized that attitudes regarding censorship would be related to the school's sectorial affiliation.

## Literature Review

The problem of censoring the contents of school and public library collections has long concerned researchers and practitioners. Professional literature abounds with hundreds of articles and books on the various aspects of library censorship, examining the prevalence and reasons of this problem and its implications on library and librarian functioning. In view of the numerous publications, the following review focuses on a selection related only to the specific topic of the present study.

### *General background*

The Library Bill of Rights composed by the ALA (1989) states that library books and material should meet the information needs of all members of the community and no material should be excluded due to the origin, background or stances of its author. A library must provide information that reflects and represents the maximum perspectives on past and present events.

Previous research has indicated a gradual rise in the extent of censorship attempts in school libraries (Hanson, 1987; Martorelli, 1982). In the eighties, the proportion of parental complaints grew while, compared to the sixties, the number of complaints from the school staff dropped (Burruss, 1989).

Pope (1974) investigated the attitudes of librarians in school, public and academic libraries regarding the acquisition of books dealing with sex and sexuality and found that the proportion of "banning" among school librarians was highest (ca. 82%), compared to only 48% among public librarians and 31% among academic librarians. The common explanation is that the school library is an integral part of the school and used by youngsters, a fact that determines its conception and goals. Consequently, the content of school library collections is much more supervised and restricted (Fiske, 1959). A study by Bump (1980) of over 600 high school libraries in five US states found that when acquiring new books, the librarian's decision is more influenced by the book's suitability to the collection and less by its possibly objectionable contents. However, a concurrent and more comprehensive study by Wood & Salvatore (1981) of over 700 high school libraries revealed that many librarians indeed exercised self-censorship by refraining from acquiring controversial titles, and denied access to many such titles to avoid complaints. A recent study by Ken (2002) of 100 high school libraries in Texas also found that 82% applied self-censorship, by not purchasing at least half of listed controversial titles. Summarizing the accumulated findings, Schrader (1996) states that school librarians, particularly in elementary schools, are undoubtedly under greater public pressure to censor material as compared to their counterparts in public libraries.

### *Causes of Complaints: Controversial Topics*

Most requests for removing books from the library involved moral degradation and educational values, mainly in sexually related topics (pornography, homosexuality, nudism, sex education and birth control, obscenities and foul language), violence, drugs and alcohol. Additional complaints cited sacrilege or defamation of faith (e.g. Darwin's evolution theory), of religious convictions or rights of religious minorities and stories of magic and witchcraft. Other complaints concerned political issues (e.g. anti-Vietnam war) and sexist or racial discrimination, although sometimes the moral, social or political grounds were not easily distinguishable (Woods & Salvatore, 1981, Woods, 1979; Serebnick, 1982; Hansen, 1987; Maley, 1990). Burruss (1989) found that profane language, obscenities and sexual topics

accounted together for 75% of banned titles. Additional reasons, much less common, were religion degradation, racism or explicit violence. Similar conclusion was reached earlier by Reichman (1988) who classified the reasons for complaints into five major categories: undermining of family values, threat to traditional family structure (mainly in sexual context), political views, religious faith and social issues, e.g. deprivation of minority rights. The straightforward and open treatment of sexual topics, including sex education, in many adolescent books, often elicited complaints from parents who considered it a violation of traditional family and moral values.

Comparing later surveys (1982-1984 and 1991-1993), Schrader (1996) pointed out the changes in the frequency of complaints against book contents. Witchcraft, which previously ranked fourth, rose higher and violence, which ranked fifth, rose to second place, while obscenities and explicit sexual descriptions, previously in the top place, now dropped to fifth place. Additionally, new books were published, dealing with hitherto untreated topics, such as: single-parent families, abusive parents, changed family roles, sadism, homosexuality, adolescent sex, drugs, alcohol, AIDS, etc., which also aroused controversy and drew harsh criticism by various citizen groups.

Professionals believe that a lucid and balanced book selection policy and formulation of standing procedures for positive handling of complaints from interest groups, combined with a broad perspective, sensitivity and discretion may help librarians solve the problem. The line between meeting the challenge positively and submitting to censorship is very thin. The school staff should initiate meetings with parents to discuss the school's objectives and methods (Dick, 1982; Schrader, 1996).

### *Self-Censorship by Principals, Teachers and Librarians*

Demands to remove material from the school library may also originate from within, from the school staff itself, e.g. principals (Hopkins, 1995), librarians (Serebnik, 1982), educational technology experts (Woods & Salvatore, 1981) and other school employees (Burruss, 1989) honestly concerned about the corrupting impact of certain books on the tender souls of students (Reichman, 1988).

Fiske's (1959) interviews with school and public librarians in California suggested widespread self-censorship: 67% of them reported having refrained from purchasing controversial books and 82% reported having imposed physical and technical restrictions on access to such books. A 1979 study by Woods & Salvatore (1981) on high-school libraries also affirmed that self-censorship was surprisingly commonplace and that many librarians were reluctant to face the dilemma of controversial titles. Thus, in the long run a library's collection depends to a great extent on the librarian's character and professionalism (Woods, 1981; Hansen, 1987). It should be noted that library collections were checked against a predetermined list of titles, a fact that may compromise the validity of findings. This and other methodological flaws led Serebnick (1982) to question the reliability and validity of the above findings and to recall that several previous studies, such as those of Bristol (1949), Moon (1962) and Broderick (1962) reached different conclusions indicating librarians' struggle against censorship.

### *Librarian vs. Principal and Teachers*

Libraries with a lucid policy tended to retain books, but not all fully adhered to it. The responsiveness to complaints was found to depend on the identity of the complainer. Studies show that demands for removing material were more influential coming from the principal and teachers than coming from parents: when parents complained, offensive material was removed in less than half the cases, but if the principal, library staff or a student complained, the material was removed 80% of the time. The principal has an important role with regard to the school library, as supervisor of the librarian and the teachers and this affects collection content. External pressure on the principal to remove material may place the librarian in conflict between his professional ethical code on one hand and his subordination to the principal on the other. Principals often seek to remove controversial material, in which case the librarian may prefer to avoid a head-on struggle for intellectual freedom and seek consensus or compromise, e.g. retaining the material but restricting access and use. Teachers usually back the librarian but refrain from active intervention so that final outcome greatly depends on the librarian's perseverance, self-confidence, freedom of action and ability to cope with the principal's views and opinions (Downs & McCoy, 1984; Hopkins, 1993, 1995).

In **Israel**, where the present study was conducted, the librarians' ethical code (1996) contains a clause entitled "Avoiding Censorship" which states that "the librarian chooses and employs literature without censoring material with respect to outlook, religion or political view... The librarian does not exclude material merely because it is controversial or may offend some of the user population. The librarian must ascertain that the library provides material reflecting the range of opinions...never removing material due to pressure from interest groups or specific minority groups" (Basifriot, 11, February 1996).

The censorship issue was first addressed in the late nineties, in an exploratory study encompassing 25 schools (Yitzhaki, 1998) which later expanded into a larger study of 98 schools (Yitzhaki, 2001). The expanded study found that most libraries actually exercise some form of internal "censorship" originating from within the school. Most libraries had no written protocol or even a standing unwritten policy of specific guidelines for applying censorship. Significant differences were found between school libraries in the public-religious sectors and those in the public non-religious sector concerning collection size and content.

## **Methods**

The research population was defined as the population of librarians working in high-schools belonging to the Jewish public and public-religious sectors in Israel. The study did not include junior high-schools or schools belonging to the Arab sector or to the Jewish ultra-orthodox sector since their unique characteristics warrant separate study. The sample was chosen by strata sampling from the national list of Israeli high schools according to Ministry of Education records for 2001. To increase the probability of obtaining a representative sample, a random sample of two-thirds of the schools in each of the country seven districts was chosen so that each district was represented proportionately to its size. The Ministry of Education list contained 636 schools, yielding a random sample of 424. The initial questionnaire was tested by personal interviews in 18 libraries in the Tel-Aviv and Center districts and consequently a revised version was mailed to all 424 selected schools, with a cover-letter and a pre-stamped self-addressed envelope. Telephone follow-up and re-mailing of questionnaires in late 2002 raised the total number of returned questionnaires. Elimination of non-usable questionnaires resulted in 187 usable questionnaires, a reply rate of 42.3%, relatively high for social science research based on mail surveys (Hornik and Meyer, 1989).

The final sample encompassed almost 30% of the 636 high-schools in the Jewish public and public-religious educational system in Israel.

The research tool consisted of a detailed questionnaire containing questions on demographic background and on the librarian's theoretical and practical stance regarding censorship of library collections. The questionnaire was based on questionnaires used in previous studies in the US (Busha, 1972; Porter, 1997; White, 1988), adjusted and modified according to local circumstances. Questions referred to the respondent's demographic profile, her/his theoretical stance on censorship and actual reaction to attempts of censorship. Due to the wide scope of findings, the current paper presents some preliminary findings only regarding the theoretical stance.

## Findings and Discussion

### *A. Demographic Profile of the Sample:*

The final sample consisted of 187 high-schools, 127 belonging to the public-secular sector (~68%), 27 from the public-religious sector (14.4%) and 33 from the national-orthodox sector (17.6%) consisting of Yeshiva-type high-schools for boys or girls, which formally belong to the public-religious sector but possess a unique atmosphere and a stronger emphasis on Jewish studies. These differences warranted separate analysis and were reflected in the findings.

*Table 1: School library work experience of respondents (job seniority)*

Years	Public Sector	Public-Religious Sector	National-Orthodox Sector	Total Sample
Up to 5	13.4	22.2	37.5	18.8
6-10	22.0	22.2	15.6	21.0
11-15	17.3	22.2	25.0	19.4
16-25	33.1	14.8	9.4	26.3
26 or more	14.2	18.5	12.5	14.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>186</b>
No response	0	0	1	1
<b>Mean</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>13.9</b>	<b>11.3</b>	<b>14.5</b>
<b>Median</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>13.2</b>
Mode Category	16-25	Up to 15	Up to 5	16-25
SD	8.6	9.6	9.1	8.9

The sample was predominantly female (~95%) with men comprising only 5.3%, although the various sectors differed significantly. Women comprised 97.6% in the public sector and men 2.4%, while in the two religious sectors the proportion of men was almost five times higher: 11.1% in the public-religious and 12.1% in the national-orthodox. The large majority (~70%) were 46 or older, the mean age being 48.5, and median age 49.7. As shown in Table 1, mean seniority in school library work was 15.4 years in the public sector, but only 13.9 and 11.3 years in the two religious sectors. As far as school size is concerned, the sectors differed significantly: small schools with under 500 students dominated both the

public-religious sector (59%) and the national-orthodox one (78%) but comprised only a minority of 28% of the public sector. Large schools (over 1000 students) constituted 44% of the public sector but only 7.4% (!) in the public-religious and none in the national-orthodox.

### *B. Attitudes Concerning Censorship*

The questionnaire included 17 statements dealing with the issue of censorship of school library collection and respondents were asked to mark the degree of their agreement with each statement on a Likert-type scale. The scale ranged from 1 to 5, as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = unsure, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

The 17 statements were phrased in general terms, expressing a positive or negative view of censorship of school library collections or presenting a challenge or dilemma facing the school librarian. For example:

- "In principle, the main consideration in purchasing items for the school library should be the librarian's ethical values".
- "Controversial books should be removed from the open stacks and locked in a limited access place".
- "In principle, if the school principal asks the librarian to remove an item from the shelves, the librarian should promptly comply with the request".

Table 2 presents the "agreement index", that is the average degree of agreement with all 17 statements together in each of the three sectors. In each sector the mean grade for each individual statement was calculated, based on respondents' ratings of agreement and then an average was calculated for the 17 means.

*Table 2: Average degree of agreement with statements regarding censorship \**

	Public Sector	Public-Religious Sector	National-Orthodox Sector	Total Sample
Mean	2.61	3.07	3.42	2.82
Median	2.58	3.11	3.41	2.94
N (no. of schools)	127	27	33	187

\* Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

The figures presented in Table 2 clearly show significant differences between the three sectors, indicating a direct positive relation between the degree of agreement and the religious affiliation of the school: the stronger the affiliation the higher the degree of agreement. However, it should be remembered that these figures are in fact averaged means and that extent of agreement varied among certain statements. For some the extent of agreement was much higher and so were the differences between the sectors. For example, regarding statement no. 2 ("The use of certain books by certain age-groups should be limited and subject to librarian guidance") the disagreement indices were: 3.25, 3.96, and 4.3. The extent of agreement naturally varied, even in the same sector, depending on the statement's content and public consensus on it. Even in the public sector, the more liberal and permissive of the three, statement no. 6 (objection to include hard pornography in the collection) received a relatively high agreement average of 4.3. In contrast, in statement no. 11, supporting the

suppression of ideas, the extent of agreement dropped to 1.72, and was relatively low in the two religious sectors too.

*Table 3: Percentages of agreement and disagreement with statements regarding censorship*

	Public Sector		Public-Religious Sector		National-Orthodox Sector		Total Sample
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
% of agreement	27.0	17.6	41.1	33.3	53.7	54.4	33.4
% of disagreement	55.9	65.7	36.0	49.0	27.4	26.5	48.3
N	124	3	24	3	29	4	187
% in sector	97.6	2.4	88.8	11.2	87.8	12.2	/
Total	100%		100%		100%		

Table 3 presents the mean percentages of agreement and disagreement with the 17 statements among the three sectors. To calculate rates of agreement for each statement ratings 4 and 5 were combined and similarly ratings 1 and 2 were combined to calculate rates of disagreement. Obviously, both agreement and disagreement rates usually totaled less than 100%, since some respondents marked number 3 (unsure). Like Table 2, Table 3 illuminates, though from a different angle, substantial differences between the sectors. The average proportions of agreement among school librarians working in the public non-religious sector were significantly lower, for both women and men (27% and 17.6%) than the proportions found for the public-religious sector (41.1% and 33.3%). The rates of agreement found for the national-orthodox sector were the highest (53.7% and 54.4%). The proportion of librarians reluctant to express agreement was around 20% and thus the corresponding proportions of disagreement display the same disparity between the three sectors.

Again, it is worth noting that the presented figures are averages and that for certain statements, such as statement no. 2 mentioned above ("The use of certain books by certain age-groups should be limited and subject to librarian guidance") the differences were much higher: only 51% in the public non-religious sector vs. 85% and 91% in the two religious sectors.

Concerning all but one statement, the rates of agreement with censorship in the public non-religious sector were relatively low, ranging from less than 1% and slightly over 50%. However, even there, exceptionally high agreement- almost 90%- was found for the statement that "school librarians should ascertain that books containing 'hard' pornography are not included in the collection". Evidently, despite the more liberal attitude of librarians in the public sector regarding collection content, they too draw the line on "hard pornography", although they probably have diverging definitions for this expression. Needless to say, both



two religious sectors expressed unanimous agreement regarding the librarian's duty to exclude such books from the collection.

Rates of agreement in the public-religious sector were usually higher compared to the public non-religious sector, ranging between 4% and 85%, except for statement no. 11, (approving suppression of ideas), which received no agreement. Agreement with censorship in the national-orthodox sector was even higher, ranging between 12% and 97%.

It is worth noting that the rate of agreement in each sector was not uniform in all 17 statements, but fluctuated according to the statement's content and phrasing. In general, the harsher and more constraining the content and phrasing, the lower the agreement in all sectors.

**Women vs. men:** the small number of male librarians in all three sectors (3-4 in each) precluded solid and statistically significant conclusions regarding the gender effect. The three men in the public non-religious sector displayed less agreement with censorship, but it is doubtful to what extent they represent all or most librarians in that sector. Similarly, in the public-religious sector the three male librarians displayed less agreement with most statements (13 of 17) but more agreement with the remaining three. Conversely, in the national-orthodox sector the four men showed more support of censorship than the women there in nine statements, and less support in seven statements. This probably results from their different educational background compared to colleagues in the public-religious sector.

### Summary and Conclusions

Despite being partial and preliminary, the findings presented above indicate substantial differences between the three sectors, in the extent of agreement with statements which approve censorship in the school library. A direct positive relation was found between the extent of agreement and the school's religious affiliation: the stronger the affiliation the higher the extent of agreement. The average rates of agreement among both male and female school librarians employed in the public non-religious sector were significantly lower than those in the public-religious sector. The highest agreement rates were found in the national-orthodox sector, suggesting a more conservative stance, probably due to the sector's greater emphasis on traditional religious values.

Variations existed in the extent of agreement with certain statements in the same sector. The rate of agreement was found to be affected by the scope, content and phrasing of the statements. Despite the more liberal and permissive attitude of librarians in the public sector regarding the content of books in their library collection, they too favored some censorship of the school library collection against specific topics.

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