



When Libraries Aren't Challenged: Librarians Discuss a Lack of Patron Challenges to Their Collections

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Abstract

Many public libraries receive challenges from patrons, when patrons request that certain materials be removed or relocated through a formal process. However, many other public libraries avoid this fraught situation. The differences between these libraries is not clear—why do some libraries face patron challenges while other libraries do not? To address this question, the authors sought interviews with children's and teen librarians in public libraries who had never dealt with patron challenges. Twenty-five telephone interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed with DeDoose software, which allows for iterative team web-based coding. The qualitative coding revealed three predominant themes. Librarians discussed their collections, their patrons, and their actions as librarians in their attempts to explain their lack of challenges. We analyze these interpretations and suggest future research directions.

Introduction

The American Library Association (ALA) defines censorship as “the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups, or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous” (2007, para. 4). Oltmann (2016b, 23) notes that “in libraries,

“censorship can take several forms” (see also McMenemy 2009; Knox 2014a). These censorious acts include redacting words or phrases, cutting pages out of a book, labeling materials, restricting access to materials, or not purchasing items likely to be controversial. Sometimes potential censorship comes in the form of a challenge to library materials—that is, individuals or an organization challenges the inclusion of certain content in the library.

Such acts stand in direct opposition to one of the core values of librarianship: intellectual freedom. According to Knox (2014b), the principle of intellectual freedom is codified in contemporary librarianship. This facet of librarianship is supported by the Library Bill of Rights (LBR), with Principles I–IV pertaining to intellectual freedom (IF) and censorship, and the role of librarians and libraries in cultivating IF, as well as forestalling and confronting attempts at censorship. Those principles (ALA [1939] 2019) state:

- I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
- II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
- IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.
- V. A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

Given that intellectual freedom is a core value of librarianship and is codified in the profession (Knox 2014b), censorship must be seen as an antithesis of librarianship (Asheim 1953; Doyle 2002; Intner 2004). Challenging the inclusion of certain content, likewise, is antithetical to librarianship. Doyle (2002, 18) explains, “The librarian’s bias is that the collection should be unbiased. But an unbiased collection is precisely what censors disapprove of” (see also Asheim 1953). Responding to challenges—standing up for intellectual freedom—has been portrayed as an important (though sometimes minor) aspect of librarianship (see Preer 2014; Zimmer and McCleer 2014; ALA 2018).

However, some librarians never face challenges. Their collections go uncontested. The differences between challenged and unchallenged libraries remains unexplored in the current research.

Research Questions

Therefore, this research sought to address the following research questions:

- Why might some libraries not experience challenges—especially in youth services, given that many challenges are to youth materials?
- Are there librarian actions or perspectives that might explain the lack of patron challenges in some libraries?
- What do youth service librarians themselves think about not being challenged by patrons?

Literature Review

Although the ALA provides one definition of censorship (see introduction), it may be useful to consider additional perspectives. Intner (2004, 8) defines censorship as “the systematic and deliberate exclusion of materials that would be considered protected speech,” while Oppenheim and Smith (2004, 160) describe censorship as “something [that] is withheld from access by another.” The philosopher Mathiesen (2008, 576) writes that to censor is to

restrict or limit access to an expression, portion of an expression, or category of expression, which has been made public by its author, based on the belief that it will be a bad thing if people access the content of that expression.

Jenkins (2008, 228) explains that “book censorship involves causes, beliefs, and goals that are far larger than any particular text. . . . [It’s] the tensions of society writ small.”

Along these lines, Knox (2014a) notes that there are narrow and broader conceptualizations of censorship, and these different perceptions can be a source of tension. For example, people who challenge a book’s inclusion in the library may view censorship as something only a government can do, meaning their act wouldn’t “count” as censorship; in contrast, the ALA (and the authors cited above) define censorship far more broadly, to include challenges and removal of library items. (For a broad definition of censorship, consider Knox [2014a, 742], who writes, “Censorship is the realization of the intimate relationship between

knowledge and power. At its heart, the practice of censorship is predicated on who gets to decide what certain people or groups should know.”)

Self-censorship—when librarians themselves censor items—may be even more pernicious. As Gregory (2018, 168) explains, “If the book never makes it to the shelves, discussion about its content never happens, and its themes are preemptively struck from the minds of children and/or adults.” There is a fine line between not selecting a book because its themes or content are inappropriate for one’s audience versus not selecting a book because one is concerned its content may result in challenges or controversy; the latter action is self-censorship. Gregory, in her collection management textbook, encourages librarians to avoid self-censorship because it results in reduced access to information.

The ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) indicates that 491 library materials (including books, DVDs, programs, services, and displays) were challenged or censored in 2017; of those, 354 challenges to materials had more details available. Patrons accounted for 42% of the challenges, with 56% occurring at public libraries (ALA 2019). Parents accounted for 32% of the challenges, which could have occurred at schools (which accounted for 25% of challenges) or at public libraries (ALA 2019). While a small percentage of public library challenges are initiated in-house and by librarians, most come from patrons.

According to young adult author Malinda Lo (2014), “Analysis of the most banned/challenged books in the U.S. shows that diverse books are disproportionately targeted for book challenges and censorship.” Based on her research, Lo surmises that “books that fall outside the white, straight, abled mainstream are challenged more often than books that do not destabilize the status quo.” Challenges to these diverse books have not just come from library patrons; they have also resulted from self-censorship by librarians. According to a 2019 report from the American Library Association, the association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) “has noticed a representative pushback by those who believe that a more diverse and just society poses a threat to their beliefs and their way of life” (Rosa 2019, 15). What does this mean about the state of censorship in America’s public libraries? According to the Banned Books Week (BBW) website (www.bannedbooksweek.org), the top 10 reasons for censorship in 2018 were as follows:

1. **LGBTQ Content**
2. **Sexually Explicit**

3. Profanity
4. Racism
5. Violence
6. **Religious Viewpoint**
7. **Sex Education**
8. Suicide
9. **Drug and Alcohol Use**
10. Nudity

It should be noted, however, that unless a challenge progresses far enough to become newsworthy, libraries must self-report their challenges to the ALA for them to be counted in the annual totals (Jenkins 2008). Thus, many challenges likely go unreported. Many others never go beyond a verbal complaint. In this study, we follow the ALA's (2018, para. 3) formal definition of a challenge:

A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others.

To counter challenges to library materials, librarians rely on their core value of intellectual freedom. Again, we can turn to Intner (2004, 7), who defines intellectual freedom as “inclusion—the willingness to add things and be open enough to look at them.” Cooper (2010, 218) adds that “intellectual freedom is the freedom, or the ability and the right, of individuals to allow their minds to take them wherever they may lead in their search for understanding and, thus, information and ideas.” Importantly, Calkins (2014, para. 2) specifies how intellectual freedom should be interpreted for teens: “Parents and guardians have the right to decide what their children have access to, but they don't have the right to decide what all children have access to” (see also Connelly 2009). Finally, Asheim (1953) explains that selectors (librarians) have a different orientation than censors:

The selector begins, ideally, with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; the censor does not. The aim of the selector is to promote reading, not to inhibit it; to multiply the points of view which will find expression, not limit them; to be a channel for communication, not a bar against it. . . . [S]election seeks to protect the right of the reader to read;

ensorship seeks to protect—not the right—but the reader himself [*sic*] from the fancied effects of his reading.

Quoting Asheim (1983), Doyle (2002, 18) states, “An unbiased collection represents all kinds of literature, objectional though some of these may be to the librarian or to most people. The unbiased collection gives users free, unrestricted access to the ‘the wildest possible variety’ of viewpoints.” According to the ALA, intellectual freedom “encompasses the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas.” Intellectual freedom is important because it “is the basis for our democratic system” (ALA 2007, paras. 3, 2; see also Cooper 2010; Schliesman 2008).

Calkins (2014, paras. 19, 6) elaborates on the importance of intellectual freedom for teen patrons, in particular, noting that these patrons are “undergoing rapid intellectual, psychological, and social change.” She notes that a librarian’s job is to “provide access to information on a wide range of topics, depicting a wide range of experiences, so that teenagers who come to the library looking to broaden their horizons find the materials to do so.”

Despite the significance of intellectual freedom for teen patrons, and for librarians in general, relatively little research examines this area. Dresang (2006, 171) notes that publications about intellectual freedom and censorship are typically philosophical, legal, descriptive of policy, or case studies. Knox (2014b, 16) says that “perhaps the most common type of research on intellectual freedom and censorship is written by practitioners and consists primarily of case studies and reflective essays.” The research described here thus fills an important gap in the research, by describing the viewpoints and experiences of actual librarians practicing in the field. Further, we focus on librarians who have not experienced materials challenges to see what lessons may be learned—in contrast to much of the extant literature, which focuses on librarians who have experienced challenges.

Methods

We created a semi-structured interview guide, which was approved by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board; next, recruitment messages were distributed via email Listservs (such as the Young Adult Library Services Association [YALSA] Listserv) and social media (such as Facebook messages and groups). For example, the message posted to relevant Facebook groups said, “Hello! We are conducting a study of children’s and young adult librarians. We want to interview librarians who have never had a patron challenge their

collection. We want to learn about how you've avoided challenges—whether you've taken specific actions or not, we think you may have useful approaches and ideas to share with other librarians,” followed by contact information for the authors. From these recruitment methods, a total of twenty-five willing participants were identified and interviewed. Although we intended to interview a balanced sample, all but one respondent identified as female (the exception was male). Respondents came from across the U.S., in large and small library systems, as well as liberal, moderate, and conservative areas. Respondents all had MLS or equivalent degrees, and all identified as youth or children librarians. To protect their confidentiality, we do not provide more detailed information about them.

The data for this project was collected via qualitative telephone interviews. A qualitative approach is an appropriate method for collecting individuals' perspectives and reflections (Oltmann 2016c). The researchers determined that interviews were the best method of data collection. This method of data collection allowed for interviewer/interviewee engagement, which would not have been possible with a survey. The interview methodology allowed the researchers to elaborate on these interview questions, often explaining the Request for Reconsideration policy to those whose libraries did not have such a policy in place.

The interviews lasted an average of 24:57 minutes (minimum of 13:30, maximum of 52:02); they followed a semi-structured format. After transcription, the interviews were coded iteratively in DeDoose, which allows for web-based team coding. To protect confidentiality, each respondent was given a randomly selected pseudonym. Identifying details in their responses are obfuscated.

Findings and Discussion

As described in the introduction and research questions sections, this research project focused on librarians who have *not* experienced materials challenges. These respondents described possible reasons for the lack of challenges; their reasons can be categorized into three groups: perspectives on the collection, views about patrons, and things that librarians do. This section describes and analyzes the data we collected.

Perspectives on the Collection

Respondents described the importance of considering the age appropriateness of items they were selecting for their collections, as well as the importance of dividing one's collection into age-appropriate sections, such as children's, juvenile, teen, and so on. One librarian, Mildred, explained, "We've had parents in the kids' section ask or say that they are uncomfortable with a couple of books. . . . A lot of those cases were because teen books had accidentally been put into [the] kids['] section." Marie said, "Occasionally, I look at stuff and think in terms of who's the reader going to be? . . . I might put a book in the teen room even if it's called a juvenile book, because it looks kind of long and difficult." Joanna, similarly, said:

I think that we are very careful about where we end up putting those books. So, if we order a book to be in the children's nonfiction collection and it comes in and we're like, "No, this is actually a little bit older, a little more mature," then we put it in the YA nonfiction collection.

As these quotations imply, having age-demarcated sections in a public library can be complicated. Some books may be intended for a particular audience (often specified by the publisher), but librarians may think the book should be directed toward a different age group. All of the respondents who described relocating books indicated that they moved the items "up" in age—from children's to juvenile, from juvenile to young adult, and so on.

Furthermore, different public libraries delineate these sections differently. In correspondence with various library associations (such as the Young Adult Library Services Association and the Public Library Association), representatives confirmed that these categories do not have standard, consistent definitions across libraries. Erin captured this problem:

A lot of libraries will . . . group young adults together, ages twelve through eighteen, or even eleven through eighteen . . . and there's certainly stuff in some of the books in my collection that I think, if I were the parent of a twelve-year-old, I wouldn't want them reading that. And I wouldn't want them walking into a room and thinking this stuff was for them.

Here, we see respondents anticipating challenges or concerns with the collection and relocating items. Sometimes this is done out of a genuine belief that a title is better suited for a different age range, while other times this action may be taken to forestall a challenge.

These different motivations matter: the former is being a thoughtful collector, while the latter is being a censor of one's own collection. Cassie noted that "a lot of books I know that are

normally challenged are in that middle section [which she defined as fifth to sixth grade] and they usually end up in YA,” and Michelle said, “If it’s had really good reviews and everything, I’d buy it and just decide for myself [if] it’s too mature for the K–5 [kindergarten through fifth-grade] group. Or do I put it in the teen room?” With Michelle, we see a librarian who is willing to disregard the recommendations of the author and/or publisher and “decide for myself” about the supposed maturity level of library items. If such actions are done preemptively (that is, *before* a challenge occurs), this is effectively censorship, as the books will be less available to the presumptive readers. A fifth- or sixth-grader used to going to one section to select books will be unlikely to go to the YA section for some books—in fact, this is what people are counting on when they move books to an older-aged section.

A more reasonable and thoughtful approach is described by Caroline, who was told by a colleague that a certain book had an “adult” sex scene that was inappropriate for teens. Caroline explained:

I read the whole thing and it definitely . . . reads exactly like an adult sex scene, not a teen sex scene. But at the same time, I didn’t feel comfortable moving it, unless I get a complaint. I am going to leave it here. Because I’ve had teens read adult books. Would I hand that to a twelve-year-old who told me they read other things similarly? Probably not. But I’m not going to move it away just because of these two pages.

Graphic novels raised particular concern for the respondents because of their very nature, as Jackson said, “[in] a graphic novel, where there’s the image on the page,” as opposed to pure text. Joanna noted that she explained the broad range of graphic novels to parents and minors whenever she took people to that section, saying that the books ranged from middle school to early adulthood so not everything would be appropriate for middle schoolers. Ramona described an unusual approach to adult graphic novels: they were placed in the nonfiction section “to hide some of the more graphic adult books. But I’m not putting them on the ‘new’ shelf [either].” This, again, seems to effectively put these books out of reach of much of their intended audience. As with other types of books, respondents noted moving graphic novels “up” in age, often putting teen graphic novels in the adult section—particularly if they contained nudity, sex, or extreme violence.

In contrast to these perspectives, Ariel reported shelving a graphic novel that could have caused controversy because it contained nudity. She said, “I would prefer to keep it on the shelf

and if it gets challenged then we can address it then, rather than take it off and just assume someone has a problem with it.” Marie also noted, “If [a book] is published with the intention of a teenager reading it, I’m comfortable putting it in the [teen] room.”

Despite concerns about how to categorize certain materials, nearly all respondents were confident they had a diverse collection; in fact, twenty-one out of twenty-five participants explicitly indicated their collections were not “safe” but contained a wide range of perspectives and topics. Hazel, for example, noted:

I was looking at the top 100 banned books, and every single one of the ones I would say that are for our age group, we’ve got it. . . . I don’t avoid something because of controversy; if anything, if it’s gotten good reviews, I will make sure I have it.

Similarly, Marie said, “My collection is not safe. I keep waiting for someone to storm in with a book and tell me to stop buying so many books about gay teenagers. But, nope, my collection’s not particularly safe.” Jenn added, “I can’t think of any risqué books because I don’t think of books that way. But we never have any situation where we say, ‘Well, we don’t want to buy this book because somebody’s going to challenge it.’”

Several respondents noted they were likely to purchase items to round out or strengthen their collections. For instance, Kendall said, “If it’s a sensitive topic, I’ll say we are going to get that because we don’t have anything else [on that].” In addition, Theresa reported that she tries to “include items that have diverse characters . . . [because] it’s important for us to make sure that we are reflective of the world that we live in, and not just the community that we are in.” Ariel elaborated on this approach:

My feeling is that if you can really actively collect things that are diverse and you can substantiate your reasons [and] why you keep the collection diverse, never assume that things are going to create a problem. And if they do, you can address them when they happen; but like I said, if you can back up your purchases and why you made them, and [why] you collect the way you do, then there’s a good chance that even if something is challenged, that you can convince somebody that what you’re collecting is best for your patronage . . . if you know that something is right for your patrons and right for your collection, then you should put it in there.

Returning to the above theme about categorizing materials in an age-appropriate manner, Joanna explained:

I can't think of any topic that we've shied away from ordering, because, like, we don't think it would serve the community or [we] were shying away from a potential book challenge. I think we try and be careful about where we put the books so they are most likely to find their intended audience.

This quote neatly summarizes the dilemma that seemed to arise from respondents' discussion of their collections. On the one hand, they overwhelmingly saw their own collections as diverse and covering a wide range of topics, including "difficult" or potentially controversial topics. On the other hand, respondents also expressed concern about categorizing and shelving books in an age-appropriate way, which, for some respondents, meant taking preemptive caution to avoid challenges by "aging up" some items.

Twenty respondents emphasized that in collecting diverse materials, they were attempting to collect resources that teens and other patrons needed. Samantha, for example, said, "I think being a teen is when you're exploring life and figuring things out for yourself, and part of that is figuring out what you think about a whole lot of things that maybe people do consider controversial." Similarly, Martha explained:

I feel like I push the envelope a little bit, and because that's the information that the kids are looking for, that they're trying to decide their identity, knowing that they're not alone . . . they can read about other kids or teens that are going through the same thing. That's always been my philosophy.

Jackson noted that "I have deliberately been purchasing more LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] for the collection, because I know that we do have a small LGBT population here." Stella took an interesting stance on this: "My role here is for the teens and not for the parents, so anything I [can] do to support my kids, whether it's reading materials [or other materials], I can do to help them figure out their own life." Erin added that she was likely to collect material that could be challenged "because I think it's important for teens to have access to those books that I know the school libraries have a harder time [with]." Interestingly, these respondents who focused on providing books that minors "need" focused exclusively on teens. There was no discussion of younger patrons needing access to information that could be considered controversial.

Views about Patrons

In addition to discussing the collections, respondents addressed some aspects of their patrons as well. In particular, the respondents noted that parents played (or should play) an important role in selecting appropriate materials; many also noted that they had a liberal patron base.

Hazel explained, “For the really thinking parent, they monitor what their kids are reading, so they don’t even bother with anything that isn’t right for them.” From her perspective, some parents prevented their minors from accessing material that the parents disapproved of, so this circumvented the need to challenge items—in this scenario, minors would not gain access to materials that were controversial. Marie, similarly, said, “People seem to have an attitude that it’s their responsibility if they have something in particular they don’t want their child exposed to, people seem to feel it’s their personal responsibility to check.” Shelby elaborated on this:

We can’t decide what’s right for every single kid that walks through the door. So it’s the parents’ responsibility to decide for them. And then if you have an issue or are worried about it, then you have to come in with them [meaning parents have to come in with their own kids].

Cassie noted that this line of thought applied to minors of all ages. She said, “It’s at that specific moment in their life, what are they ready for? I don’t think as a librarian I should be determining that; I think that should be determined by the kid and the parent.”

Furthermore, respondents indicated that parents had responsibility for their own children but not others’ children. Suzanne explained, “I think even our conservative parents are open-minded enough to realize they can’t determine what other parents or children are going to read.” Marie added that “people know if they are conservative, that’s their family and that’s their values, but it’s not something that they try and impose on other people.” This line of thought echoes the ALA’s guidance on parental involvement with minors’ reading choices.

While respondents felt that the onus for determining appropriateness was on parents, they also generally reported having liberal patrons (even those who lived in areas generally seen as conservative). Amy, for example, explained that she lived in “a place that’s a hallmark of intellectual freedom and free speech. . . . We are an envelope-pushing town and our collectors collect accordingly.” Camilia said, “Granted, I am living in New York, which is a more liberal area; the South or part of the Midwest could be a little bit harder” for librarians who want to collect a wide range of viewpoints and topics. Others likewise noted that their particular locales

were known for being liberal and wondered if less liberal areas would experience more challenges. It's unclear, from our data, if liberal locales do experience fewer challenges than conservative ones. Ariel said, "We are more liberal in comparison to other branches" of the same library system, and Jenna surmised, "My guess is it's because it's a largely liberal community." Shelby added, "I wonder if it [the lack of challenges] is just because demographically speaking it tends to be a more liberal area." Hazel explained, "We don't have any strong really conservative groups, that I'm aware of, in our city." She felt that the lack of these groups might be tied to the lack of challenges her library experienced.

Things That Librarians Do

Finally, several reasons that the respondents suggested for the lack of challenges were based on things that librarians do or aspects of librarians' jobs, such as relying on review journals as materials are selected, performing readers' advisories, mentally preparing for challenges, diffusing concerns that are raised, and having a reconsideration policy available.

Hazel explained the importance of professional reviews in relation to potentially controversial materials:

That's where you need to make sure it's being well-received and well-reviewed, so that's really your armor. I feel that if you have that to back you up and say that this is a well-written book on an important topic, then you shouldn't be worried what people will say.

Many respondents mentioned specific sources on which they rely, including *Hornbook*, *School Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Amazon*, *Booklist*, *Voice of Youth Advocates*, *Library Journal*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. Jenna simply said, "I do rely on the reviews," and Camilia reiterated, "I pretty much look at reviews." Erin added, "I am very careful to read reviews and take professional reviewers into account. . . . If somebody does come and complain, I can say, 'Well, this professional journal recommended it for this age range.'"

These respondents point to the important (and understudied) role of reviews, particularly for items that could be considered controversial or potentially sensitive. Caroline said, "If I have to pause about a book, I'm like, 'Hmmm, it got really good reviews,'" and then she generally would purchase it. In other words, items that could cause concern—leading librarians to pause about adding them to the collection—have their reviews scrutinized. This implies that book

reviewers have a professional responsibility to be forthright in their reviews, while at the same time not being overly cautious or scaremongering about sensitive topics.

Once the items are purchased and added to the collection, according to respondents, another important aspect of their roles is to perform readers' advisories. They work to connect readers to books that are appropriate, interesting, relevant, and desired. Caroline explained that when she conducts readers' advisories, she tries "to gauge from [the patrons] if they need or want to censor themselves, then I accommodate that as best I can." Jenn also added, "I'd say that the concern isn't censorship, so much as we want to fit the right books with the right reader, and just making sure we get a book that we think the kid will enjoy." She expanded with an example:

[We have parents] where they are saying, "My child is a super reader; we want harder books." Sometimes we have the conversation of "these harder books have x, y, and z—are you okay with your child reading books like this?" And so, again, not that we've ever had challenges, but we also have a very strong readers' advisory in the youth services [department], and we want people to value that as a service we have.

Erin noted that in her library, readers' advisories were also important, especially because the teen department contained material for younger and older teens—and some of the materials for older teens contained "pretty graphic sexual content" or were "significantly more violent." She said that she might "hesitate to recommend" these books because "it's more or less an issue of interest and things I think would be likely to start a complaint or get challenged." This respondent exemplifies both the importance of a readers' advisory and the intellectual freedom challenge inherent in this service. There is a gray area between recommending "appropriate" books and avoiding recommending books that could lead to a challenge.

Respondents also suggested that it was important to prepare for and try to anticipate challenges. For example, Camilia said that librarians should "have to kind of try to think of different things, how to say it, how to be neutral and not offend people and kind of diffuse situations." Similarly, Hazel said she would "encourage librarians to be brave. We're there putting out important ideas, helping them get out into the world, where other people can read them. I think we're activists in our own way." Erin added, "I do prepare for [challenges] even though it hasn't happened. I would like to be able to keep these books on the shelf if they're ever challenged. I have to make sure I have the tools to do that."

How can one prepare? Mildred said, “Just be very aware of your library collection policies. And if you do receive a challenge or somebody questions it, make sure you know what the policy is, so you can back yourself up.” Fourteen respondents discussed diffusing concerns when they are raised. Theresa said:

If somebody were to object to something, I think the biggest and most important thing is just to listen to them. A lot of times they just have to get whatever it is off of their chests, and similar to a customer that might be complaining in a store, and then once they’re done and they know that you listened and they feel like you heard what they said, they might be willing to hear as to why you decided to keep the thing in the collection. Then maybe everything’s going to be okay.

Likewise, Shelby said, “We would definitely try to work with the patron as best as we possibly could to get them to understand why we couldn’t remove a book from the collection.” Ramona agreed, noting, “I think a lot of what we do in here, in this building, it’s diffused before it goes any further.” Respondents explained the importance of talking to patrons and explaining the reasoning behind the collection, as well as emphasizing that parents and guardians could oversee the selections for their own children. Cassie, for example, said, “If you actually talk to them and listen to them, I think that can help diffuse a lot of the tension.”

Several individuals described specific instances of diffusing tension. Mindy described a situation in which a mom was upset about “the LGBT book display” and talked to the director; eventually, the concerned parent talked to Mindy, who “found her some books for her daughter [which] mitigated the problem.”

Jenna noted that “my experience has been almost 100%, as I recollect over the years, once [the concerned individuals] have to put it in writing, they don’t. They don’t want to go that far” of putting their concerns into a formal challenge. Sheila described an incident in which a lady was upset about the Harry Potter novels, fearing they were satanic and supported witchcraft. After a long conversation, Sheila said, the concerned individual took a reconsideration form with her but did not complete or return it. Sheila explained, “They see that I’m not trying to prevent them from making the objection, but when they realize they will actually have to work at it, it becomes something they don’t really want to do.”

Several respondents noted the importance of having a reconsideration policy and form and offering them to those individuals who were unhappy. Jackson, for example, said, “If anyone

were to formally challenge materials, we are directed to give them a copy of the form as well as the reconsideration policy.” Jenna said, “I think the ALA recommends that you have challenge paperwork in place.” In addition, Cassie explained:

I think it’s very important to have clear expectations. If someone were to visit the library right now with a challenge to a book, I have our district’s policy, I have talking points to talk to them about, and I have [a] form that they can fill out. . . . And then we’d form a committee, and everyone in the committee would read or view the material in question, and we’d read other people’s reviews and critical analysis of the materials and come to a decision. So I think it’s very clear that there is a set plan, and that everyone in the library knows what to do if there is a challenge.

Other respondents, however, were much less clear on this point. Shelby, for instance, said, “I don’t know if we have a request for removal form,” and Kendall noted, “It’s really difficult to find our challenge forms or procedure . . . so it’s possible we don’t get challenges because it’s not obvious that they can make a challenge.” Joanna said her library had a policy but it was not on the website yet. Michelle added, “I did ask the director today [about our policy] and we don’t really—it’s just kind of a case-by-case basis, because she said we’ve never really had a lot of issues.”

Finally, it is important to note that several respondents indicated that they thought they had escaped formal challenges due to luck. Erin said she was “just fortunate . . . given the community I live in and the book challenge that happened recently [nearby], I do feel lucky that I haven’t had any books in my collection challenged so far.” Shelby also said, “Part of me thinks I’ve just gotten lucky.” Cassie added, “I haven’t had a challenge to the collection, but it doesn’t mean I won’t. It just so happens no one has bothered to challenge it.” These respondents may see challenges as inevitable, eventually, especially if their collections are as diverse and broad as they indicated.

Conclusion

This research has analyzed the responses of twenty-five children’s and teen librarians who have not experienced material challenges. We wanted to examine the possible reasons they have not had their collections challenged, anticipating that other librarians might be able to draw lessons from this. The interviewed librarians discussed the complexity of determining where to shelve

items that might be controversial. Though some of those interviewed indicated that they shelved potentially controversial items in other areas (e.g., moving a book from the teen to the adult area), it was unclear how often the new location resulted in less accessibility—and thus de facto censorship—or if those items were simply reshelved in a more age-appropriate location. It should be noted, however, that these librarians emphasized that their collections were not “safe,” but contained a wide array of topics and perspectives. In addition, the librarians noted that parents should be responsible for what their children read, but suggested that their patrons were likely more liberal than patrons of other libraries that do experience challenges. Finally, librarians emphasized the importance of studying reviews of materials and preparing for challenges, even if they never come.

Throughout these interviews, librarians struggled between advocating for diverse, bold collections regardless of the threat of challenges and acting cautiously to protect their collections from challenges. This was a complex juxtaposition that the librarians were not fully able to reconcile in their interviews. It is difficult to know how to interpret these results for other librarians who wish to also avoid challenges. Perhaps the clearest lesson is to be thoughtful, reflective, and deliberate about decision-making with one’s collection. In addition, it may be worthwhile to challenge oneself about decisions to relocate items within the collection.

However, it is worth noting that many librarians identified their areas as fairly liberal compared to other places (though we did not perceive respondents to be primarily located in liberal places). Perhaps challenges are less likely in liberal areas. Anecdotally, this may be true, but empirical research has yet to be conducted to support this. An additional area for further research is to interview adult librarians who have not experienced challenges. Further, librarians who have dealt with informal or verbal complaints that did not escalate into formal challenges would be a worthwhile group to study as well. How did they avoid a formal challenge? What lessons could be drawn from these situations?

Regardless, every public library should have a solid Collection Development policy, which includes a Selection Development policy, a Request for Reconsideration form, and the guidelines for its use. While the researchers were fortunate to talk with librarians working within communities where their libraries had never encountered challenges to materials, being prepared for that eventuality is an important aspect of respecting community standards. Though it is possible that it has never occurred to some patrons that materials can be challenged, and that

community awareness of such policies could open the door to challenges, it is far better to be prepared than to have to create and implement such policies after the fact.

We believe this research has begun to clarify these sorts of issues of intellectual freedom by interviewing youth librarians who have not experienced materials challenges. We learned that these librarians struggled to be true to the ideals of intellectual freedom while respecting community standards and the age appropriateness of materials for their underage patrons.

Appendix: Interview Questions

Exploration of public library policies and procedures that circumvent challenges

PIs: Shannon M. Oltmann and Stephanie D. Reynolds

Semi-structured interview questions:

- How long have you been a youth librarian (or children's or YA librarian)?
- What is your community like? What are its demographics? How large is it?
- What are your favorite parts about librarianship (specific to children's or YA)?
- How do you do collection development?
 - Follow up to clarify about using vendors, approval lists, etc.
 - Do you read everything you purchase for the library? Why or why not?
 - Do you purchase materials that patrons suggest? Why or why not?
- In the time you've been a librarian, have you had any part of your collection challenged?
- Why do you think that is?
 - Follow up based on what they say—really probe for details.
- Some people might be concerned that not having any challenges means the collection is “too safe.” How would you respond to that?
- Does it mean that you're shying away from collecting things that might be challenged?
- Other people have called that “self-censorship.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Are there topics that you consider inappropriate for children or young adults?
- Or are there topics that you tend to avoid? What are they?
- I'm going to read you a list of topics, please you tell me if you have books that deal with them:
 - Divorce
 - Death
 - Drugs and/or alcohol
 - Homosexuality
 - Puberty
 - Suicide
 - Peer pressure or bullying
- Has this interview led you to rethink your collection development decisions? If so, how?
- Any other thoughts or comments? Any questions?
- Advice to other librarians?

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