

What the Shelves Aren't Saying: An Exploration of Self-censorship in High School Libraries

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Abstract: *Censorship attempts in libraries have been occurring since the 1850s, with variations in frequency (Steele, 2020). Recently, school libraries in America have experienced a significant increase in censorship attempts, particularly around books about BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ issues and experiences (ALA, 2021). Efforts range from Texas politicians' inquiries and accusations about school library collections to individual citizens and private groups nationwide flooding libraries with book challenges. Not all attempts to censor, however, are external; some acts of censorship occur as perceived preventative measures. Fear of a potential challenge can sometimes result in a librarian self-censoring when developing the collection (Hill, 2010).*

Statement of the Research Problem

Self-censorship occurs when a librarian engages in a self-preserving, self-defense mode to prevent potential conflicts and challenges with materials they see as controversial (Bellows, 2005). The act can be intentional or subconscious, and as a result, gaining a true understanding of the problem's extent can be difficult (Hill, 2010), especially when coupled with self-reporting bias (Mertens, 2005). A library's collection can provide insight into the possibility of a librarian self-censoring. Coley (2002) examined 100 high school library collections to determine the extent of self-censorship occurring, based on the absence of "YA

books, which contained content that made them potentially subject to challenges” (p. 5). This study seeks to update Coley’s often cited work, answering these research questions:

- RQ 1: To what extent are high school librarians engaging in self-censorship?
- RQ 2: What, if any, are the relationships between a school’s characteristics and the absence of controversial books?

Literature Review

Censorship in libraries is a topic frequently covered in both scholarly and professional library literature. Self-censorship studies, however, are significantly fewer. Moeller and Becnel (2020) suggest the lack of research can primarily be attributed to librarians perceiving self-censorship as a “secret, quiet, shameful practice” (p.526). Rickman’s (2010) survey of self-censorship among 1,000 school librarians found certain subsections of the population were more likely to self-censor: librarians between the ages of 60-69, those without a formal degree, those working in a secondary school, and those with fewer than 15 years of educational experience. *School Library Journal’s* 2016 Controversial Books Survey found that elementary and middle school librarians were more likely to engage in self-censoring behaviors than high school librarians, and almost half of all librarians had experienced a book challenge. Coley (2002) systematically reviewed holdings in the online public access catalogs (OPACs) of 100 Texas school libraries, ranging in size, and concluded schools with smaller populations were less likely to possess titles identified as controversial, while larger schools were more likely to possess 50% or more of said titles.

School libraries nationwide are experiencing an increase in challenges, some states more than others. As a result of the drastic increase in challenges throughout Texas (Hixenbaugh, 2022), the research team explored the extent of self-censorship in Texas public high school libraries based on the inclusion or exclusion of controversial books in their collections.

Methodology

The research team systematically reviewed library collections of 90 Texas public high school campuses (typically students ages 14 to 18 years old). The Texas University Scholastic League (UIL) provides a downloadable list of schools grouped into divisions by population size. Fifteen schools from each of the six divisions were selected using a random number generator. Each school library’s online public access catalog (OPAC) was searched for 55 identified titles. If the OPAC was not accessible, another school from the same division was randomly selected. The book list was generated using titles found on three lists: 12 young

adult books from American Library Association's Top 10 Most Challenged Books from 2016-2020 (ALA, 2022), Coley's (2002) original 20 titles, and 25 newly published titles replicating Coley's criteria. After eliminating two duplicates, the master list consisted of 55 titles. If an individual school possessed fewer than 50% of books in all three book lists, the authors indicated possible self-censoring behaviors (Moon, 1962; Gies & Polhamus, 1974; Coley, 2002).

Data were analyzed (1) to determine the frequency of each book title appearing in OPACs and of the controversial themes identified as challenge potential; and (2) to identify possible relationships between the schools' characteristics and books' contents.

Findings

Primary findings for the two research questions include:

- RQ 1: Medium and smaller campuses were statistically more likely than larger schools to possess fewer than 50% of the 55 titles, suggesting engagement in self-censoring behaviors.
- RQ 2: Larger campuses were statistically more likely to own titles with controversial subject matter; however, when analyzing individual topics, certain topics were notably less prevalent than others. Titles with transgender characters were least likely to appear in collections, followed by titles identified as LGBTQIA+, whereas titles featuring profanity, drinking, and drug use were most likely to appear, regardless of campus, district, and city size. A positive relationship exists between the size of a school district and the number of selected titles, as well as the size of the city/town where the school is located and the number of selected titles, although the relationships are not as strong as those between size of individual schools and collection holdings.

Discussion

School librarians engaging in self-censorship is problematic for a multitude of reasons. Studies over the past 60 years have concluded self-censorship occurs more frequently in schools with smaller populations than larger populations (Moon 1962; Serebnick 1982; Coley, 2002). As a result, students are denied access to the windows, mirrors, and sliding doors (Sims Bishop, 1990) of the human experience. The research team acknowledges this study's limitations. Other factors, such as budgets, can influence a librarian's decision to

purchase newer titles. To help moderate the issue of new books and budgetary concerns of smaller libraries, the research team included Coley's original 2002 book list. Additionally, the sample size is small, with only 90 out of over 9000 Texas schools (Texas Education Agency, 2020) examined.

Implications and Conclusions

Multiple reasons for excluding books from a school library's collection exist. School library budgets vary considerably, limiting the purchasing power of some librarians. Librarians should carefully consider each possible book and weigh multiple factors to determine the best fit for their students. However, it is important to recognize behaviors of self-censorship and look for patterns in purchasing. Analyzing gaps in collections and analyzing the books that were not selected for purchase can assist in recognizing self-censoring behaviors. This study serves to explore the current landscape of self-censorship in Texas public high schools and can be used as a practical guide to assist librarians as they monitor their collection for both intentional and subconscious acts of self-censorship.

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Biographies

Alissa Tudor is currently pursuing her doctorate degree in Information Science at the University of North Texas. She is working as a full-time researcher and is also a teaching assistant in multiple courses that help prepare future librarians.

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