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The Representation of Controversial Materials in Middle School Library Collections in Iowa

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The Representation of Controversial Materials in Middle School Library Collections in Iowa

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore a sample of middle school library collections to determine if titles recommended by the ALA's Notable Children's Book list from 2012 to 2016 that may contain controversial topics and those not likely to contain controversial topics are equally represented within the collections.

In order to determine the prevalence of self-censorship in Iowa middle school libraries that employ a teacher librarian, eight rural and eight urban middle schools were randomly chosen. Each school's catalog was examined to determine the presence or absence of selected titles within the school's library collection. The selected titles were organized into two separate lists; one of works not likely to contain controversial content and the other of titles previously identified as containing controversial content. After the data was thoroughly examined and compared, only 2 schools were identified to self-censor.

THE REPRESENTATION OF CONTROVERSIAL MATERIALS IN MIDDLE
SCHOOL LIBRARY COLLECTIONS IN IOWA

A Graduate Research Paper
Submitted to the
Division of School Library Studies
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
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Collections in Iowa

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore a sample of middle school library collections to determine if titles recommended by the ALA's Notable Children's Book list from 2012 to 2016 that may contain controversial topics and those not likely to contain controversial topics are equally represented within the collections.

In order to determine the prevalence of self-censorship in Iowa middle school libraries that employ a teacher librarian, eight rural and eight urban middle schools were randomly chosen. Each school's catalog was examined to determine the presence or absence of selected titles within the school's library collection. The selected titles were organized into two separate lists; one of works not likely to contain controversial content and the other of titles previously identified as containing controversial content. After the data was thoroughly examined and compared, only 2 schools were identified to self-censor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Upon releasing his novel, *Boy Toy*, Barry Lyga was expecting negative responses to the controversial content, which includes a 12 year old having sex with a teacher. However, no such responses came. Instead, “‘The book just didn’t get out there,’ says Lyga. ‘Kids weren’t getting the book because adults weren’t letting them get the book’” (Whelan, 2009, p. 27). Despite many positive literary reviews, school librarians and media specialists decided not to purchase the novel for their library collections (Whelan, 2009).

Problem Statement

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL, 2018) has a common belief that “Reading is the core of personal and academic competency” (p. 13), which demonstrates that students need to engage with text to be better prepared for experiences they will encounter in life and reading allows them time to think critically about these potential experiences. School libraries play a unique role in this endeavor as they give all learners access to books by providing “students, staff and families with open, non-restricted access to a high-quality collection of reading materials that reflect personal interest and academic needs in multiple formats” (AASL, 2016b, para. 4). The AASL (2014b) emphasizes that the teacher librarian carries a dual responsibility of inclusiveness in the selection process: (1) represent diversity in people through the collection materials and (2) represent diversity in issues despite the possibility of it being offensive to certain users. However, Rickman (2010) points out that there may be barriers to diversity in

collection development; if teacher librarians are “making collection management choices on the basis of avoiding conflict with administrators, parents or colleagues” (p. 1) regarding offensive or controversial material, they are, by definition, participating in self-censorship. This practice is in violation of intellectual freedom and the school’s selection policy but may stem from outside scrutiny of previous book selection choices or past challenges to materials.

Intellectual Freedom

Intellectual Freedom is a responsibility that all libraries uphold for their users and is defined as “the right to seek and receive information on all subjects from all points of view without restriction and without having the subject of one’s interest examined or scrutinized by others” (American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2006, p. 3). In order to help libraries with this charge, the American Library Association (ALA) first created clearly defined policies called the *Library Bill of Rights* in 1939. Since then the ALA (2017a) has included interpretations to support implementation of policy into library practice. In one such interpretation, the ALA (2014b) clarifies that libraries must include content that meets the needs, interests and abilities of all users. School libraries are included in this imperative and are guided by their selection policies.

Selection Policy

The ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (2018) recommends that each school district have a selection policy that contains criteria for selection of all instructional materials and that it is approved by the school board. Also, as a way of ensuring the protection of intellectual freedom and the development of a diverse collection, there

should be a specific section that contains detail on policies related to the library and places responsibility of selection and purchase of library materials with the teacher librarian. This section provides details for the following policies for library materials: selection, donation, weeding and reconsideration. The policy for selection provides specific purchasing criteria and procedures. The donation policy explains the procedures for evaluation of donated materials to determine acceptance into the library collection. The weeding policy provides criteria for removal of books from the collection such as damage or age. The reconsideration policy outlines the procedures to be followed in the event that someone objects to the inclusion of an item in the library collection. Together, these policies guide the teacher librarian.

According to the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom (2018), the purchasing criteria helps guide the teacher librarian by providing a rationale for the purchase of a certain item. The purchasing criteria includes support of educational goals, potential student appeal, favorable book reviews, and others. Also, a typical selection policy states the professional book lists and review sources that are consulted during selection. These could include award lists, journals, and bibliographies of notable books.

The ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom (1999) advises schools to include resources that are "appropriate for the subject area and for the age, emotional development, ability level, learning styles, and social development of the students for whom the materials are selected" (para. 17). Notably school libraries are intended solely to be used by minors or to meet the needs of minors. Therefore, Scales (2017) suggests that the selection policy contain age recommendations for selected books that correspond

with the age of the library users and the intended audience of individual items, which can be found in review journals. She goes further to suggest that items should not be restricted based on student age or the intended audience, rather she believes that items should still be accessible to all students and that they will be returned unread if they are beyond that for which the student is ready.

According to the ALA Office Of Intellectual Freedom (2018), even if the selection policy is followed diligently and the selected materials are appropriate for the age of the users; parents, teachers, or administrators can question whether an included book contains appropriate content and should remain a part of the collection. This is known as a reconsideration or a book challenge. The procedures included in the selection policy should be followed. Specifically, the policy should outline the steps that need to be taken and who has authority at each step. Also, there should be a committee already in place to handle reconsiderations when they arise. The teacher librarian should be included throughout the process to defend his or her decision in book selection and to protect the intellectual freedom of all patrons. Ultimately, the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom (2006) explains that an item may be removed from the collection if it is “educationally unsuitable or pervasively vulgar” (p. 391) meaning it has been found devoid of educational value or containing content that is excessively offensive or inappropriate for that age group.

Challenges

At the same time, the challenge process and those practices intended to remove books from library collections are in opposition to intellectual freedom and are

considered censorship, i.e., “the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons - individuals, groups or government officials- find objectionable or dangerous” (ALA, 2007, para. 3).

The ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (2017b) compiles statistics throughout the year regarding documented library challenges to keep the public informed about censorship. In 2016, 323 challenges were recorded. 30% and 20% of challenges took place in either a school or a school library, respectively. The majority (73%) of all challenges came from parents or the patrons themselves. Some of the common reasons given regarding the challenge were: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) content, sexually explicit content, offensive language, religious viewpoints, and violence (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2017).

The statistics gathered by the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom are only a small representation of the number of challenged books. The ALA (2017b) compiles this information from news coverage and the challenges that are reported directly to them. Combined these are thought to account for only 3-18% of the book challenges that occur nationwide each year (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2017). Specifically, the statistics provided do not take into account the number of challenged books from previous years, the informal challenges that are handled by school administrations, or the concerns expressed to teacher librarians regarding their selection choices.

Rationale

Self-censorship is a private practice that has continued to increase among teacher librarians. In response to the results of *School Library Journal’s* 2008 anonymous survey

regarding self-censorship by school librarians, Whelan (2009) explained that self-censorship is not often talked about or openly acknowledged but was occurring in school libraries nationwide. Eight years later self-censorship has not only continued but proliferated. Jacobson (2016), also of *School Library Journal*, explored the results of the 2016 anonymous survey of self-censorship. She noted the growing number of teacher librarians who admitted that they had not purchased certain books due to potential concerns regarding controversial content. Rather than not purchase works, it became common practice to put content labels on books or create a restricted section (relying on the patron to specifically request access to a work) for more mature topics, which is also a type of censorship (ALA, 2004; ALA, 2014c). Both authors state that these practices are becoming more frequent in order to avoid challenges or concerns from administration and parents.

Any censorship practice is in violation of intellectual freedom and is contrary to selection policy guidelines because it restricts information for all users. As a result, teacher librarians who knowingly or unknowingly practice self-censorship or any form of censorship are also in violation of each student's *Freedom to Read*. Specifically, they are not performing the duty to

serve the educational process by helping to make available knowledge and ideas required for the growth of the mind and the increase of learning. They do not foster education by imposing as mentors the patterns of their own thought. The people should have the freedom to read and consider a broad range of ideas than those that may be held by any single librarian or publisher or government or church. It is wrong that what one can read should be confined to what another thinks proper. (American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2006, p. 217).

In light of professional guidance for librarians, it is not the responsibility of the librarian to restrict what is available in the library. In fact, it is the responsibility solely of the parent or guardian to decide the appropriateness of material for their own child, and only for their child (ALA, 2014a). In conclusion, self-censorship is a subtle and often unspoken practice. However with more awareness, teacher librarians and administrators may be able to stop the continuation of this practice.

Deficiencies/Niche

There are other studies that focus on different perspectives of self-censorship in varying settings and locations (Bellows, 2005; Coley, 2002; Fliger, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Johnson, 2008; Moody, 2004; Pierce Garry, 2015; Rickman, 2010) . However, the prevalence of self-censorship within secondary schools has not been fully examined.

Summary of Problem Statement

Middle school teacher librarians may knowingly or unknowingly be engaging in self-censorship.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore a sample of middle school library collections to determine if titles recommended by the ALA's Notable Children's Book list from 2012 to 2016 that may contain controversial topics and those not likely to contain controversial topics are equally represented within the collections.

Research Questions

1. Is there an equal representation of books in the library collections that are known to contain controversial topics as compared to those not likely to contain controversial topics?
2. Is one specific controversial topic represented in libraries more often than other controversial topics? Is there a measurable lack of representation of another topic or topics?
3. Does the tendency to self-censor collections occur more frequently within rural versus urban schools?

Assumptions and Limitations

The author assumes that self-censorship occurs within middle school libraries. It is also assumed that if a controversial book is on the ALA's Notable Children's Book List from 2012 to 2016 but not present within the collection, it is due to the teacher librarian self-censoring. This study is limited to a sample of sixteen middle schools in Iowa that have a certified teacher librarian on staff.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore a sample of middle school library collections to determine if titles recommended by the ALA's Notable Children's Book list from 2012 to 2016 that may contain controversial topics and those not likely to contain controversial topics are equally represented within the collections. Previous research related to this study fell into three areas: self-censorship in middle school libraries, survey of school librarians and analysis of collections. The studies that include both survey of school librarians and analysis of collections are relevant because both address a different methodology that is used to determine if librarians participate in self-censorship and both areas speak to the prevalence of self-censorship in other locations and settings. Self-censorship in middle school libraries is relevant to this research study because all studies discussed in this section focus specifically on the middle school setting.

Self-censorship in middle school libraries

One study addressing self censorship in middle school libraries focused on the difference between teacher and student response to a specific novel. Freedman and Johnson (2000) conducted a study about responses to the novel *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994) and compared the results. One of the groups interviewed included current middle school teachers responding to the novel in regards to its value and potential use in the classroom. The other group interviewed was middle school students with a focus on their perceptions of the novel's value. The teachers interviewed included 15 in-service middle-grade (fifth to eighth grade) teachers from varying school

settings who were also taking a master-level middle school reading instruction course. The students included 11 sixth and seventh graders who were identified by their teachers as those who enjoy reading. The researchers also noted that all participants were female. The participants in either study group responded to the text through discussions with the researchers or other participants. In addition, the in-service teachers had written responses to the text. The oral and written responses were then analyzed by the researchers to determine if certain themes emerged. Although both groups found similar aspects of the novel meaningful to readers, they varied in their response to the controversial content. Both groups identified the novel as containing controversial content due to the inclusion of racism and sexual molestation. However, the student participants believed the controversial content added to the importance of the novel. In contrast, the teacher participants determined that the novel should not be used in the school setting because of it. Based on teacher response, the researchers believed teachers would self-censor in order to avoid controversial content within classrooms.

A survey of teacher librarians led to a similar conclusion. Johnson (2008) conducted a survey of middle school librarians to determine if self-censorship practices were prevalent within New Jersey Public Schools. A survey about selection practices was sent to all New Jersey middle school teacher librarians but only 72 completed the entire survey. The questions in the survey were about selection policies, books included in library collections, previous challenges, and selection choices. Also included in the survey were various quotes from books with only the reading level and interest level given, not the title or author. Based on the quote, the participants were then asked what

action they would take in regards to the book. The results showed that some teacher librarians struggled with self-censorship because of the age and perceived maturity level of middle school students. Along with these factors, potential challenges, support of administration and pressure from the community also affected the teacher librarians' selection choices.

A subsequent study of self-censorship was also conducted in New Jersey. Gallagher (2009) examined 15 collections of New Jersey middle schools, in person or through online catalogs, to determine if 30 pre-selected titles were present. The included titles were reviewed in professional sources as appropriate for seventh to tenth graders and surrounded certain select topics (abuse (drug, sexual, or domestic), homosexuality, interpersonal relations, family problems, religion, self-mutilation, teenage pregnancy or violence) that many believed would be controversial. The participating middle schools all had enrollment between 400 to 1,000 students and were located within a single zip code. The researcher determined that 50% of the titles must be present to conclude the librarian was not self-censoring. Based on this, 86% of the schools were participating in self-censorship. The researcher also questioned which topics were the least represented within collections. She found that those areas least represented contained topics of homosexuality and teenage pregnancy. The three studies of self-censorship practices in middle schools inform this current study about the prevalence of self-censorship in other locations among teachers (Freedman & Johnson, 2000) and among teacher librarians. They also provide a rationale for self-censorship in some locations such as community pressures and teacher librarians' own perceptions of students' maturity (Johnson, 2008)

especially when teacher librarians consider topics such as abuse (drug, sexual, or domestic), homosexuality, interpersonal relations, family problems, religion, self-mutilation, teenage pregnancy or violence (Gallagher, 2009).

Survey of School Librarians

One method to measure self-censorship is to survey the librarians who make selection choices. Moody (2004) sent a questionnaire to Queensland public librarians to better understand professional attitudes and behaviors surrounding self-censorship in Australia. Only 17.4% of public librarians responded to the questionnaire. The population represented varied in demographics but the majority of respondents were female. In one section of the questionnaire, participants were given a list of items and a brief description of the contents. They were asked what decision they would make in regard to that item without spatial or financial restrictions and then asked for an explanation of their decision. Their responses were then analyzed to determine what percent of participants were more likely to censor when purchasing materials. Only 32% of the participants showed “low censorship tendencies” (Moody, 2004, p. 175). In another section, participants were asked about library policies and procedures. The researcher noted that the low rate of responders created unreliable results when analyzing the survey responses. Bearing this in mind, the results demonstrated that there is a contradiction between beliefs and behaviors when it comes to self-censorship. For example, many Queensland librarians believe that the library needs to have a diverse collection but do not always include diverse items. The researcher suggested that librarians need more education on separating personal bias from professional decision making practices.

A later study focused on the factors that might influence librarians to self-censor. Rickman (2010) conducted a survey to determine the reasons that might influence school librarians to self-censor in Arkansas, Delaware, and North Carolina. The sample size for this study was 395 school librarians. The survey consisted of three sections; librarian demographics, school library demographics, and questions related to internal or external pressures such as individual beliefs, pressures from the school or the community. Overall, the researcher determined that self censorship was not common practice for the participants. However, self-censorship behaviors were observed within the following demographics: age between 60-69, no formal collegiate education degree in library sciences, working within a secondary school library setting, and less than 15 years of educational experience.

In contrast, a subsequent researcher focused on the collection prior to the survey of teacher librarians. Pierce Garry (2015) conducted both a qualitative and quantitative study to explore self-censorship of LGBTQ materials in school library collections. The researcher conducted this study in three phases. Phase one analyzed 120 Ohio public school library collections to determine if LGBTQ content was present and which schools self-censored. Phase two focused on 60 of the previously examined school libraries to compare school demographics between those that self-censored and those that did not. Then during phase 3, 12 school librarians, whose libraries contained the most or the fewest titles, were interviewed to better understand selection decisions in regards to LGBTQ content. The researcher found that libraries that do not seem to be self-censoring have the following: a certified librarian on staff, an open-minded community, a

significant minority population, and a larger student body. The researcher concluded that the support felt by the teacher librarian from the community and administration determines how likely he or she may be to practice self-censorship. Another determining factor was the presence of a selection or reconsideration policy. The three surveys of school librarians inform this current study by examining different factors that influence self-censorship such as personal bias (Moody, 2004), formal education in library sciences (Rickman, 2010), and support from the administration or community (Pierce Garry, 2015).

Analysis of Collections

Another method to measure self-censorship is to analyze the contents of the collection. Coley (2002) completed a study on self-censorship based on the examination of a library's collection. Coley examined 100 Texas public high school collections through their OPAC (online catalog) to determine if select young adult titles were present. The 20 selected books contained content that made them a potential target for challenges, per previous studies (profanity, sexuality, religion/witchcraft, violence/horror, rebellion, racism/sexism, substance use/abuse, suicide/death, crime, crude behavior, and depressing/negative tone) and were highly reviewed in multiple sources of professional literature. The researcher determined that the library needed at least 50% of the selected titles present within the collection to conclude the librarian was not self-censoring. Based on this criteria, 82% of the schools practiced self-censorship.

Similarly, Bellows (2005) conducted an examination of 102 Florida public high school collections through their OPACs. He created two book lists, each with 25 highly

reviewed titles. One contained books with content that had potential to be challenged (profanity, sex/sexuality, occult activities, violence, and substance abuse). The second list, originally intended to be used as a means of measuring book ownership in regard to budget, was not used in this manner to maintain validity with the findings. Like Coley, he also determined that 50% of the titles needed to be present to conclude that the librarian was not self-censoring. In this location, 74.5% of schools practiced self-censorship.

This same method was used to analyze elementary collections in Iowa. Fliger (2010) examined 45 elementary school library catalogs in Iowa. The chosen schools all had an online catalog and a certified teacher librarian on staff. The researcher created two book lists based on the 2002 - 2009 ALA's Notable Children's Books. One list contained potentially controversial titles (those that included profanity, sexuality, religion, violence/horror, racism, suicide/death, and crude behavior) while the other, known as the control group, did not. Each list contained 25 titles recommended for ages five - twelve years old. The same 50% criteria was used in this study. Therefore, 69% of the included schools practiced self-censorship. However, the researcher noted that 82% of the schools had more than 50% of the control titles included in the collection. The researcher determined that there was a significant variance between the control group and the potentially controversial group especially within certain locations. Based on this, the researcher concluded that there is a prevalence of self-censorship within varying regions of Iowa. The three analyses of collections inform this current study by demonstrating best practice in methodology for determining degrees of self-censorship practiced by librarians by applying the same method to varying states and grade levels.

Summary

Previous studies have been conducted to examine the prevalence of self-censorship in school libraries. One study of middle schools demonstrated the contrasting opinions about controversy between teachers and students based on a certain novel and the teachers propensity to practice self-censorship (Freedman & Johnson, 2000). Several studies examined factors that influence teacher librarians to self-censor such as students' maturity, potential challenges, community pressure/support, the age of the teacher librarian, formal collegiate education/teacher certification, teaching setting, years of teaching experience, school population, and size of the student body (Johnson, 2008; Pierce Garry, 2015, Rickman, 2010). Also, several studies identified topics that could be considered controversial, the majority included substance abuse, profanity, sexuality, religion/witchcraft, suicide/death, and violence (Bellows, 2005; Coley, 2002; Fliger, 2010; Gallagher, 2009).

Based on the study completed by Freedman and Johnson (2008), students do not perceive controversy the same as teachers. However, the previous studies demonstrate that self-censorship is prevalent in many locations (Bellows, 2005; Coley, 2002; Fliger, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Johnson, 2008; Moody, 2004; Pierce Garry, 2015). In order to decrease self-censorship, one study suggested that more education should be completed by teacher librarians to remove personal bias from professional decisions (Moody, 2004). Another mentioned adequate support from the community and administration (Pierce Garry, 2015).

One limitation to the reviewed studies is that they are not current. The current study will examine a previously unreported population in professional literature, a sample of Iowa middle school libraries.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore a sample of middle school library collections to determine if titles recommended by the ALA's Notable Children's Book list from 2012 to 2016 that may contain controversial topics and those not likely to contain controversial topics are equally represented within the collections. This study is guided by the following questions:

1. Is there an equal representation of books in the library collections that are known to contain controversial topics as compared to those not likely to contain controversial topics?
2. Is one specific controversial topic represented in libraries more often than other controversial topics? Is there a measurable lack of representation of another topic or topics?
3. Does the tendency to self-censor collections occur more frequently within rural versus urban schools?

Research Design

This study is a quantitative content analysis of library collections to determine the prevalence of self-censorship. Spurgin and Wildemuth (2009) describe content analysis as "the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics" (p. 297) and state that results can usually be generalized to a larger population. This type of research design lends itself well to this study because only a sample of a larger population is being examined. Also, Spurgin and Wildemuth (2009) state that "manifest

content exists unambiguously in the message; it is easily observable and countable” (p. 298). They follow up with an example of previous research that included machine readable cataloging (MARC) fields from online library catalogs. Taking that study as a model, this study also examined the contents of online library catalogs.

Population

The researcher conducted the research study with a sample comprised of 16 Iowa middle schools. In order to determine which Iowa middle schools to include, the researcher consulted the results of the 2017 Iowa School Library Survey. First, the researcher consulted the raw data to compile a list of potential schools by noting all schools that were identified as “middle” schools. Once the initial list was complete, the researcher used the raw data again to determine which surveys were completed by teacher librarians. Based on previous research findings, this study focused solely on schools that have a certified teacher librarian on staff. It is assumed that if a teacher librarian did not fill out the survey, then the school does not have one on staff. Those without an identified teacher librarian were excluded from this study.

The researcher then consulted the 2016-2017 Iowa Public School District PreK-12 Enrollment data to determine school size for the remaining schools. The researcher used this data to determine possible urban schools and rural schools from the previous list to be included in the sample for this study. Only schools with over 4,200 students preschool to twelfth grade were considered as urban schools and those below 1,550 students in the same age range were considered as rural schools.

Based on enrollment size, the researcher examined school district websites to determine the grades served in the varying middle schools. This study is specifically focused on those middle schools who serve sixth through eighth grade to eliminate discrepancies among schools about age, maturity level and appropriateness of certain items. All other schools were removed from the list. If there were multiple schools represented for one district, only one was randomly chosen to be included in the study. Also, only schools with public access to their online catalogs were included.

In order to find an appropriate sample size, the researcher had to continually decrease the intended urban population and increase the intended rural population. A sample of 16 schools, eight urban and eight rural, was eventually decided to allow for enough difference in population size. The included schools will remain anonymous.

Procedure

Data Sources

A number of existing documents were examined throughout this study. Wildemuth (2009) states that existing documents are a “more accurate representation of the phenomenon of interest than data collected through self-report” (p. 158) and that the studied behavior “will be truly ‘natural’” (p. 159).

The first step was to generate a list of book titles to be analyzed for inclusion across the middle schools. The American Library Association (ALA) Notable Children’s Book list was chosen because it is a reputable source. The included titles are already highly recognized by the ALA. The researcher used this list to begin identifying potential titles to include in the analysis beginning with 2016 titles. The year 2016 was chosen because it

is recent but also allows time for libraries to have purchased the titles on the list. The 2016 ALA Notable Children's Book List is broken down into different age groups. The researcher used the section "older readers" to identify potential titles. This section contains titles with the intended audience of children ages 12 to 14, or grades sixth through eighth, which matches the population being studied. In previous research, Coley (2002) stated that challenged works are mostly fiction; for this reason nonfiction titles will not be considered in this study.

Next, the researcher consulted three professional review journals: *Booklist*, *School Library Journal* and *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*. The researcher located and read reviews for the items on the ALA Notable Children's Books in order to sort the books into two lists: controversial and non-controversial. Controversial was defined for this study using the findings of previous studies that identified controversial topics and the categories by which the ALA's Most Frequently Challenged Books data is organized (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2017). The ALA compiles this data from reports libraries or the media make to ALA about attempts persons in their communities have made to ban books from a library. The following categories were used in this study to identify themes as controversial: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) content, sexually explicit content/sexuality, offensive language/profanity, religious viewpoints/witchcraft, and violence. If a review in any of the three journals identified one or more of the topics considered controversial themes within the work, the title was included in the controversial book list. If none of the three journals identified any of the stated themes as being present, the title was included in those not likely to

contain controversial content. If the researcher was unable to locate a review for an item in any of the three journals, the item was excluded from the study. Also, if the researcher was unable to determine the likely presence of controversial themes or was undecided about the themes present, the title was not included in the study. In addition, each copyright year included has an equal representation of titles in both the controversial and noncontroversial groups. This occurred both naturally and through some manipulation of the researcher. In most cases, the number of included titles for each year were determined by the controversial group, as it typically had the least number of titles per year. In this case, titles for that year from the noncontroversial group were randomly chosen to be included, the others were eliminated. If the noncontroversial group had the least number of titles for that year, the researcher would examine the controversial titles list and eliminate the titles that were more difficult to classify as controversial. In some instances, both the groups were naturally equal and no further steps were taken.

Based on the book list and professional reviews, two lists of 13 titles each from 2012 to 2016 ALA Notable Children's Books were compiled to be used in this study. The group that is not likely to contain controversial material will be used as a control group. The control group will be used to account for libraries that have a small budget as was done in Bellow (2005) and Fliger (2010). The controversial books list and the control/not likely to be controversial list are in Appendix A. The theme leading to a titles designation as controversial is noted for each book contained in that list.

Lastly, the researcher searched the online catalogs of the 16 middle schools to determine the presence of the titles within each collection. Each catalog was searched

individually until all titles were searched for in each catalog. If an item was not found by a title search, the researcher also attempted to locate the item using an author search. If neither approach to searching was successful, the collection was deemed as not including the item.

Data Analysis

Based on the previous research of Coley (2002), Bellows (2005) and Fliger (2010), the researcher used the figure of 50% or less of controversial titles present to determine that self-censorship was occurring within the varying school collections. After searching the catalogs, this was determined by calculating the percent present of titles in the controversial group and the percent present of titles in the control group. Then these two totals were compared to determine if there was a discrepancy between the percentages of the control group and the controversial group. Based on Wildemuth's (2009) description of the use of frequencies to analyze data, the data was organized and displayed using a table of frequency and percentages (p. 348). In this case, the percentage of controversial titles and control titles present will determine if the practice of self-censorship is present.

Also, the researcher examined the list of controversial titles to determine if a majority of the sample locations did or did not contain certain controversial themes within their collections. The researcher noted whether the urban or the rural middle schools showed greater discrepancy between the controversial and control groups.

Limitations

This study has many limitations. There are limitations in the population of the sample such as the number of schools included, the location, and the demographics. The

titles included are limited to fiction titles from the ALA Notable Children's Book list.

The researcher was limited to reviews of the titles that might not contain specific information regarding the controversial themes. The researcher may have made errors in classifying the titles due to personal bias or to the inclusion or exclusion of relevant information contained within the reviews.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In order to determine if Iowa middle school libraries participate in self-censorship, the researcher randomly selected eight rural and eight urban middle schools in Iowa as the study sample. The online library catalog of each school was examined to see if the collection contained any of the 13 titles thought to have non-controversial content, also known as the control group of books, and/or any of the 13 titles thought to include controversial content, known as the controversial group (books that include topics from categories by which the ALA's Most Frequently Challenged Books data is organized).

Equal Representation

Question one asked if there was an equal representation of books in the library collections that are known to contain controversial topics as compared to those not likely to contain controversial topics. Table 1 identifies the number and percentage of titles present in each school's collection.

Eight schools (four, five, six, nine, ten, eleven, thirteen, and fifteen) had more titles from the control group than from controversial group within their collections. Two schools (schools three and sixteen) had the exact same number of titles from both groups present within their collections. Six schools (one, two, seven, eight, twelve, and fourteen) had more titles from the controversial group in their collections than from the control group.

Table 1

Number and Percentage of Titles in Each School's Collection

School # Urban	Control Group	Controversial Group	School # Rural	Control Group	Controversial Group
1	4 (31%)	7 (54%)	9	6 (46%)	5 (38%)
2	6 (46%)	9 (69%)	10	3 (23%)	2 (15%)
3	6 (46%)	6 (46%)	11	6 (46%)	5 (38%)
4	10 (77%)	8 (62%)	12	9 (69%)	10 (77%)
5	7 (54%)	5 (38%)	13	6 (46%)	3 (23%)
6	13 (100%)	11 (85%)	14	7 (54%)	8 (62%)
7	6 (46%)	7 (54%)	15	7 (54%)	5 (38%)
8	5 (38%)	6 (46%)	16	4 (31%)	4 (31%)

Specific Controversial topics

Question two focused on the specific controversial topics in order to examine if certain topics were more likely to be included or excluded from the collection. Table 2 identifies the number of each title included in the school's collection and identifies the potentially controversial topic represented in the book. Notably books with content involving sexuality were neither consistently included nor excluded: *Goodbye Stranger* and *Between Shades of Gray* were each in 15 of the 16 libraries studied, whereas *This One Summer* was in only 3 libraries. Likewise, two titles analyzed that included LGBT contents were neither consistently included nor excluded, with 14 libraries holding

Drama, but only one library holding, “*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*.”

Table 2

Number of Libraries with Potentially Controversial Items by Title and Topic

Title	Controversial Topic	# of libraries
<i>Goodbye Stranger</i>	Sexually explicit	15
<i>This One Summer</i>	sexuality, profanity	3
<i>Between Shades of Gray</i>	Violence, sexuality	15
<i>Orbiting Jupiter</i>	sexuality, violence	15
<i>Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass</i>	Violence, profanity	3
<i>Darius & Twig</i>	Violence	4
<i>Far, Far Away</i>	Violence, religion/witchcraft	6
<i>Anya's Ghost</i>	Religion/witchcraft, Violence	8
<i>Seraphina</i>	Religion/witchcraft	5
<i>Baba Yaga's Assistant</i>	Religion/witchcraft	2
<i>Cuckoo Song</i>	Religion/witchcraft	10
<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i>	LGBT	1
<i>Drama</i>	LGBT	14

Rural vs. Urban Schools

Question three focused on whether there is a tendency for urban or rural schools to self-censor more or less frequently. Three schools (four, five, and six) in the urban group

and five (nine, ten, eleven, thirteen and fifteen) from the rural group have more titles from the control group than from the controversial group within their collections. One school from both rural and urban (schools three and sixteen) have the exact same number of titles from both groups present within their collections. Four urban schools (one, two, seven, and eight) and two rural schools (twelve and fourteen) have more titles from the controversial group in their collections than from the control group.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore a sample of middle school library collections to determine if titles recommended by the ALA's Notable Children's Book list from 2012 to 2016 that may contain controversial topics and those not likely to contain controversial topics are equally represented within the collections. The collected data addressed the following questions:

1. Is there an equal representation of books in the library collections that are known to contain controversial topics as compared to those not likely to contain controversial topics?
2. Is one specific controversial topic represented in libraries more often than other controversial topics? Is there a measurable lack of representation of another topic or topics?
3. Does the tendency to self-censor collections occur more frequently within rural versus urban schools?

In order to determine the prevalence of self-censorship in Iowa middle school libraries that employ a teacher librarian, eight rural and eight urban middle schools were randomly chosen. The schools included had a teacher librarian who completed the Iowa School Library Survey, fit the selected enrollment size of over 4,200 students for urban and below 1,550 for rural, were attended by sixth through eighth graders, and had a publicly accessible online library catalog. Each school's catalog was examined to determine the presence or absence of selected titles within the school's library collection.

The selected titles were organized into two separate lists; one of works not likely to contain controversial content (the control group) and the other of titles previously identified as containing controversial content (books that include topics from categories by which the ALA's Most Frequently Challenged Books data is organized). Both lists were created using ALA's Notable Children's Book Lists from 2012-2016.

Based on the data collected, eight schools (three from the urban group and five from the rural group) had more titles from the control group than from controversial group within their collections.

Conclusions

Previous studies (Coley, 2002; Bellows, 2005; and Fliger, 2010) determined that a percentage of controversial titles below 50% present meant that the collection was being self-censored. Nine (56%) of the schools (3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, and 16) held less than 50% of the controversial group titles; and eight of those held an equal or greater number of the control group titles, indicating possible self censoring. One of the nine schools with below 50% of the controversial titles (school 8) had even fewer of the the control titles, indicating the lack of titles may be due to a budget shortfall. Based on this data alone, it first appears that eight of the schools are self-censoring.

However, the data were explored and compared further with the control group to better understand the prevalence of self-censorship in the sample. The percentage of titles for the controversial group for seven schools (3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 16) fall below 50%; however, the percentage of titles from the control group in the same seven schools are also below 50%. Similar to Bellows (2005), the control group is used to measure book

ownership compared to budget. In these cases, it is more likely that the schools have a small budget and are unable to purchase as many books as some of the other schools included. As a result, these seven schools have titles from the control group and controversial group that fall below 50% and thus are not considered to be self-censoring. On the other hand, the collections of schools five and fifteen contain less than 50% of the titles from the controversial group and also contain more than 50% of the titles from the control group. Thus, in the end, only these two schools are identified as self-censoring.

The collections of schools four and six have more than 50% of the titles from both groups. Even though the controversial group percentage is lower than the control group, since they are both above 50%, schools four and six are not considered to be self-censoring.

Furthermore, six schools (one, two, seven, eight, twelve, and fourteen) have more titles from the controversial group in their collection than from the control group. It is very surprising that these six school collections contained more controversial titles than control titles.

When examining the controversial topics present, the schools were generally inclusive to controversial titles with all controversial themes i.e. sexuality, profanity, violence, religion/witchcraft, and LGBT. However, no particular theme seemed to be very likely to be included or excluded; thus only general conclusions could be drawn. In general, sexuality seemed to be somewhat likely to be included in schools, as three of the four books containing that topic were held by 15 libraries. Religion/witchcraft was present in five titles on the list, but four of the five titles were owned by under half of the

libraries. Violence occurred in five titles as well, and in this case two of the titles were owned by 15 libraries. Within collections the inclusion of religion/witchcraft and violence varied by school and by how the concept was interpreted and applied. In the case of violence, for instance, the severity of incidents described and the prevalence or frequency of violent occurrences in a work were also factors influencing whether its inclusion was tolerable. LGBT was a theme in two of the titles in the group, but inclusion also varied by school. Only two works with LGBT content appeared in the sample; one item was included in 14 collections and the other was only included in one collection. Profanity was also only in two books in the sample. The two items with profanity were each only present in three library collections. Having profanity apparent in the title of the work (*Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*) may be part of why it was included in only three library collections.

Based on the results collected from this study, self-censorship occurs with the same frequency in both rural and urban settings. One urban and one rural school were determined to self-censor.

Based on the data collected, Iowa middle schools do practice self-censorship but it is only a small percentage: 2 schools (13%) of the sample. In comparison to other locations and settings, Iowa middle schools' practice of self-censorship is minimal as opposed to 69% (Fliger, 2010), 74.5% (Bellows, 2005), and 82% (Coley, 2002). Based on past studies, it would seem that a higher percentage of Iowa middle schools would be self-censoring. The results may not be an accurate representation of the actual practices within Iowa because this does not seem to be the trend that others have found across the

nation. It seems unlikely that Iowa middle schools practice self-censorship at a lower frequency when many middle schools in the nation have shown higher tendencies toward some form of self-censorship. This could be explained by the methodology chosen for this study. It is notable that the methodology of this study, like Fliger (2010), used only school collections from among those that employ teacher librarians. This may help to improve the number of controversial titles in collections.

Upon completing the research, the researcher noticed that some of the titles consistently present in the collections examined were also nominees for the Iowa Teen Award. The inclusion of these titles in either group could skew the results because most librarians purchase these titles for their libraries. Each year's list is compiled first from nominations by teens across Iowa, then adult volunteer readers and a committee choose a smaller selection from which readers will eventually elect the best book for the year. These books are more likely to be purchased because students need to read them in order to vote. Teacher librarians may overlook the controversial content in order to have them available to readers. Teens may be interested in and therefore nominating more controversial titles to the committee. The committee in turn may then be intentionally including controversial books among their selections to support student interest. The interest in edgier titles and the desire to serve patrons could explain why some of the sample libraries included more controversial titles in their collections than titles from the control group. Also, this could explain the lack of conclusions found in relation to specific controversial topics in research question two of this study.

In contrast to Gallagher's (2009) study, no conclusions could be drawn about specific controversial topics and their representation within the collection. It seems that Iowa middle school libraries are more likely to include or exclude an item based on the individual item's content, degree of severity, and prevalence of the theme represented in the work. Each teacher librarian determines purchases based on the unique population they serve and their knowledge of the student body. The titles included in this study may not be controversial with the population represented in the sample schools because of the librarians knowledge of students and their cultural values that guided selection when purchasing. While other titles that were not considered by the researcher may have changed the prevalence of self-censorship had they been included in this study because they may be more likely to be seen as controversial due to the potential differences between the students, their cultural values and those represented in the work. The schools chosen would also influence the results when comparing urban and rural populations.

According to Fliger's (2010) study, specific individual locations are more likely to self-censor. However, no conclusions could be drawn from this study to speak to the prevalence of self-censorship in urban versus rural locations. One school from each group demonstrated tendencies to self-censor. The researcher was limited in the sample size for this study. The inclusion of more schools from various locations may have led to a better representation of urban and rural school populations across Iowa.

Self-censoring is of interest to teacher librarians because they are required to create a collection that is diverse and protects access to information for all readers. The paucity of self-censorship in this study demonstrates that the occurrence of self-censorship seems to

be less prevalent in Iowa middle schools. This could be explained by the education and awareness of self-censorship available to librarians. It could also be explained by librarians becoming more aware of their own bias when making purchasing decisions. However, it is recommended that schools use stronger selection and reconsideration policies in their school board adopted policies to better guide selection choices and to protect titles that may be scrutinized due to controversial content. These changes could lead to greater diversity in collections and better access to materials for library users.

Recommendations for Future Study

In a future study, a better method of determining potentially controversial works would allow for a more accurate representation in both the controversial and control groups. The method of relying on reviews to determine controversiality may not be the most appropriate for this type of study. The interpretation and critique of the work is dependent on the reviewer and review source which in turn may affect the researchers determination to include the work as controversial. Relying on reviews to include pertinent information (or information of particular relevance to a given study) puts too much responsibility with the researcher to determine controversial content when not all information may be given. A more thorough examination of the selection criteria and reviewing policies of available review sources before determining which sources to use may lead to more accurate results. Future research could also use the works themselves to determine the presence of controversial themes.

Other future studies could focus on schools that do not employ a teacher librarian in order to see if there are differences in their collections using the same set of control and

controversial titles. Another study could use a set of books in the control and controversial groups that are beyond those that are part of the Iowa Teen Award (ITA) in order to remove the possibility that the ITA purchasing priorities may be impacting the assessment of self-censorship. Still another study could focus on the ITA lists such as examining the lists themselves to determine the number of controversial titles and control titles present from year to year or questioning the committee members to determine selection practices for specific lists.

This study could be replicated in the future with a larger population size or a larger group of diverse titles. This study could also be duplicated in other settings with a different population.

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APPENDIX A
GROUP OF TITLES

Table A1: *List of Potential Controversial Titles*

Title	Author	year	reason for potential controversy
<i>Goodbye Stranger</i>	Rebecca Stead	2016	Sexually explicit
<i>Cuckoo Song</i>	Frances Hardinge	2016	Religion/witchcraft
<i>Orbiting Jupiter</i>	Gary D. Schmidt	2016	sexuality, violence
<i>Baba Yaga's Assistant</i>	Marika McCoola	2016	Religion/witchcraft
<i>This One Summer</i>	Mariko Tamaki	2015	sexuality, profanity
<i>Darius & Twig</i>	Walter Dean Myers	2014	Violence
<i>Far, Far Away</i>	Tom McNeal	2014	Violence, religion/witchcraft
<i>Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass</i>	Meg Medina	2014	Violence, profanity
<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i>	Benjamin Alire Sáenz	2013	LGBT
<i>Drama</i>	Raina Telgemeier	2013	LGBT
<i>Seraphina</i>	Rachel Hartman	2013	Religion/witchcraft
<i>Between Shades of Gray</i>	Ruta Sepetys	2012	Violence, sexuality
<i>Anya's Ghost</i>	Vera Brosgol	2012	Religion/witchcraft, Violence

Table A2: *List of Control Titles*

Title	Author	year
<i>The Thing about Jellyfish</i>	Ali Benjamin	2016
<i>The Seventh Most Important Thing</i>	Shelley Pearsall.	2016
<i>Listen, Slowly</i>	Thanhha Lai	2016
<i>The Hired Girl.</i>	Laura Amy Schlitz	2016
<i>The Crossover</i>	Kwame Alexander	2015
<i>Navigating Early</i>	Clare Vanderpool	2014
<i>One Came Home</i>	Amy Timberlake	2014
<i>Counting by 7s</i>	Holly Goldberg	2014
<i>The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano</i>	Sonia Manzano	2013
<i>My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece</i>	Annabel Pitcher	2013
<i>My Family for the War</i>	Anne C. Voorhoeve	2013
<i>Under the Mesquite</i>	Guadalupe Garcia McCall	2012
<i>Bluefish</i>	Pat Schmatz	2012