Worth Fighting For: Factors Influencing Selection Decisions in School Libraries

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Intellectual freedom is one of the basic tenets of the library profession. However, most librarians will face attempts to censor or control access to information at some point in their careers. School librarians might choose to self-censor because they fear facing a challenge that calls into question not only their professionalism but their personal values and ethics. While there have been numerous studies on censorship in other types of libraries, there is little research in the-area of censorship and intellectual freedom as it pertains to the school library field. The purpose of this study is to understand the decisions being made by school librarians when choosing or not choosing materials for addition to the collection. To that end, the following research questions were the focus of this study:

- How do school librarians describe their own selection process?

- To what extent do school librarians engage in self-censorship as part of the collection development process?

- When school librarians engage in self-censorship, what are the ways they do it and the factors that influence their decision making?

This study used a mixed method design composed of two phases: an initial survey distributed to school librarians in North and South Carolina and follow-up interviews with school librarians who volunteered to be interviewed. Four hundred seventy-one responses were collected as part of the initial survey. Out of this sample, one hundred thirty of the responders volunteered to participate in the interview portion of the research. Using purposeful sampling in order to obtain representation from both states and the different types of school settings, forty-

nine school librarians were interviewed. The survey instrument was designed to collect demographic data, as well as to test the usefulness of a scale to measure the likelihood of self-censorship. The interview questions included nine questions designed to elicit descriptions of the selection process and censorship experiences of school librarians.

The following themes emerged through analysis of the survey and interview responses:

1) Communication with those who presented concerns to materials in collections was key in allaying concerns and avoiding a full, written challenge;

2) Support of administration for school libraries and during the challenge process varied widely and influenced the decisions school librarians made when choosing materials and when choosing whether or not to defend them;

3) The grade levels of a school greatly impacted the decision making of school librarians when choosing to add materials, with middle school librarians finding the issue of age appropriateness especially difficult;

4) The awareness of and implementation of both materials selection policies and reconsideration policies influenced both the selection of materials and the successful defense of challenged materials;

5) School librarians sometimes chose to voluntarily remove or restrict access to materials when they thought they might face a full, formal challenge;

6) The funding of school libraries varies widely both within districts and across states;

7) LGBTQ content was particularly troubling for school librarians when undergoing the selection process;

8) Librarians at combination schools (elementary/middle, middle/high) faced unique challenges when making selections and providing access to materials;

9) School librarians' perceptions of the community environment, particularly those located in rural communities, impacted their decision-making process.

The findings of this research suggest that school librarians are influenced by multiple factors when making selection decision and better preparation on dealing with controversial materials may assist them in avoiding self-censoring or censoring behaviors.