

The Experience of East Texan School Librarians Who Participate in Self-Censorship

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Abstract

This literature review aims to synthesize research on the self-censorship practices of school librarians in East Texas while also examining and interpreting the self-censorship experience. East Texas was studied due to its political and religious demographic, the recent enactment of the Restricting Explicit and Adult-Designated Educational Resources (READER) Act 2023, and the rise of book censorship attempts. Various peer reviewed articles published within the last 20 years were analyzed for information on self-censorship practices and experiences. While self-censorship is opposed by librarians, the studied school librarians have admitted to participating in self-censorship for a variety of reasons such as fear of reprimand, personal biases, and recent legislation changes. This literature review will also include recommendations for school librarians on avoiding self-censorship.

Keywords: self-censorship, school libraries, phenomenological, East Texas, censorship

The school library has the opportunity to contribute to a school's curriculum while providing students access to reading materials they can enjoy during their leisure time. While librarians are called by the American Library Association (ALA) (2017) to not only oppose censorship, but also to prevent materials from being excluded from a collection based on its content or author, some school librarians are actively censoring their collection (Coley, 2012; Dawkins, 2018; Huston, 2003; Jacobson, 2016; Lammert

& Godfrey, 2023; Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Noll, 1994; Tudor et al., 2023). East Texas was chosen due to its political and religious demographic, the recent enactment of the Restricting Explicit and Adult-Designated Educational Resources (READER) Act, and the rise of book censorship attempts. The READER Act regulates materials in public school libraries aiming to limit sexually explicit material which it defines as, any information that "describes, depicts or portrays sexual conduct ... in a way that is patently offensive" (Texas State Legislature, 2023, para.4). Through personal conversations with school administrators, librarians, and teachers, it became evident that the vagueness of the Act has influenced unnecessary censorship. **As East Texan Native**, there was an interest to see how recent legislature, or political or religious beliefs influence a school librarian's tendency to self-censor, if at all. This literature review aims to synthesize research on self-censorship practices of school librarians and also offers guidance on avoiding self-censorship.

Literature Review

Censorship in School Libraries

Schools librarians are reporting an increasing number of challenges to books throughout the United States (Coley, 2002; Dawkins, 2018; Friedman & LaFrance, 2023; Huston, 2004; Jacobson, 2016; Lammert & Godfrey, 2023; Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Tudor et al., 2023). Unfortunately, increases in censorship is not a new problem. Noll (1994) asserts, "school censorship challenges are on the rise and are limited to no one geographic region" (p. 59). Recent laws restricting what teachers can teach, targeting topics such as race, gender, sexuality, and US History has led to a new surge in challenges (Friedman & LaFrance, 2023).

In 2022, the ALA reported that school libraries saw more challenges to its collection than any other institution (ALA, 2023). Books in schools are often challenged or outright banned based on controversial content which includes: racism, BIPOC, subjects of sexuality, violence, profanity, religion, substance abuse, and suicide/death (Coley, 2002; Dawkins, 2018; Friedman & LaFrance, 2023; Lammert & Godfrey, 2023; Jacobson, 2016; Tudor et al., 2023). While studies related to censorship may be prevalent, it is more difficult to research self-censorship. This in part is due to the shame

librarians may feel when participating in self-censorship out of preservation or because they are not conscious of the fact that they are performing self-censorship in the first place (Noll, 1994; Tudor et al., 2023).

This paper defines the act of self-censorship by school librarians through incorporating the various definitions found in the literature. Self-censorship by school librarians can involve: purposefully not purchasing a work, removing a work, or strategically shelving a work so that it is inaccessible for a population (Dawkins, 2018; Huston, 2004; Lammert & Godfrey, 2023; Tudor et al., 2023). Typically the work being censored has controversial material and has previously been challenged by the community.

School Librarians and Self-censorship

How are librarians partaking in self-censorship? School librarians interviewed and studied have placed books in alternative locations difficult for the students to access, shelved books in locations accessible to certain students, or required parental permission before checking out a book (Moeller & Becnel, 2020). In one study, librarians would directly censor graphic novels by writing in the novel to make an image “cleaner” (Moeller & Becnel, 2020). According to Jacobson (2016), “school libraries at all levels are more likely than they were eight years ago to place content labels on books or to have restricted sections for books containing mature content” (p. 21). School librarians are also participating in self-censorship before books even make it into the collection. In the study conducted by Jacobson (2016), “more than 90% of elementary and middle school librarians say they have passed on purchasing a book” due to controversial content (p. 22). Coley (2002) found that more than 80% of the schools in his study were participating in self-censorship by not purchasing certain controversial books for their catalogue. Likewise, Tudor et al. (2023) found that school librarians were less likely to purchase books with LGBTQIA+ content than other typically challenged content.

Self-censorship Due to Fear

Through surveys and interviews, many researchers have found that librarians and teachers mostly self-censor due to fear of challenges or repercussions. Huston (2004) affirms, “since challenges to library materials became common, library professionals are noting the tendency to self-censor” (p. 247). Dawkins (2023) studied 470+ school librarians in South Carolina through surveys and interviews and found that, “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” (p. 10). Unfortunately, the fear of retaliation is not unwarranted. Noll (1994) summarizes an incident where a teacher had been fired for her use of the play, *The Shadow Box* by Michael Cristofer in class, even though she had received permission. Speaking to censorship in the classroom, Noll (1994) affirms, “fighting for the right to teach certain literature could cost them their jobs” (p. 60). Moeller & Becnel (2020) also notes in their research, the fear that teachers and librarians have of their occupational livelihood and are professionally insecure.

Friedman & LaFrance (2023) state that “many teachers have taken to self-censorship... before anyone has a chance to object” (p.71). “Anticipat[ing] potential negative community response” in addition to new laws, have affected not only what teachers are now willing to talk about, but also what books librarians choose to purchase for their stacks (Moeller & Becnel, 2020, p. 521).

Alternative Reasonings for Self-censorship

While fear by far was the most common reasoning for self-censorship, additional factors to participating in self-censorship included legislation relating to libraries, personal biases, a lack of enough knowledge to defend challenged works, and working in predominant conservative communities. In the last two years, “309 bills have been introduced in 45 states, and 19 states have passed a gag order into law or signed an executive order” that limits topics that can be discussed in schools (Friedman & LaFrance, 2023, p. 68; PEN America, 2022). Many of these states have left the wording of the bills and laws vague, sparking confusion amongst educators and librarians alike (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023; Friedman & LaFrance, 2023). Lammert and Godfrey (2023)

found that new restrictive laws in Texas have led teachers to use “legislation as an excuse for excluding perspectives” (para. 4).

Interviews have also found that “teachers may not want to address a controversial dilemma without taking a clear stance on its moral underpinnings, which can lead to self-censorship” (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023, para. 10). When referencing graphic novels, lack of knowledge and misunderstanding of the format was given as a reason for self-censorship (Moeller & Becnel, 2020).

Many librarians interviewed referenced “religiously conservative Christian communities” and anticipated their reactions to certain books when making collection purchasing decisions (Moeller & Becnel, 2020, p. 521). It was believed that the children would not have issues with the book, however, their parents may cause difficulties and create challenges if a book was purchased (Moeller & Becnel, 2020). This resulted in the librarian rejecting purchasing the book in question (Moeller & Becnel, 2020). Conservative communities were also attributed to purposeful self-censorship in research conducted by Dawkins (2018), Huston (2004), and Lammert & Godfrey (2023).

Self-censorship in Texas

Coley (2002) in an often-cited research study, analyzed the catalog of 100 Texas schools for 20 young adult literature (YA) books that contain commonly challenged material. Coley (2002) found that of the 100 schools, over 80% did not own at least 50% of the challenged books. He concluded that this data indicates self-censorship across the state in school libraries no matter the size or location (Coley, 2002).

To investigate Coley’s (2002) study, Tudor et al. (2023) expanded the research and looked at 55 controversial books within the catalog of 90 Texas school libraries. Tudor et al. (2023) quantitatively looked at what extent school librarians were engaging in self-censorship, and found that “self-censorship is far less common than prevalent” (p. 10). By using a formula meant to predict how many controversial books a school should have based on its size, this study found that 63% had the number of expected books and 18% of school libraries had more books than expected (Tudor et al., 2023). Tudor et al. (2023) also looked into what controversial topics were more likely to experience self-censorship in the Texas school libraries and found that those with

transgender characters were least likely to appear in collections, whereas books featuring profanity, drinking, or drug use content were most likely to appear in the library.

Lammert and Godfrey (2023) took a different approach to study self-censorship in Texas. As university professors who teach a children's literature course to preservice teachers, they surveyed and analyzed written responses from preservice teachers to determine what they would censor and why (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023). Pooling their analyses of the surveys and written responses, they concluded that preservice teachers were more likely to avoid using literature and discussing topics they were confused or unfamiliar with, such as gender and gender identity topics (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023). The preservice teachers also referenced vague legislation as potential reasonings for self-censorship (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023). For example, Texas Senate Bill 3 "passes the responsibility of interpretation to teachers and in the case of a complaint, school administrators" (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023, para. 9).

How to Avoid Self-censorship

The literature not only delves into causes of self-censorship but also offers solutions. Friedman and LaFrance (2023) offer two solutions for librarians: to invest in the time to understand the laws and secondly, to not censor unnecessarily. They also recommend that librarians should not edit lesson plans out of fear if they do not think a lesson plan violates the law (Friedman & LaFrance, 2023, p. 72). Librarians that take part in self-censorship due to being uncomfortable defending materials in a challenge, could benefit from time to research books and professional reviews (Moeller & Becnel, 2020; Tuder et. al., 2023). Tuder et al. (2023) also recommend having clear and enforced policies and procedures offer support to school librarians making catalog purchases. Overall, librarians need the support and understanding of their peers and administrators to brave the challenges that could arise from purchasing and providing works that would allow children to experience the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors that books can offer.

Conclusion

Overall, self-censorship can be difficult to understand and research due to the acting librarians feelings of shame or embarrassment. While there were a considerable number of studies dedicated to school libraries in Texas, none of these interviewed working school librarians (Coley, 2002; Lammert & Godfrey, 2023; Tudor et al., 2023). With the existence of contributing factors to self-censorship such as fear, predominant conservative communities, and personal biases, further studies should be conducted on school librarians in East Texas to determine how these factors or if others contribute to self-censorship in the stacks.

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