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# Treat Yo Shelves: An Exploratory Study of Censorship in the Private and Public School Libraries of a Rural Town in Central Arkansas

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Treat Yo Shelves: An Exploratory Study of Censorship in the Public and Private High School

Libraries of a Rural Town in Central Arkansas

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**Abstract**

When choosing a school, it is important to be aware of the materials students may access. This study seeks to provide information on the use of censorship in the school libraries of a rural community in central Arkansas. It will investigate the practices of three public school libraries and one private Christian school library. A survey concerning practices of censorship surrounding the topics of teen suicide, profanity, racism, and LGBTQ references has been given to librarians. These topics are drawn from the American Library Association's Banned Books List of 2018. This study has considered how censorship may differ between public and private school libraries. Public schools have been found to acknowledge these topics more often than private school libraries.

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### Treat Yo Shelves: An Exploratory Study of Censorship in the Public and Private High School Libraries of a Rural Town in Central Arkansas

#### **Introduction**

In a rural town in central Arkansas, four school libraries have been investigated to find out how many frequently challenged books are available on their shelves. The control group for this study was the American Library Association's Most Challenged Books List of 2018, books that mention or discuss controversial issues like: teen suicide, LGBTQ references, profanity, and racism and stereotyping. Furthermore, the study investigates a second variable, seeking to determine whether classic literature that delves into the same frequently challenged topics is being censored as well. The classic novels that are presented as a means of comparison in this study are: *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. This exploratory study used surveys sent to each school librarian to investigate if public or private high schools differed in the practice of censorship of library materials. This study will indicate whether or not public or private schools are addressing these banned book topics so that parents can make a more informed decision about where their child should study based on what topics they feel comfortable presenting to them.

#### **Teen Suicide**

James S. Chisholm and Bradie Trent (2012), discuss in their article the frequently challenged book that landed the number one spot on the American Library Association's Top 11 Most Challenged Books of 2017: *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher as an instructional tool in the classroom to discuss the bullying that goes on in schools and how to prevent it. Chisholm

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and Trent (2012) state that using this text as a discourse in the classroom created an environment in which students could see bullying from multiple perspectives.

## LGBTQ

On the 2018 11 Most Challenged Books List, the texts that were challenged due to an LGBTQ reference include: *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* by Jill Twiss, *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier, *This Day in June* by Gayle E. Pitman, *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan, *George* by Alex Gino, and *Captain Underpants series* by Dav Pilkey. A canonized work of literature that deals with similar content is “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” by William Shakespeare. According to Weiner (2013), while this play is often encouraged in schools, it also ties in controversial themes of falling in love with the wrong person while under the influence of a fairy. In, “Fight for Your Right: Censorship, Selection, and LGBTQ Literature” by Curwood, Schliesman, and Horning (2009), the topic of LGBTQ censorship is not encouraged in the English classroom. The book that they focus on in this article is Stephen Chbosky’s, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012), a book that was formerly on the American Library Association’s List of Most Challenged Books. Much like the books on the Most Challenged List of 2018, Chbosky’s novel mentions a homosexual character, but leans more heavily on the themes of bullying. Nevertheless, when there is a reference to the homosexual lifestyle, even books that aim to combat bullying are being challenged. Burke and Greenfield (2016) in their article, “Challenging Heteronormativity: Raising LGBTQ-Awareness in a High School English Language Arts Classroom,” deem these challenges to be a promotion of heteronormative values that silences students dealing with same sex attraction and does not prepare students for handling that topic respectfully in the more LGBTQ - inclusive sphere in the university.

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### **Profanity**

A very common reason for a book to be censored in a school setting is the use of profanity. *This One Summer* written by Mariko Tamaki is the 2018 most challenged book for the use of profanity, according to the American Library Association's Top 11 Most Challenged Books List of 2018. Other novels that have been challenged in the class room for a similar reason include: *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. In, "Literature is Not a Cold Dead Place": An Interview with John Green," Jayme K. Barkdoll and Lisa Scherff (2008) state that Green's novel is not without challenging content but that it is his unabashed realism that makes his coming-of-age novels more accessible than his contemporaries. *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2015) is often challenged in the classroom for the reference to sex, drugs, and alcohol. Green counters in Barkdoll and Scherff's (2008) article that the inclusion of sexual content is not adequate justification for a book's censorship in the school, because his novel is more about the ethical problem of whether or not allowing a peer to drive home drunk to her eventual death is good decision. According to Green, this ethical question is more important to the classroom discussion than the elements of sex and profanity that cause the book to be challenged in the school setting. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (2010) is often challenged for its use of the n-word, but it is also a novel that is more concerned with the ethical questions of framing, racism, and sexual abuse than it is about using a profane title for a black person (May, 1987).

### **Racism/Stereotype**

Novels that have been challenged due to stereotyping or racist content on the 2018 Most Challenged Books List according to the American Library Association include: *The Hate You*

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*Give* by Angie Thomas, the *Skippyjon Jones Series* by Judy Schachner, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. A canonized work of literature that deals with similar content is, “The Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare. While Shakespeare is often the example for canonized literature that all students should read in the classroom, even “The Merchant of Venice” was banned in a New York public school due to its content that was deemed anti-Semitic (Rossuck, 1997). Emily J. Knox (2019), in “Silencing Stories: Challenges to Diverse Books,” discusses that keeping diverse books in the school library is important even when racist content might be shocking, because material that acknowledges historical racism and stereotyping is vital information and should not be censored.

Marc Nachowitz (2019) writes, in “When the Book Is Worth the Risk,” that he once was challenged for using a controversial text in the classroom. After parental complaints came in about the pedagogical use of one he took the text off of the syllabus and put the classroom copies on his personal reading shelf. One day the books on the shelf were completely missing, and Nachowitz (2019) came to the conclusion that the only type of student that would steal a challenged book is one who wanted to read it; and, furthermore, that banning books that mention the blatant racism of the past and present and delve into the stereotypes that race, religion, or socio-economic class cast people into is sometimes enough to intrigue students to read them.

Nachowitz (2019) goes on to explain how he avoided getting fired for using challenged texts in the classroom by sharing his units before teaching them with both his department chair and his student’s parents so that no one would be shocked by the material. Knox (2019) and Nachowitz (2019) have both experienced censorship of the reading material used in their school that contained a stereotypical trope of a character. They still advocate for the challenged books

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to accessible to students in the classroom and in the libraries because silencing the stories is more of a risk than allowing a student to learn from them.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to find out if public or private schools in a rural town in central Arkansas differ in their practice of censorship of library materials.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study were the librarians from Public Schools A,B,C, and the librarian in the private Christian academy.

#### **Instrumentation**

The *Use of Censorship in School Libraries Questionnaire* was administered through Google Sheets to each of the participants of the study. See Appendix A for a list of the questions presented to the participants in the study.

#### **Procedure**

After IRB exemption was approved for this exploratory study, school librarians were contacted and asked to fill out an online form regarding the censorship of such topics in their school libraries. All responses were anonymous, and no incentives were provided for participation. The responses were grouped into the categories of public and private schools, and the accumulated information was used for comparison.

### **Results**

Public school libraries are acknowledging the topics of: teen suicide, LGBTQ references, profanity, and racism/stereotyping.



## **Discussion**

### **Findings**

The study found that the private schools in this rural town in central Arkansas censored more hot topics from the American Library Association's Banned Books List of 2018 than the public school libraries. Out of the banned books list, only one text was represented in the private school's library: The Skippyjon Jones Series. This was interesting because the one title that the library decided to include, out of all of the literature containing such hot topics for censorship, was not a classic. This contemporary book series appears on the American Library Association's Top Ten Banned Books List of 2018 for its mention of racism and stereotyping.

### **Limitations**

Two of the librarians involved in the study are in charge of an elementary library. The elementary librarians participated on behalf of their high school counterparts because they could not participate in the survey. For this reason, some of the topics that land these novels on the banned books list would not be represented due to age restriction regulation.

### **Implications**

If a parent is looking for an educational facility that will censor topics that their student may find triggering, it would be best to send them to a private school. According to this study, public schools are more likely to provide students with access to materials that contain: teen suicide, LGBTQ references, profanity, and racism/stereotyping. However, the public schools

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that do offer these texts in this study say that they do so as conversation starters so that students can have a safe place to ask questions and seek help if needed. Taking these topics out of the school library will not make these topics go away. Their absence on the shelf leaves a cultural implication that it is better to not involve oneself in the study of such topics. That may be beneficial to one student and detrimental to another. Each child is different and should be treated on the individual level.

### **Future Research**

Three potential research projects that this research has inspired are: “A Classic Case of Censorship”, “The Impact of Religion on the Censorship of Books in the School Libraries of a Rural Town in Central Arkansas”, and “Censorship: It’s Elementary.” In, “A Classic Case of Censorship,” the same study could be conducted using only a list of classically canonized literature to see how many classics are still on the shelf. In, “The Impact of Religion on the Censorship of Books in the School Libraries of a Rural Town in Central Arkansas,” the same study could be conducted, but with the additional variable of religion. The private school involved in this study is a private Christian academy, and all of the schools in the study are located in the Bible Belt of America. Religious influence may be a large factor of why certain topics that are popularly censored on the American Library Association’s Banned Books List are not on the shelves. Finally, “Censorship: It’s Elementary,” would be the same study, except with the sample size strictly composed of elementary librarians. This would allow parents of young students to see what their child has access to during their developing years in the public and private schools.

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**Appendix A****The Use of Censorship in School Libraries Questionnaire**

- Demographics
- School Name
- Public or Private
  - Public
  - Private
- Does your school library contain *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher?
  - yes
  - no
- If not, does the school library contain *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare?
  - yes
  - no
- How does your school deal with content concerning teen suicide?
- Does your school library contain *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* by Jill Twiss, *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier, *This Day in June* by Gayle E. Pitman, *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan, *George* by Alex Gino, and/or *Captain Underpants* series by Dav Pilkey?  
Explain.
  - *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* by Jill Twiss

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- *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier
  - *This Day in June* by Gayle E. Pitman
  - *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan
  - *George* by Alex Gino
  - *The Captain Underpants* Series by Dav Pilkey
  - None
- If not, does the school library contain *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare?
  - yes
  - no
- How does your school deal with LGBTQ content?
- Does your school library contain *This One Summer* written by Mariko Tamaki?
  - yes
  - no
- If not, does your school library contain *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger?
  - yes
  - no
- How does your school deal with novels and library materials that contain profanity and sexual content?
- Does your school library contain *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas, the *Skippyjon Jones* Series by Judy Schachner, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie?

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- *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas
- *The Skippyjon Jones Series* by Judy Schachner
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
- None
- If not, does the school library contain *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain or *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee?
  - *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
  - *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
  - None
- How does your school deal with novels and library materials that contain racism and stereotyping?