Shelves under siege: School librarians as (temporary?) risk workers

Abstract: Book-banning and censorship attempts are becoming increasingly prominent within UK school libraries. Creating legal and financial risk for school librarians, attempts to ban books also generate risks for young people by pushing reading into unregulated online spaces as well as denying access to representative reading material. This paper uses the theoretical framework of risk work, which has been used to conceptualise how health and social care professionals make decisions or act upon risk as part of their daily practice, to examine how risks related to intellectual freedom are (re)shaping the work of UK school librarians. Ten UK based school librarians who had previously faced book ban attempts were interviewed about their experiences. Analysis demonstrates that these school librarians are engaged in distinctive forms of risk work within their workplaces, including interpreting, communicating and sharing knowledge about the risks of book bans with their professional communities. Introducing and drawing attention to new relational and emotional demands upon school librarians, the identification of risk work has important implications for educational and professional support structures as heightened tensions and demands become part of everyday working practice.

1. *Introduction*

Questions of censorship have typically played a far less prominent role within school librarianship in the United Kingdom (UK) than in other countries (Oppenheim & Smith, 2004, p.159). Banned Books Week is approached as an "abstract" concept (Leggatt, 2022, p.14), while issues related to book removals remain absent from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)'s advocacy and campaign work (Oltmann et al., 2022, p.441). Since 2021, however, when a library's LGBTQ+ author talk was unceremoniously cancelled by the school's senior leadership team (Leggatt, 2022), school librarians in the UK have unexpectedly found themselves at the foreground of attacks on intellectual freedom. Research demonstrates that between 37% (Turner, 2024) and 53% (Dancey-Downs, 2024) of UK school library workers have since been challenged about reading materials with at least one librarian losing their job over the matter (Dancey-Downs, 2024). While book banning activity in the UK remains far less prevalent than in the United States (Oltmann, 2023), the vicious nature of attacks as well as the UK's relative lack of preparedness calls for an urgent examination of the impact that challenges have on school librarians and their professional work.

The potential implications of attacks on intellectual freedom become even more apparent given the lack of statutory protection accorded to school libraries in the UK; being involved in a dispute creates legal and financial risks for school librarians as well as threatening future employment prospects. Book bans further generate risks for the young people that school libraries serve by denying access to representative forms of reading material as well as driving reading into unregulated online spaces. The potential severity of these outcomes suggests the need to examine how the risks of censorship are reshaping the nature and experience of school library work. This study uses the theoretical construct of "risk work" (Horlick-Jones, 2005) to explore the impact of book bans on school librarianship. Risk work refers to everyday working practices that involve the negotiation or handling of risk (Brown & Gale, 2018b, p.1). Originally conceptualised in relation to how health and social care professionals make decisions or act upon risk as part of their daily practice, risk work emerges from the premise that the growing

"preoccupation with the management of risk" (Horlick-Jones, 2005, p.293) has sidelined "the material and embodied practices which enable this work to "get done"" (Brown & Gale, 2018a, p.3). Applied to school libraries, risk work offers a useful framing device to explore the impact that the threats of book-banning are having on professional practice; in effect, how are the risks of censorship (re)shaping how school librarians get their work done?

In exploring school librarianship through the lens of risk work, this study specifically centres the information activities that hold together and give shape to professional practice. Positioning risk work as anchored by participation within workplace information environments, this informational framing draws attention to a previously underexplored aspect of risk work- namely, how information literacy, which is defined as a "way of knowing the many environments that constitute an individual's being in the world" (Lloyd, 2007, p.182), supports the handling of uncertainty. Taking inspiration from recent research that highlights how work forms the means to make hidden activities visible (McKenzie & Dalmer, 2020, p.2), the foregrounding of how people learn how to operate within hazardous contexts positions risk work as predicated upon the development of practical, embodied, and conceptual risk knowledge. Information literacy and risk have previously been connected through risk-informed information practice, which is defined as "the knowing of risk through connection to and interpretation of the forms of risk knowledge that, in being practically or situationally of value to a person, contribute to the development of situated risk expertise" (Hicks, 2025a). This study, which positions both risk and information literacy as shaped by social and cultural processes (e.g., Douglas, 1966; Lloyd, 2017), extends research into risk-informed information practice by explicitly foregrounding the role that information activities play in supporting the professional handling of risk. Since this study started, the Trump administration has significantly increased its attacks on intellectual freedom including within academic library contexts (Hicks, 2025c) as well as in school and public library settings. Findings from this study will consequently offer insight for professional associations and Library and Information Science (LIS) educators looking to support the anti-censorship focused work of librarians from any sector.

2. Literature Review
a. Censorship in School Libraries

Research suggests that challenges to intellectual freedom are increasing worldwide (see ALIA, 2023; CFLA-FCAB, 2023). The United States (US) has seen one of the biggest rises in incidents with data collected by PEN America indicating that 2,532 book bans were upheld within the 2021/2022 school year (Goncalves, 2024, p.197), and the American Library Association (ALA, n.d.) calculating that challenges grew a further 65% within 2023. Book bans are not new in the US; the ALA drafted the Library Bill of Rights in 1938 (ALA Council, n.d.) and established the Office for Intellectual Freedom in 1967 (OIF, n.d.). However, recent challenges have been almost exclusively directed towards racial, gender and sexual identity in what has been characterised as a dramatic revival of McCarthyism (Jaeger et al., 2022). In contrast, the UK has not previously experienced widespread attacks on intellectual freedom. While Taylor and McMenemy (2012) found that 25% of Scottish public libraries received book challenges between 2004 and 2009, Chapman (2013) reported few complaints in her study of two local authorities and CILIP has notably lagged the ALA in its support for anti-censorship work (Oltmann et al., 2023, p.445). This lack of engagement has resulted in the labelling of UK

librarians as "irrational and discriminatory as other censors" (Oppenheim & Smith, 2004, p.159) or as expressing theoretical rather than practical support for intellectual freedom (McNicol, 2016).

Increasing numbers of censorship challenges have since led to a corresponding growth in research in this area. Legal scholars in the US have challenged the contradiction between censorship and students' first amendment rights (e.g., Perry, 2023), while social inequalities researchers have addressed common features of attacks (e.g., Goncalves et al., 2024). LIS scholars and librarians have further reflected upon book ban experiences, including by providing advice about how to fight censorship attempts (e.g., Leggatt, 2023; Oltmann, 2023). However, while these case studies offer useful insight into experiences of attacks, including recommended communication and mediation strategies, there has been far less exploration of the impact of book bans on everyday school librarian working practice, despite concern about the rise of self-censorship. Previous studies have often relied on collection analyses to draw conclusions about librarian actions (e.g., Tudor et al., 2023) while research into self-censorship typically focuses on selection protocols (e.g., Moeller & Becnel, 2020) rather than how decisions are made. Scholarship into Section 28, a UK government act prohibiting the promotion of homosexuality that was in force until 2003, has similarly tended to take a collections (e.g., Attwell, 2020) rather than a person-centred approach. These gaps provide an impetus for this study.

b. The work of information professionals

The information practices of library and information professionals have been surprisingly underexplored within LIS despite the "imperative" for evidence-based library and information practice (Pilerot & Lindberg, 2018, p.1). Although librarian competencies have been widely discussed within professional literature (e.g., Wingate Grey, 2013), far less attention has been paid to how the work of librarianship is performed, including how librarians learn about or adjust to new contexts and situations. An exception is found in the work of Pilerot and Lindberg (2024), who draw upon Strauss' (1985) theoretical concept of articulation work to illustrate that staying informed is often invisible within the practice of academic librarianship despite being essential for its coordination. Highlighting how a failure to recognise librarian work can quickly lead to "structural invisibility" (McKenzie & Dalmer, 2020, p.11), these studies also draw attention to how the obscuring of physical labour may further sideline the relational care work that underpins so many forms of librarian activity (Stooke & McKenzie, 2009). Interestingly, while research has addressed the work of public, academic and hospital librarians, the activities of school librarians have not yet been subject to examination. Instead, research has focused on the role (e.g. Roche, 2022) and identity (e.g., Centerwall, 2019) of these professionals rather than on their everyday working practices.

Given the lack of scholarship, it is not surprising that risk has rarely been used as a lens to explore the work of information professionals. When risk has formed the focus of this research, studies have tended to take a cognitive approach, in which authors aim to identify the risks of information, such as digital privacy (e.g., Haynes & Robinson, 2023). An exception is found in Frank (2020), who explicitly uses a sociocultural lens to establish how trust, uncertainty and political culture shape the construction of risk within digital preservation work. Research into the related topic of safety introduces the importance of experiential knowledge to risk responses (Marcella & Lockerbie, 2016, p.561). However, this research has remained limited to

professional areas where risk management has already been established as a guiding principle. Risk studies research offers an intriguing alternative perspective, with a study of social care working practices drawing out the importance of observing and documenting information within professional risk decision-making (Harrad-Hyde, Williams & Armstrong, 2022) and information sharing further seen as key to ambulance work (Harrad-Hyde & Mackintosh, 2024). Offering insight into how information shapes risk work, this research is nevertheless typically restricted to health and social care professions.

   3. Theoretical Framework
This study employs risk work as a theoretical lens through which to explore the impact of censorship on school librarianship. Risk work is a theoretical construct that has emerged at the intersection of the sociology of risk that is applied to health and the sociology of professions (Brown & Gale, 2018a). First introduced through the work of Horlick-Jones (2005, p.293), risk work has since been more robustly theorised through the work of Brown and Gale (2018a), who drew upon a review of literature and empirical work to establish the core analytical framework for the concept. With its roots in risk theory as well as Habermas' theory of the lifeworld (Brown & Gale, 2018a), the risk work conceptual framework has been employed to explore the work of healthcare as well as social work and education.

   The basis of the conceptual framework lies in the identification of three "distinctive" (Brown & Gale, 2018b, p.2) components of risk work: translating risk to different contexts, minimising risks in practice, and caring within risk contexts (Gale et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the sociocultural association of risk with the value that an event holds to a person means that risk work must also account for the negotiation of uncertainty. Core elements have subsequently been reinterpreted (see Figure 1) to conceptualise risk work as centred on the connections that exist between *risk knowledge*, which refers to the application of formal and informal ways of knowing to a risk context, *interventions*, in which practitioners mediate risk situations, and *social relations,* which acknowledge the impact of risk work on current and future relationships (Brown & Gale, 2018a). Yet, while this elaboration represents practitioner lived experiences, it also positions risk as both a paradox and a fallacy, in which interventions to minimise risk that are based on current risk knowledge impact on professional relationships, which in turn, come full circle to implicate risk knowledge (Brown & Gale, 2018a, p.7). From this conundrum, risk work is more complexly conceptualised as the *questioning* of its core features, including the truth of risk knowledge, the legitimacy of interventions and the authenticity of experiences (Brown & Gale, 2018a, p.9). In effect, it is the interactions and tensions between the key features of risk work that are key to its understanding (Brown & Gale, 2018a, p.12).
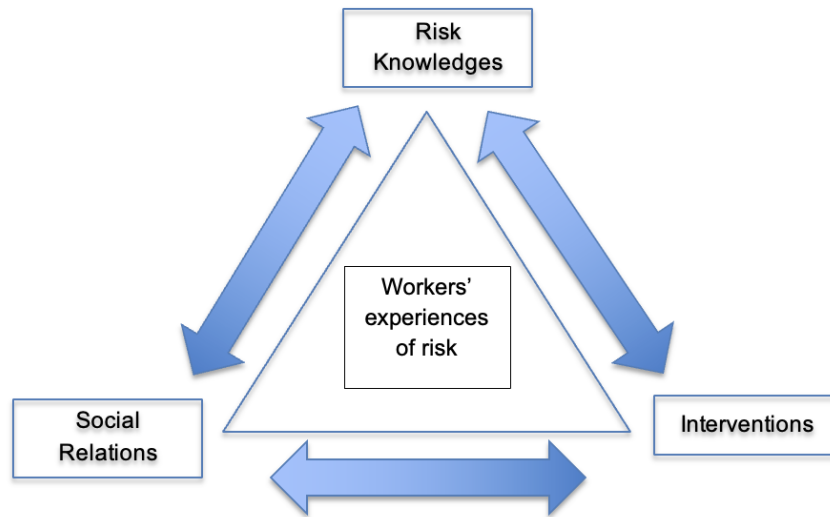
Figure 1: A simplified version of the conceptual model of risk work (Brown & Gale, 2018a)

Given its origins, it is not surprising that risk work has been most comprehensively explored in the working practices of healthcare providers, including professionals and trained lay people (see Gale et al., 2016). However, the growing language of risk means that the concept is also spreading to social spaces that have not typically formed the focus of risk analysis (Horlick-Jones, 2005, p.293). One area of interest is research into risk work with children and young people where scholarship indicates that the onus that is placed on safeguarding introduces emotional demands (Truter & Fouché, 2019, p.451) while referencing areas of expertise that lay outside a professional's core training (Cecchini, 2021, p.237). Another area of research that has some application to this study relates to situations in which risk work becomes imposed on a field, often in response to sudden changes in the law. Healthcare workers who were suddenly expected to enact the UK's government counterterrorism Prevent Strategy, for example, expressed limited awareness of how to respond to the policy (Chivers, 2018) while care home managers who became liable for enforcing post-Brexit immigration rules noted how vigilance introduced new tensions and stress to their daily activities (Manthorpe et al., 2018).

Perhaps the most explored situation in which risk work has been suddenly foregrounded is the COVID-19 pandemic. Leading to the irrelevance of "nationally agreed" protocols that would typically guide the assessment and management of risk (Alaszewski, 2023, p.93), the rapid spread of the coronavirus forced health professionals to draw upon tacit knowledge as well as expertise shared over informal app-based groups to establish temporary guiding procedures for their everyday healthcare duties. The absence of rules meant that medical inspectors were further forced to translate confusing and constantly changing official risk advice into practice (Bonnet et al., 2023) all while being unable to "bracket" out the risk of infection to themselves (Alaszewski, 2023, p.94). Research has also explored how the COVID-19 pandemic introduced risk work to new social and professional roles, including caregivers (Twamley et al., 2023) and domestic workers (Siraj et al., 2024). Noting that caring for families adds an additional relational dimension to risk work, Twamley et al (2023, p.88) also highlight the labour implications of new tasks, which they characterise as seeking and interpreting information; assessing risk; and minimising risk. Information was also seen as important by Siraj et al (2024)

who highlighted how "being transparent" with employers helped the precariously employed to balance the financial risks of the pandemic with health concerns.

4. Methods

The emphasis placed on school librarian experiences of risk meant that the study employed a qualitative research design that was informed by the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This approach, which aligns with the sociocultural theoretical framing adopted within this study, allowed for an exploration of social realities that are "multiple, processual and constructed'" (Charmaz, 2014, p.13). More specifically, the wish to allow participants the time and space to consider the impact of censorship challenges on their professional work, as well as to reference complex fears and emotions, meant that the study employed semi-structured interviews as the research method. These interviews, which were carried out online through end-to-end encrypted video conferencing tools, were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Interviews lasted between 34 and 56 minutes for an average of 41 minutes. Interview questions focused on book ban experiences, including strategies adopted to either manage or pre-empt attacks. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating.

The study employed a purposive sampling method (Palys, 2008) to obtain broad representation of the many forms that challenges to intellectual freedom have taken in UK school libraries. Participants were recruited through messages posted to UK school librarian mailing lists and social media channels. Nine school library workers were interviewed (see Table 2). A final participant chose to submit a written narrative of their experience, which brought the total number of study participants to 10. Inclusion criteria for the study involved working in a school library in the UK and experience of challenges to library materials. Participants represented a variety of UK locations but were predominantly located in large urban settings. A range of schools were included in the study, including single sex and co-educational primary (age 5-11), secondary (age 11-18) and all through (3-18) schools in both the independent (private) and state sector.

Participant	School Type	Location
S1	Co-educational, State	London
S2	Single Sex, Independent	Scotland
S3	Single Sex, State	London
S4	Co-educational, Independent	London
S5	Independent	Scotland
S6	Co-educational, State	East of England
S7	Co-educational, State	London
S8	Co-educational, State	South of England

| S9 | Co-educational, State | London |
| S10 | Co-educational, Independent | North of England |

Table 1: Participant data

Interview data were analysed through a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014), which allowed for an iterative analytical process. Data were coded by hand using an open coding process before being subjected to a second round of more focused coding. The six codes produced through this process were subsequently raised to two categories through further focused analysis and memo writing. Limitations of the study included difficulties finding male participants as well as participants who were located outside of large urban settings. The study is also limited by the small number of participants, which means that findings from this study are not generalisable and further ongoing research is needed in this area.

Given that attacks on intellectual freedom are ongoing, the study paid particular attention to ethical process. The small size of the school library sector in the UK and the potential impact of identification meant that the study, which was approved by the [X University] Research Committee [AH/2023/012], anonymises details of the school librarian, school and the specific details of the challenge. However, as participants inadvertently mentioned loopholes that could be exploited by book ban activists, it became clear that this study also risked causing indirect harm to people who had not consented to participate in this study. For this reason, comments that were perceived to place school librarians or their users in danger have been removed from the dataset. For a more complete exploration of this ethical dilemma, please see (X). Due to these ethical concerns, the data generated and analysed in the study are not publicly available.

5. Findings

Analysis suggests that the school librarians interviewed for this study become informed about the risks of book banning through mapping the terrain, which comprises the information activities of *establishing guidance, seeking professional advice and disclosing,* and roping together, which includes the information activities of *monitoring, observing* and *pooling*. These categories are unpacked below and represented in Table 2.

Category	Codes	Definition
Mapping the Terrain		Orienting to new risk information environments
	Establishing Guidance	Ascertaining direction from people in authority/ with more experience
	Seeking Professional Advice	Seeking support and guidance from rights-protecting membership organisations
	Disclosing	Making new or previously secret information known to people
Roping Together		Creating solidarity/cooperation within new risk information environments

	Monitoring	Keeping track of changes and developments related to book bans
	Observing	Paying careful attention to actions and words of others
	Pooling	Amalgamating different fragments of information found by a group

Table 2: Overview of the study's key categories and codes

a. *Mapping the terrain*

As prior literature intimates, book bans and censorship challenges form a largely unknown territory for UK-based school librarians. The suddenness of attacks as well as the "surprise" (S2, S8) or "shock" (S9) at the tenor of complaints means that participants are plunged into highly uncertain information environments, in which seemingly stable knowledge structures became unsettled: "I'm just having to think about it in ways I've never had to before" (S1). This ambiguity, which also creates new tasks and responsibilities, forces school librarians to start *mapping* or orienting themselves to the new informational terrain that surrounds them. Helping participants to identify the rules and guidance that structure these unfamiliar contexts, *mapping the terrain* mediates risk by connecting them with the forms of information that will enable them to adjust to new demands: "keeping across what's happening in publishing… and keeping into, you know, being in those forums" (S1). At the same time, the vulnerability (S4, S9) of the school librarian position means that *mapping the terrain* also serves a secondary purpose of helping participants to ascertain who they can trust within this uncertain new context. In effect, attempts to determine useful sources of information also provide the means for school librarians to chart what backing they might expect to receive from their school, colleagues and professional associations. Illustrating how a focus on information makes both the social and material dimensions of uncertainty visible, this category is explained through the information activities of *establishing guidance, seeking professional advice and disclosing.*

Establishing Guidance

One of the first actions that school librarians take when they either receive or hear of a challenge to library materials is to try and *establish guidance* from more senior members of staff. Comprising line managers, safeguarding or Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) leads, these figures inform risk by connecting school librarians to both practical and instrumental advice as well as more nuanced forms of emotional support:

> "So, I was able to, like, go to her and talk to her about all of this. I wasn't completely alone" (S2)

Located in the local school environment, these figures become even more important given the unexpectedness of challenges, which means that school librarians typically neither have experience dealing with these sorts of events nor established procedures in place to support them. At the same time, school leaders are not always universally helpful, with participants

indicating that they also extend considerable energy "press[ing]" (S2) senior teams to set up mediation meetings with stakeholders (S1, S2, S9) or to expand on rushed pronouncements:

> "[The deputy headteacher] was just, like, 'we don't want this book'. And I was, like, 'Okay, but I'm gonna need more specifics. Because if you don't give me something more specific, it's going to happen again.'" (S2)

Frustration with a lack of official clarity is further compounded when institutional direction seems to ignore or even contravene professional guidance on intellectual freedom (e.g. CILIP, n.d.). Leading to a need for yet more relational work, as participants are forced to check whether their actions align with official recommendations, the perceived poor quality of advice also challenges confidence in the value of these sources:

> "I will email the safeguarding lead and be, like, 'Just to let you know. I'm sure you know about this book' -obviously he doesn't- 'I'm sure you know about this book, but just to let you know that I have taken it off'" (S1)

Drawing attention to growing tensions between institutional advice and librarian expertise, the actions of school leaders are also used as an indicator of how supportive a school might be of professional library values and activities.

Seeking Professional Advice
Alongside engaging with local school hierarchies, participants also typically *seek professional advice* when they become aware of a book ban challenge. Encompassing trade unions and professional library groups, these associations inform risk by connecting school librarians with material assistance in the face of censorship requests. At the same time, the emotional needs engendered by book ban challenges means that engaging with these groups also provides access to social support in the shape of solidarity and community:

> "I was lucky that I had a really good union. I think it would have been, you know, a lot lonelier without them." (S3)

For some participants, professional associations prove to be extremely helpful with meetings and supportive public statements helping to validate and legitimise their concerns. For others, however, *seeking professional advice* proved to be as disappointing as working with their schools, with participants complaining of a lack of support materials, particularly in comparison to what the ALA offers (S2), failure to put on training events (S9) and dismissal of their issues:

> "I went to [the professional association], and I said, 'this has happened.' And they said, 'Oh, that's terrible! Yes, we are doing a new diversity policy. Yes, we must put that in Appendix'" … and that was it." (S9)

Adding to participants' frustration by revealing further institutional knowledge deficiencies, the lack of support also magnifies the risks of book bans by distancing librarians from their

professional community. While associations have since started to respond more constructively, including through organising training events, the initial inability to help increased the potential severity of events by undermining a sense of collective endeavour as well as intersubjective forms of identity.

Disclosing
A final way in which participants become informed about the risks of book bans is through *disclosing* information about events to professional colleagues. Referring to making new or previously secret information known to people, *disclosing* informs risk by encouraging information sharing; in situating colleagues in relation to the book ban challenges they are facing, participants become privy to localised or fragmented forms of information that help to contextualise recent events: "and, as is so often the case, it turned out that there was a bigger story" (S4). Yet, in drawing colleagues into a difficult situation, *disclosing* also mitigates risk by helping school librarians to either build or maintain the social connections on which they rely for emotional support. Thus, *disclosing* events to teachers who were "shocked that [the attack] had happened at all" (S2) strengthens relationships in their immediate workplace. From another angle, the potential consequences of a book ban as well as school librarians' "lone operator" status (S4) means that *disclosing* also provides an important way through which participants gauge support for their position within the local context. Being "very upfront" (S3) with a new employer about prior involvement within a book ban, for example, informs risk by helping to determine the likelihood of institutional support if another challenge were to arise. Providing insight into the vulnerable position of school librarians, participant efforts to control the flow of information also represent an agentic response to the uncertainty of this time.

   b. *Roping together*
Increasing tension between professional ways of knowing, including frustration with what is perceived to form superficial (S1) or "racist" (S9) forms of institutional knowledge, subsequently recentres participant information activity upon local community members, including fellow school librarians. Referred to as *roping together*, which is a technical term that describes how climbers tie themselves together to ensure safe passage across difficult terrain, joining forces with the local community represents a strategic form of cooperation that is designed to strengthen an ability to cope with the uncertainty of this time. Seen to bring different but often overlooked priorities to bear upon book ban challenges, these networks inform risk by connecting school librarians with the situated and experiential forms of information that are missing from the institutional sphere:

> "That was another forum where I was saying 'I'm getting a few challenges… Is anyone else experiencing that?' And you'd feel like everyone would have a story" (S1)

In turn, engaging with similarly situated others also strengthens participants' ability to cope; the realisation that "even the most experienced school librarians… are nervous" (S4) encourages a collective approach to managing difficulties created by the disruption of knowledge. Speaking to the importance of firsthand experience within an emerging risk scenario, this coming together of otherwise unconnected community members illustrates how *roping together* forms a strategic

activity that supports wellbeing as well as the piecing together of more informed ways of knowing. This category will now be explained through the information activities of *monitoring, observing* and *pooling.*

Monitoring
The relative novelty of attacks coupled with, in some cases, secrecy enforced by the school in question, means that *monitoring* the media forms a particularly important way for school librarians to build their knowledge of book bans. Helping to expand a frame of reference beyond individual incidents, *monitoring* also informs risk by connecting participants with the situated forms of knowledge that are vital for managing the impact of challenges. One vital function that *monitoring* plays is to alert participants to what is relevant within risk information environments. The *Lit Hub Daily* newsletter, for example, is seen to be "very good… [on] … legal action that's being taken and stuff" (S6), while emails from the School Library Association help to draw attention to the existence of bad actor freedom of information requests (S3). Listening to "horror stories" (S3) also provides warning of touchpoints that might provoke book ban action:

> "I know in other schools where I've spoken to people… is maybe… 'don't put the pride display up' or 'you can have the books, but you can't promote them'" (S3)

Beyond drawing attention to threats, *monitoring* for stories also provides a way for school librarians to self-assess their own preparedness to meet further book ban challenges:

> "I mean, there's always that slight feeling of have, is there something… out there that I should be doing, that I just don't know about or haven't found because of that professional isolation?" (S1)

Incredulity that the self-categorised "low stakes" of librarianship could result in "arrests" and "death threats" (S10) means that *monitoring* also informs risk by providing the means to reflect on professional activity, including the value and worth of school library work.

Observing
Concern that the voices of community members, including other parents and pupils, are often excluded from consideration in challenges to intellectual freedom (Leggatt, 2022, p.51) means that *observing* local reactions forms another important way in which school librarians become informed about the risk of book bans. As one participant points out, the fact that one complaining parent always "trumps 47 other [non-complaining] parents" (S9) often obscures alternative perspectives on the issue. In physically attending to the reactions of local community members, including through recognising validating gestures, school librarians demonstrate the importance of sensory and embodied information to becoming informed about risk. *Observing* how a Black parent "picked [a] book up, read the blurb, and sort of nodded" (S4) at a title clearly aimed at Black girls, for example, was interpreted as a heartening indication of the wider community's lack of support for censorship. The receipt of supportive letters (S3) and posters (S8) from pupils performed a similar function. At other times, participants purposefully engineered a situation to test community response; *observing* that key school members,

including the rugby and the school leadership team, attended a photo opportunity at a community event provided a useful way to gauge the depth of local feeling:

> "Most of [the school leadership team] came… and… regardless of, you know, where they're at… the optics of that was important. Which I… took sort of comfort from" (S4)

At the same time, *observing* can also extend risk, particularly when it highlights additional tensions. Recognising "beauty" and "tender[ness]" (S1) in how students react to diverse books draws attention to less commonly considered risks of book bans, including the damage that a lack of support could do to children who are starting to explore their identity. In direct contrast, *observing* posters that have been deliberately "defaced" (S4) or books that have been "thrown down behind the back of the sofa" (S8) also reveals different forms of opposition to diverse books. While only a handful of participants noted issues with the physical abuse of library materials, these behaviours provided a disquieting indication of threats that might be present in a community:

> "So, we've had a problem with one set of books in particular being destroyed and defaced… It's horrible, but… it's ripped and scribbled on and really quite badly defaced. Yeah. And then, like [describing defacing] 'this is disgusting' 'gay,' 'disgusting gay.' (S8)

Creating a reminder of the complexity of intellectual freedom, including how UK book ban issues are not uniquely associated with organised international groups (Leggatt, 2022), incidents such as these also highlight the physical and emotional toil of book bans on school librarians as *observing* becomes reframed in terms of vigilance and suspicion.

Pooling
A final way in which school librarians become informed about the risks of book banning is through *pooling* information about attacks with co-located others. Referring to how groups join fragments of information together to create a more comprehensive picture of a situation, *pooling* forms a collective coping strategy that is precipitated by a disrupted information environment and the fragmentation of knowledge (Lloyd, 2014, p.55). The typical solo worker status of school librarians means that *pooling* often happens in professional groups, in which attendees draw upon shared experiences to make decisions about actions to take, for example, whether to adopt the School Library Association statement on censorship (S1). Where pooling becomes particularly valuable, however, is in schools facing unaccounted for pupil-perpetrated damage to collections. In these scenarios, *pooling* information between librarians and library assistants informs risk by allowing for the construction of a more comprehensive understanding of the grievance that lies behind the attack:

> "I mean, I think talking about it's really important, because I had no idea about that Malala conspiracy [that her shooting was staged] … So, I wouldn't have even looked to see if the handwriting was the same if we hadn't had that conversation" (S8)

Demonstrating the strategic ways in which school librarians work with limited information, these actions also draw further attention to the shared and communal ways in which risk knowledge is informed.

6. Discussion
6.a School library work as risk work

Findings from this study indicate that the school librarians who participated in this study are engaged in distinctive forms of risk work. While this study does not attempt to assess whether the management of risk has become a "(re)defining logic" (Brown & Gale, 2018a, p.2) of school librarianship, the information activities in which these school librarians engage, including accessing, sharing and filtering book-banning information, illustrate the proliferation of the "material and embodied practices" that Brown & Gale (2018a, p.3) note as being key to working with risk. This risk work is further exacerbated by the "discretionary space" (Brown & Gale, 2018b, p.2) that school librarians, as "lone operators" (S4) who often carry out public-facing work individually or in small teams, have to interpret and implement rules, norms and other forms of organisational policy. Along these lines, findings from this study suggest both the utility and the applicability of the theoretical construct of risk work to the cultural heritage arena. Although there are obvious differences between school librarianship and the health and social care contexts in which risk work has been developed, this framing provides a useful structure through which to explore how risk responses are enabled and constrained.

More specifically, findings from this study indicate that the risk work of these school librarians encompasses interpreting, communicating and sharing knowledge about the risks of book bans within their professional communities. The theoretical concept of risk work establishes three interwoven features as critical to understanding the dynamics of the phenomenon- risk knowledge(s), interventions and social relations (Brown & Gale, 2018a). Within the context of book banning and censorship, this lens positions the risk work of these school librarians as involving the interpretation of a wide range of knowledge. Engagement in *observing* and *monitoring,* for example, illustrates that uncertainty is handled through reference to emerging forms of contextual knowledge while the information activities of *seeking advice* and *establishing guidance* illustrate that this knowledge may also be more formal in shape. In turn, participation in *disclosing* and *pooling,* which represent professional interventions, suggests that this risk work also involves communicating about risk between different audiences, as befits school librarians' membership within different workplace communities. The many ways in which school librarians share knowledge indicates that risk work further includes building and maintaining the social relationships that they rely on for support during times of uncertainty. Overlapping and interconnected, these core features conceptualise the risk work of school librarians in terms of the sudden intensification of information activities as their professional remit is extended into a new domain (cf. Brown & Gale, 2018a, p.6).

At the same time, risk work is also conceptualised as shaped by tension; as Brown and Gale (2018b, p.5) point out, the sociocultural shift away from conceiving risk in terms of simple probability acknowledges that both risk and risk responses are marked by "morally charged dynamics." Risk work is accordingly further framed in terms of the questioning of its core features, including the truth of risk knowledge, the legitimacy of interventions and the authenticity of social relations (Brown & Gale, 2018a). Within the context of this study, the

tensions of risk work mean that school librarian activities are predicated upon negotiating the limits of risk knowledge, as *seeking advice* and *establishing guidance* challenges the worth of formal guidance. Risk work also becomes framed in terms of power and agency as *pooling* and *disclosing* provide the means for school librarians to challenge conflicts with organisational values, including by reclaiming marginalised professional autonomy. The *mapping* activities in which school librarians engage additionally centre risk work upon the scrutinising of the social relations that can either support or strain the handling of uncertainty. Drawing attention to the messiness of working with risk, the surfacing of local educational hierarchies as key to each of these disputes further reveals that school librarian risk work is shaped in relation to the fracturing of professional authority as well as participation within the broader information environment.

In illustrating that school librarian risk work integrates considerations of status, as represented by challenges to professional competency, findings from this study introduce additional complexity to understandings of how professionals get their work done. Linked to school librarians' long challenged (Great School Libraries, n.d.) lack of statutory protection, an unevenness of power dynamics shapes the handling of uncertainty by reconfiguring opportunities to participate within workplace settings. Echoing concerns about the deprofessionalisation of midwifery (another feminised occupation) in the face of biomedical risk work (Spendlove, 2018), the limiting of information activities is problematic because it obscures the personal and emotional demands that come from working with risk. Along these lines, findings that illustrate how the risk work of school librarians centres on emerging and highly localised forms of knowledge means that this study questions the typical association of risk work with purely cognitive forms of information seeking (e.g., Twamley et al., 2023); the emphasis on the relational further directly challenges the assumption that tacit forms of information are only of use in the face of organisational shortcomings (e.g., Alaszewski, 2023; Bonnet et al., 2021). Drawing attention to the social constraints that shape how the work of school librarians is operationalised, the risk work lens also extends research into hidden information practices by highlighting how the reconciling of professional tensions creates another "invisible activity" (McKenzie & Dalmer, 2020) that underpins how people become informed within workplace settings.

6.b Information and risk work
Beyond providing insight into school librarian risk work, findings from this study further indicate the worth of exploring the connections between risk work and information literacy. Information literacy has not previously formed the focus of research for this topic despite the emphasis that risk work places on knowledge. However, in spotlighting the information activities that support how school librarians work with risk, this study extends risk work scholarship by bringing new and unexplored themes into consideration. One such theme is emotion, which continues to be largely marginalised from considerations of risk work. While literature has explored tensions related to the exclusion of affect from formal risk knowledge structures (e.g., Mitchell & Demir, 2021), school librarian engagement in *disclosing* and *roping together* provides an indication of the need to recognise the vital role that emotional support plays in the handling of uncertainty given the demands of this role (e.g., Truter & Fouché, 2019). The information activities of *monitoring* and *observing* draw further attention to the importance of accounting for the

spatiotemporal dimensions of risk work, including how risk knowledge unfolds over time and within certain physical locations. Extending Hautamäki's (2018) exploration of the tensions between clinical and experienced time within risks related to mental health, considerations of time and space also extend and provide a more solid grounding for the brief references that risk work theorising makes to tacit and embodied risk knowledge (Brown & Gale, 2018a, p.7).

The lens of information literacy additionally draws attention to labour, which forms another undertheorised aspect of risk work (although see Twamley et al., 2023). Brown and Gale (2018a, p.6) acknowledge that risk work often pushes professional engagement into new domains of practice while further recognising that risk continues to shift accountability "downwards" towards client-facing workers (Brown & Gale, 2018b, p.4). Yet, to date, there has been little emphasis on the impact that these developments have on professional workloads, including related to emotional labour. The foregrounding of information activities challenges these oversights by drawing attention to the often-overlooked relational demands (cf. Stooke & McKenzie, 2009) that risk work invokes, as evidenced by the considerable efforts to which these school librarians go to *establish guidance* and *seek professional advice.* Engagement in *monitoring* further illustrates how school librarian risk work is predicated upon the ongoing physical coordination of practice. To this must be added the considerable emotional labour involved within risk work, as evidenced by distress related to *observing* attacks and the hypervigilance that leads to the *mapping* of trusted colleagues. Arising from the tensions that are inherent within risk work, these demands further challenge the promotion of "bricolage" as central to risk responses (Bonnet et al., 2021; Harrad Hyde et al., 2022) by highlighting the labour implications that this curation entails and, by implication, who can participate in these endeavours.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the threat of book bans and censorship reframes the practice of school librarianship as risk work. In illustrating that the school librarians interviewed for this study expend considerable energy interpreting, communicating and sharing risk knowledge, findings from this study demonstrate that school librarians are engaged in distinctive forms of risk work, including mediating tensions produced through competing risk logics. In further drawing attention to the emotional and spatiotemporal dimensions of risk work, as well as the many labour implications of these developments, this study has also drawn attention to the important role that information literacy plays within the professional handling of uncertainty. Perhaps the main question remaining, therefore, is whether risk work forms a permanent characteristic of school librarianship. The typical short life of the moral panic (Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994) that lies behind book ban efforts might imply that the risk work in which school librarians are engaged is makeshift or a passing anxiety. However, the identification of tensions with local educational hierarchies as central to everyday working practice in school libraries suggests that risk work will continue to shape the profession for as long as this role remains unprotected under UK law. The implications for how professional work takes place suggest that risk work may have been an unrecognised facet of school librarianship for a much longer period than assumed.

Given the demands that risk work places on participants, an immediate implication of this research is to consider the support needs of school librarians. If risk work is to (or has

already) become a defining feature of school librarianship then both LIS education and professional structures must reflect the impact of these heightened tensions and demands, including through developing reporting tools and organised collective care strategies (see Hicks, 2025c for further suggestions). Care home workers, for example, are supported in their risk work by structured opportunities to debrief amongst colleagues as well as clear policies and procedures to follow in challenging circumstances (e.g. Farre et al., 2022). Recent findings about the extent to which public librarians experience trauma in their workplaces (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022) provide a stark reminder of the potential cost of ignoring concerns. This study also suggests avenues for future research, including how risk work evolves when uncertainty becomes more routine; little mention of documenting challenges, which is an activity that is recommended by the CILIP (2023) guidelines for public librarians working with diverse collections, indicates one area for future investigation. Another area of interest relates to self-censorship; while the unexpected nature of UK attacks meant that participants in the study did not pre-emptively work to manage risk, the growing number of book ban challenges suggests that preventive or proactive preparation for challenges could prove to be a fruitful area for further exploration. A risk work framing could further provide insight into other sectors of librarianship where censorship is becoming more prevalent, including academic and public libraries (Hicks, 2025b) as well as additional hidden tensions, such as technology-related violence (cf. Regehr et al., 2024). Research should additionally examine how risk work might extend workplace information literacy research and practice, including challenging the unique association of research outcomes with changes in teaching practice.

8. References

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