**"It does make me reflect… on the nature of the profession": Experiences of book banning and censorship in school libraries.**

Book bans and censorship attempts will come as no surprise to readers of *The School Librarian*, with recent figures estimating that between 37% (Turner, 2024) and 53% (Dancey-Downs, 2024) of school library workers have faced challenges to library materials in recent years. However, what survey based studies such as these often obscure is the impact of attacks on the people involved, as well as the implications for professional school librarian roles and identities. Inspired by broader concern about the effect of the ongoing 'anti-woke culture wars' on cultural heritage workers, the study reported here centres the voices of school librarians who have dealt with challenges to library materials and activities. The overarching aim is to offer recommendations for how we might create a more sustainable library and information sector. Noted differences with public libraries, who have not faced such a spike in book challenge incidents, as well as the lack of literature on this topic from beyond the US context, provides another motivation for this research.

Ten school librarians responded to my call to participate in this study of book banning and censorship in the UK, with nine participating in online interviews and one person submitting a written narrative about their experiences of challenges to library materials. Participants worked in primary, secondary and all through schools that were either mixed gender or co-educational, in both the independent and state sector. However, while participants represented a wide range of UK geographic regions, it proved to be harder to talk with school library workers who were located outside of large urban settings as well as male participants, although this is perhaps to be expected given the gender makeup of the library sector (CILIP, 2023a). After transcribing the interviews, I analysed narratives using a constant comparative method, in which analysis starts from each individual participant's responses rather than a fixed set of themes. Given that school library workers have been subjected to silencing and shaming (Dancey-Downs, 2024; Leggatt, 2024), I paid particular attention to considerations of confidentiality and anonymity.

**Key findings from the study**

Although the small number of participants means that this study cannot make generalisable claims, the LGBTQ focus of book challenges was unmissable. Some books, such as the Heartstopper series (Oseman, 2016), were obvious targets. Others, however, were less expected, with accusations levelled at the presence of 'coded' narratives in books such as *Billy's Bravery* (Percival, 2023). Similarly, while most complaints were made by parents/carers at educational transitional points, such as the entry into Reception/P1 and Year 7/S1, low-level pupil vandalism, including hiding, ripping and annotating books with slurs was also a problem for some schools. Challenges were noted across the sector, including at otherwise seemingly LGBTQ-friendly schools.

On facing a challenge, one of the first steps that many school library workers took was to seek out support, including from EDI leads, senior management and colleagues within the school as

well as from external professional associations. However, while these groups were seen to provide some useful guidance as well as emotional support, the unexpectedness of attacks meant that advice was often seen as patchy. These interactions did help school library workers to gauge who would defend them or uphold their professional values and actions, though. The need to rebuild this trust was vital given that participants spoke of their anxiety walking through parents in the playground and the shock of finding book-banning propaganda left on their desk.

Participants also became proactively engaged in challenging censorship attempts, with some school library workers purposefully inviting the school leadership team to attend and have their photos taken at events designed to foster inclusion. Participants with collection and complaints policies reported that these documents helped them to mediate the situation more effectively, although school library workers with unsympathetic senior leadership teams were understandably nervous of inviting further scrutiny of their collections. Participants further spoke of the comfort they received from observing affirmative gestures, including letters and posters from pupils as well as seeing visitors and parents nod approvingly at titles on display.

All of this additional work did not come without a cost, though, with school library workers having to expend considerable physical time and energy working with stakeholders to figure out what the challenge involved and how to resolve it. There was also considerable additional emotional labour involved during and after challenges, including related to reassuring library assistants, thinking about the potential consequences of any future actions, and dealing with being under suspicion. Participants were also forced to display considerable courage on a daily basis after attacks made them unsure how a certain display or purchase might be received.

**Recommendations**
Talking with participants about their experiences of book challenges and censorship provides valuable insight into ways in which the broader library and information sector could support school library workers at this time.

For professional organisations, the depth of misunderstanding by school senior leadership teams indicates that work challenging bookbans needs to be integrated with broader school library advocacy campaigns. The amount of time that school library workers spent searching for support further suggests that a one-stop helpline or step-by-step guide to best practices would also be helpful. Care, however, should be taken to avoid the use of fear messaging, which can perpetuate anxiety. The potential for trauma means that professional organisations could also draw from the Urban Library study (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022) to consider how organised collective care practices could be integrated into ongoing professional support offers.

For school library workers, CILIP's (2023b) report on managing inclusive collections may be helpful, particularly the advice to document any censorship related decision-making. The recognition that most challenges happen at transitional educational points further indicates the possible benefit of including the library in parental as well as child transition events. Care should also be taken with technology- both in terms of looking for privacy options when purchasing new library software as well as being cautious of free book giveaways on social media. The potential

for gender critical activists to use social media to troll school library workers means that it might be more circumspect to use private messaging features instead.

Finally, Library and Information Studies (LIS) programmes should support continued research on this topic, particularly given the absence of children's and young adult's voices to date. A consideration of ethics, however, is vital, given that internet savvy activist groups could exploit research that draws attention to tactics of resistance. Questions of censorship should be integrated into MA curricula, while limitations in school senior leadership team responses further indicate the need for LIS to collaborate with Education faculties. LIS should also keep working to extend school library worker access to professional education opportunities.

### What next?

The CILIP (2023b) report on managing diverse collections urges librarians to be prepared rather than scared about book bans and challenges. Together, professional organisations, LIS and school library workers can work together to protect both our values and our workforce - while creating the school library service that young people deserve.

### References

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