FEATURE

"Stepping on Eggshells" and Dodging that "Can of Worms"

Discussions of *Drama* Illuminate Selection Practices of North Carolina School Librarians

Authors _ Kim Becnel (becnelke@appstate.edu), PhD, Program Director and Professor, Library Science, Appalachian State University; **Robin A. Moeller** (moellerra@appstate.edu), PhD, Professor, Library Science, Appalachian State University

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with three elementary and two middle school librarians in North Carolina about their perception of and experiences with Raina Telgemeier's graphic novel Drama, *including whether or not they had decided to add this popular but controversial novel to their collections.* Drama, *appropriate for children ages ten and up, tells the story of a group of friends putting on a school play while navigating the world of friendships and romantic crushes. The friends discuss sexual orientation, and the novel includes a scene in which two boys share a brief kiss on stage in the production. Because of this LGBTQIA+ content, the novel has become a favorite target of censors, with many libraries reporting complaints and challenges to the content of this volume. As librarians discussed their experiences with* Drama, *researchers discovered that, to some degree, each of the interviewees attempted to create "safe" collections, though what was meant was different in each case. These efforts can be partly attributed to the pervasive narratives of anxiety and loss that they associate with the procurement of potentially controversial items.*

Raina Telgemeier's graphic novel *Drama* (2012) was published to much critical fanfare; the book received starred reviews from professional review publications such as *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, and *School Library Journal*, was nominated for a Harvey Award, selected as a Stonewall Honor book for exceptional merit relating to the LGBTQIA+ experience, and featured on numerous "best of" and suggested reading lists (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund n.d.). Unsurprisingly, readers—particularly fans of Telgemeier's 2010 graphic novel *Smile*—quickly flocked to this new title.

Drama was followed by *Sisters* (2014), with all three graphic novels addressing interpersonal issues and relationships relevant to upper elementary school children and middle school students. According to Telgemeier's publisher Scholastic, as well as most professional review sources, *Smile* and *Sisters* are appropriate for a slightly younger audience than *Drama*. Writing for *Library Media Connection*, Wendorf (2013) explained that what separates *Drama* from the other titles is its "unrequited crushes, complex relationships, kissing scenes, and resulting social drama" (Wendorf 2013, 83). The review of *Drama* in *Booklist* locates the more mature content not in the relationship complications, but specifically in the fact that *Drama* "address[es] issues such as homosexuality," stating that this makes the novel more "teen oriented than Telgemeier's elementary-school-friendly *Smile*" (Wildsmith 2012).

Drama revolves around middle schooler Callie, who is the set designer for her school's dramatic production of *Moon over Mississippi*. According to Scholastic's blurb, Callie is "determined to create a set worthy of Broadway on a middle-school budget," but she "doesn't know much about carpentry, ticket sales are down, and the crew members are having trouble working together." As they work on the production, characters are experiencing romantic crushes, and several are thinking and talking about whether they are gay. In one scene, two boys share a brief kiss on stage. In sum, *Drama* presents a world in which middle schoolers are working out big questions about identity in a supportive peer group.

As perhaps foreshadowed by the review in *Booklist*, the novel's engagement with LGBTQIA+ themes has landed it on multiple banned and challenged lists. Writing a spotlight piece on *Drama* for the Banned Books Week website, Betsy Gomez (2018) observed, "*Drama* has been on the hit lists of a number of would-be censors, who claim the book is offensive because it includes LGBTQ characters. *Drama* held the #3 spot on ALAs' [American Library Association's] top ten challenged books list in 2017, and it also had the dubious honor of appearing on the 2016 list for offensive political viewpoint and the 2014 list for being sexually explicit." Complaints have continued to flow into schools and libraries, most frequently expressing opposition to the "LGBTQ+ content" and "concerns [that] it goes against family values/morals" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund 2020). In fact, 2019 marked the fifth year that *Drama* made the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom's annual challenged and banned book list (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund 2020).

With professional sources in agreement that *Drama*'s target audience is children ages ten years old or in grade five and up, the title is appropriate not only for a middle school audience, but for upper-level elementary school students as well. Because librarians need to serve a group of learners diverse in reading ability as well as gender and ethnicity (Kimmel 2014), they must collect material appropriate for a slightly wider age range than that of their student body, and this is further justification for elementary schools to purchase the title. However, the book's consistent presence on banned and challenged book lists and its resulting reputation for controversy can complicate what would otherwise be an easy collection decision based on the popularity of Telgemeier's other, similar titles. Therefore, using this controversial title as an entry point for conversation, a great deal about the priorities, perspectives, and working environments of school librarians in the United States can be learned.

Literature Review

Collection of LGBTQIA+ Resources in Libraries

Peltz (2005) discussed the dual origins and functions of public school libraries in the United States; they exist as both extensions of the curriculum and as a place for "extracurricular learning based upon the principle of voluntary inquiry." He explained,

> If the library is to continue as a place for students to engage in the sort of self-fulfillment or self-discovery that is the very objective of free expression as a natural-law right, then the freedom of thought and expression afforded students in the library in this extracurricular capacity must be of a different order than that afforded students in the curricular classroom, or in the library in its curricular capacity. It thus becomes essential, to preserve the intellectual freedom of public school students and librarians, and in turn the intellectual freedom of all citizens educated in public schools, that the curricular and extracurricular capacities of the school library remain distinct. (107)

The American Library Association's "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" agrees that school librarians should "resist efforts by individuals or groups to define what is appropriate for all students or teachers to read, view, hear, or access regardless of technology, formats or method of delivery." It further declares that "major barriers between students and resources include but are not limited to imposing age, grade-level, or reading-level restrictions on the use of resources," "requiring permission from parents or teachers," "establishing restricted shelves or closed collections;

and labeling" (ALA 2014). Further, according to AASL Common Belief 5, "Intellectual freedom is every learner's right. Learners should have the freedom to speak and hear what others have to say, rather than allowing others to control their access to ideas and information" (AASL 2018).

Despite these professional standards, school libraries across the nation choose to implement restrictions and labels of various types in the belief that their efforts help children and teachers quickly locate materials suited to particular educational goals (Parrott 2017). Another prevalent practice that works against intellectual freedom is self-censorship, in which librarians exclude items from a collection expressly to avoid potential objections from their communities. Rickman (2010) described the dangers of self-censorship as "remov[ing] the supportive voice of both author and reader of the ideas found within the [censored] book from the public." In so doing, the practice destroys "any chance of a fair discussion between a community, the author, and the reader to defend or promote the vessel of ideas bound in a book" (7). Whelan (2009) writes that librarians who have previously faced a censorship incident in their libraries experience more anxiety over collecting potentially controversial materials. According to Dawkins (2018), librarians are also likely to avoid collecting potentially controversial materials of all types if "they perceive their community as rural, conservative, or likely to challenge such choices," "if a principal or school administrator expresses concern about a topic," or "if they even think a principal might be unwilling to back them in a challenge" (12).

In addition to profanity and violence, LGBTQIA+ themes are a major area targeted by censors. The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) identifies what it terms "identity censorship" as a specific type of censorship and a growing problem. "Identity censorship" is defined as censorship based not on content but on characters with a particular identity, specifically those who identify as LGBTQIA+. In a 2019 webinar, CBLDF reports having "participated in defending challenges and bans of books solely because they contain LGBTQIA+ characters, curriculum rejected because it focused on LGBTQIA+ titles, and community programs canceled solely because program participants identify as LGBTQIA+" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund Webinar 2019).

Given the prevalence and high visibility of such challenges, perhaps it is not surprising that access to LGBTQIA+ materials varies widely in school libraries across the county. Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris (2013) found that the school libraries in one southern state severely under-collected both fiction and nonfiction LGBTQ-themed titles. In addition to geographic distinctions, Oltmann (2015) and Garry (2015) found that the number of LGBTQIA+ titles a library has is impacted by school enrollment size, demographic diversity, and political leaning of the community. According to Garry, the most salient variable impacting whether librarians collect these potentially controversial titles is their perception of administrative and community support. All of the librarians interviewed by Garry understood "their community's collective values, although some were willing to challenge the status quo, either overtly or subversively, while others acquiesced" (Garry 2015, 84-85). The presence of a selection and reconsideration policy was found to be important to librarians for different reasons: "While more restrictive librarians seemed to view it as a mandate to exclude certain titles, the librarians with more inclusive collections tended to regard the selection policy as a safeguard against censorship, knowing that a procedure is in place to protect controversial books from arbitrary removal" (84–85). Pekoll (2020) reminds readers that library policies and procedures should be current and clear, and that they should cover not only collection development, but other elements such as displays. She notes materials in LGBTQIA+ displays often prompt informal complaints and formal challenges and that "when there are no policies to guide the school librarian in responding to concerns about displays, the display often will be dismantled" (32).

The Question of *Drama*

In "Just Another Day in an LGBTQ Comic" (2017), Alverson wrote that "the romance in Telgemeier's *Drama* (Scholastic 2012) goes no further than a kiss, but the book still drew negative one-star reviews on Amazon from adults who objected to any mention of homosexuality in a children's book." She explains that some "adults believe that sexual identity, and any discussion of homosexuality, is automatically mature content" (Alverson 2015).

Alverson provided the perspective on this from author Raina Telgemeier:

> Sexuality is a part of your identity that doesn't necessarily apply to what you are doing with other people when you are eight or nine years old, but it's still a part of you. . . . The identity and the actions are not necessarily one and the same. If a chaste heterosexual kiss had happened in *Drama*, no one would have batted an eye. But because it was two boys, suddenly I was "pushing my liberal agenda on people." I don't even have an agenda. My agenda is love and friendship.

For Berland (2017), Telgemeier's "deliberate creative choices show young adolescents contemplating their queer identities unscathed by the distant specter of prejudice or homophobia. Coming out in *Drama* provides opportunities to find a community of supportive allies and personal self-actualization" (215). This portrayal reflects current understanding of early adolescent identity, particularly the understanding that young adults "with same-sex desire are healthy, life-affirming individuals capable of effectively coping with the stresses of life, including those related to their sexuality" (Savin-Williams 2006, 183).

In the recent blog post "Victory in WY for *Drama* and Free Expression" (2020), Mastricolo reported on a case in an elementary school in the state of Wyoming that is particularly illustrative of the conflicts that can erupt when stakeholders' values diverge. In this example, *Drama* was challenged because it "takes away parents' rights to teach morals and values" and "praises normalization of the LGBTQ community." The situation was resolved with the decision to leave the book on the shelves, with officials citing the need for choice and diversity. In addition, the committee recommended steps to educate parents on the library's selection process and collection. According to Mastricolo, this decision takes into account the concerns of parents while keeping material available for other families. Though this is framed as a "win," and in many ways it is, the committee reported that "the parent who issued the challenge has accepted the school's offer to flag the account of the child so that he or she cannot check out material with themes of which the parent does not approve." It is hard to see this as a resounding "victory" for free expression, when it will require librarians to look for potentially controversial themes in their items and label them as such to prevent certain students from checking them out. Aside from the principles involved, it is simply impractical—and ultimately impossible—to extend similar privileges to all families, each of whom might have their own themes they deem off-limits for their children.

For school librarians to be able to provide materials to fit the informational and interest reading needs of all of their students, librarians must be able to recognize and acknowledge identity censorship for what it is and whose stories it attempts to silence. While many school librarians generally rely on library policies and procedures to address formal attempts at censorship, informal or perceived potential pressures from school stakeholders can place school librarians in the difficult position of having to decide to defend the intellectual freedom rights of their students or affirm their professional position within their school community.

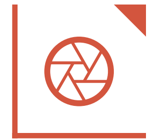
Research Questions

This study builds on research into school librarians' self-censorship of materials with LGBTQIA+ content and the factors that can be shown to impact this behavior. Here, rather than trying to ascertain the causes and determine the frequency of self-censorship by collecting large data sets to isolate variables or asking librarians to choose responses in a series of survey questions, the researchers seek to center the librarian's perspective on collection decisions. Thus this study focuses on five librarians' responses to and experiences with one particular, often-challenged novel, *Drama*, to facilitate deeper investigation into the contexts, personal experiences, and priorities that shape individual librarians' behaviors and decisions. Our research questions are the following:

- When school librarians are given open-ended questions to discuss their experiences with *Drama*, what will come to the surface as important to them about this title and its potential place in the collections they manage?
- What do school librarians' remarks about *Drama* tell us about the elements, including emotional and psychological factors, that impact their collection development decisions?

Methods

The researchers used an ethnographic interviewing approach to collect richly detailed data for this study (Luborsky and Rubinstein 1995). Ethnographic methods have been and continue to be employed by library science researchers when their aim is to gain a deep understanding of subjects' experiences and perspectives, as we wish to do here (Khoo, Rozaklis, and Hall 2012). This approach can also aid in counteracting participants' tendency to provide answers crafted to please the researchers. In the case of this study, this is a real risk because of the controversy surrounding the topic—*Drama*—and the sensitive issues it brings up, primarily self-censorship, which is a practice that is railed against in LIS programs. It is to be expected that practicing librarians might be reticent to discuss behaviors and decisions that might be characterized this way with the researchers, who are LIS professors. Thus we began our conversations by making it clear to the participants that our goal was not to solicit specific answers or look for mistakes in their professional decisions, but rather to understand their experiences connected with the novel *Drama* from their perspective. In this way, we sought to "takes on the subordinate role of pupil to the respondent's role of expert," encouraging them to "provide dense



descriptive data," as they have expert insight into their environments and their decision-making processes, which we, as researchers, lack (Bauman and Adair 1992, 13).

To develop questions for our semi-structured interviews, the researchers followed guidance provided in Westby's "Ethnographic Interviewing: Asking the Right Questions to the Right People in the Right Ways," avoiding "why" queries that "presume knowledge of cause-effect relationships," and an "ordered world," "that there are reasons why things occur and that those reasons are knowable," and that "a person has an explanation for the behavior" (Westby 1990, 106). Instead, we asked participants to describe, recall, or imagine various scenarios and allowed them ample time and space to tell the stories that came to mind for them. If a participant mentioned an interaction or event, we followed up by asking, "Can you tell me more about that? Or, can you tell me what happened next?" Finally, considering that open-ended questions designed to spur storytelling tend to generate rich data, the sample size in this study is small by design (Ogden and Cornwell 2010;4 Sandelowski 1996).

The researchers solicited volunteers throughout the state of North Carolina via email lists and social media. Five librarians (three elementary school librarians and two middle school librarians), all professional librarians with master's degrees in library science and seven to ten years of experience, volunteered to participate. We began with a brief survey conducted in Qualtrics to collect basic information about the librarian and school, followed by interviews conducted online via Zoom with each of our study participants. The interviews varied considerably in length, from fifteen to forty-five minutes, depending on how much each participant elected to share. The basic questions used in the semi-structured interviews appear in appendix A. Next, we transcribed the interviews, assigning pseudonyms to each participant and school, which have been maintained here to assure anonymity. Applying grounded theory, each researcher coded the data inductively, using constant comparison techniques, to identify the main categories into which the data could be grouped. After discussion, the researchers agreed that the data could best be classified into two main categories: parents/parental functions and narratives of fear and loss. We then returned to the interview data, performing another round of individual coding followed by discussion, to identify significant themes and patterns within these categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Post-analysis, participants were given the opportunity to read the researchers' presentation/analysis of their interview to confirm its accuracy.

Portraits of the Practitioners

Kendall—Venice Elementary School

Public Elementary School Media Specialist Kendall has worked at Venice Elementary for five and a half years. The library at Venice has a collection policy with a reconsideration section, a collection of 7,000 items, and an annual budget of $4,000. Kendall, who describes herself and her community as liberal, explained that she did not initially purchase *Drama* for her collection because after reading it, she noted that the characters are older than her students, and she perceived the title as a better fit for middle school. However, students requested *Drama* once they had read Telgemeier's other graphic novels, so Kendall purchased the title and added it to a restricted "fifth grade section" that she had created, which included titles that had received parent complaints when checked out by younger students, such *Donner Dinner Party* and *Roller Girl*, as well as some graphic novels aimed at grades five and up.

Lee—Allen and Zephyr Elementary

Lee describes her political viewpoint as green and her community as extremely conservative. She explained that her school librarian position is split between two public elementary schools, about ten miles apart, identified for the purposes of this study as Allen Elementary and Zephyr Elementary. Both schools are in poor, rural areas, and Zephyr has what Lee describes as an extremely Evangelical Christian culture. In fact, both schools have devotions every week, which students are encouraged to attend. Neither school has a dedicated library budget. Lee has not purchased *Drama* for either collection. She has not read the title, but is aware of it and the controversy surrounding it. Her decision not to collect it does not sit easy with her: "I've always considered myself liberal minded. To be as liberal-minded as I am, not to have that book on the shelf. It hurts."

Deidre—Keller Elementary

Deidre has worked in her current role for eight years. Located in what Deidre describes as a conservative, low-income area, Keller Elementary's library has a budget of $2.75 per student but lacks a collection development policy. Deidre has not read *Drama*, and when thinking about what she knew about the title, immediately referenced a "problem" with the book, reporting that there is some "different sexual orientation in it." "That's what I heard was the root of the problem." Deidre explained that she makes acquisition decisions based on booklists, book awards, recommended state lists, and requests from teachers and students made through Google forms. She

stated that there is not much interest in graphic novels at her library, aside from Holmes' *Baby Mouse* series. The library owns two of Telgemeier's other novels, *Sisters* and *Smile*, but they are not often borrowed. Deidre recalled that though *Drama* was available at the latest book fair she hosted, no one purchased it or commented on it. Thus, she says, she has not had to consider purchasing the title because of lack of interest of her student body.

Helen—Carver Middle School

New to both the profession and her current position, Helen works in what she describes as a moderately liberal area in a library with 9,000–10,000 items, a $4,000 annual budget, and no collection development or reconsideration policy. Self-described as liberal, Helen remarked that she personally liked *Drama*, finding it honest, realistic, and age appropriate. When Helen began working at her current school, *Drama* was already in the collection, and she added more copies. Along with Telgemeier's other titles, it remains checked out constantly.

Kyra—Elmore Middle School

Kyra's middle school library has a collection of 11,000–12,000 items and a budget of $5,000 annually. There is no collection or reconsideration policy. Kyra, who describes both herself and her community as liberal, has been in her current role for six years. Though Kyra has not read *Drama*, she knows that it is about students working on a play and the interpersonal relationships among them. She recalled that there is a girl who likes a boy and discovers he is gay. He and another "have a little kiss" on stage. She described the book as a popular item and seems to view having the item in her collection as a given. She mentioned that graphic novels with middle schoolers as the main characters are typically appropriate for her middle school audience.

Results Overview

Because *Drama* is appropriate for ages ten and up, it is not surprising that both middle school librarians had *Drama* in their collections. It is also significant that both middle school libraries are located in areas characterized by participants as liberal. Of the elementary schools, only the one in a community described by the librarian as liberal has the title, and it is located in a collection restricted to fifth graders. The two librarians at elementary schools in conservative areas have not added *Drama* to their collections, confirming results of prior research suggesting that self-censorship may occur to a greater extent in conservative areas (Dawkins 2018; Garry 2015; Oltmann 2015).

In the interviews, the librarians spent the most time talking about their reactions to parent input or how their own or their administrators' desire to parent their students shapes their decision making. In sum, their stories and comments signal that they do not see as a goal the creation of a wide, rich, diverse collection of developmentally appropriate resources that children can roam, intellectual freedom intact. Instead, they feel responsible for ensuring that children take home items that are appropriate and "safe." As the "parental supervision required" section below will illustrate, some librarians try to make these determinations themselves, some rely on teachers and outspoken parents, some have rules imposed upon them by administrators, and some engage children directly in making these determinations on a case-by-case basis. This sense of responsibility and the behaviors it spurs result in an unfortunate loss of access to valuable resources for students in the state.

Looking at the second most predominant category of interview responses might provide insight into the reasons librarians feel this need to create safe collections. In the section titled "Narratives of Anxiety and Loss Internalized," we hear librarians recounting stories of teachers and librarians who lost jobs because of clashes with parents and/or administrators, expressing fear that they could suffer the same fate, and bearing witness as librarians and administrators in their local networks take action to drastically restrict access to potentially controversial resources.

Parental Supervision Required

"These are Babies": Protection at All Costs

Speaking about making decisions for the library, middle school librarian Helen declared, "I'm a mom. So a lot of my decisions are based on, these are babies and what would I want my child reading?" Using the book *13 Reasons Why* as an example, she explains that she pulled it from her library: "I personally have read that book and felt like I would prefer students read it with somebody that's going to be providing them with a conversation about the book and so I guess I've done some censoring there." At another point in the conversation, she mentions, "I saw *Handmaid's Tale* [the television series] and pulled it [the book]" because she did not feel it was appropriate after viewing the television show based on the book. Though many of her decisions seem to be based on her own gut reaction, Helen reported testing her decisions against other librarians at a monthly meeting and by using Common Sense Media. Of this latter source, Helen stated it "tells what words are used, how often they are used, what kind of sex is in the book."

While Helen imagines herself as the mother of her patrons, elementary school librarian Deidre relies on the teachers to fill that role. If she is uncertain about whether to add or where to place a particular title, she asks teachers in several grade levels "to read it and go through it and see what they think and if they have said I don't think I would let my kids check this out or I think my kids' parents in my class would have an issue with this, but an upper grade teacher said good, then I know where to put that in my collection." Not only do teachers help with collection development and item placement, but they also help make sure that students are checking out items that their families would approve. Deidre noted that teachers are aware of what students are checking out: "Is it too hard? Is it something that they probably don't need to know about quite yet?"

While both Helen and Deidre wish to protect students from content they deem inappropriate or harmful, the nature of that content differs. Though Helen disallows content she deems too mature for her students, she explains, "I really try to show diversity through religion and sexuality" as well as culture throughout the entire collection. Helen noted that if parents were to complain about an item based on these elements, she would explain, "If there's something not appropriate for your child or your family, turn it back in. We have to make sure we have resources available for all students." For Deidre, anything outside of the heteronormative is inappropriate, with a few exceptions: "We do have a couple [of students] that have said that they think that they don't know [their] orientation, or which way, which team they want to bat for I guess. . . So reading that might be OK for them and those parents because the parents know. But there's only two of those cases."

"They Don't Need to Be Reading This": When the Parent is the Principal

Elementary school librarian Lee expresses a desire to broaden the perspective of the entire community and introduce more socially progressive ways of thinking: "I just wish I could change the way they think. And I don't know how. I want to open their minds. I want to open these parents' minds. And I guess the best way to do that is through their children and get them to look beyond here." This suggests that Lee would collect items that might provoke considerable parental objections. However, Lee has not added any items with LGBTQIA+ content, including *Drama*, because of one particular parent, who happens to be the principal at her school and her supervisor. Lee confided that the principal at Zephyr had purchased *Drama* for her own daughter and returned it. Lee recounted the principal's explanation: "They don't need to be reading this. It's a sin." Lee interpreted the language here—the principal's use of "they"—to mean that the principal is standing in as the parent for the student body and that this content is not permitted.

"That's for Older Kids": Compromising (for) Access

The only elementary library of the three explored here to have *Drama* is Kendall's library, where it is shelved in a restricted, fifth grade–only collection. Describing her collection development style, elementary librarian Kendall states that she tries to mirror the diverse student population at her school with the collection, noting that "it's really important to reflect our readers and make all kids feel included." While she describes feeling free to purchase a wide variety of material, Kendall maintains this freedom by placating parents who complain about an item by placing it in this fifth-grade only collection. Thus the section includes not only items recommended for upper elementary students by reviewers and publishers, but also items flagged by concerned parents, including *Roller Girl* (recommended for grades 4-6) and *Donner Dinner Party* (recommended for grades 3-6) as too mature for children below fifth grade. In the same vein, when "second graders who read *Smile* want to read [*Drama*]," she tells them that it's "for older kids," and is located in the fifth-grade section. While this arrangement enables Kendall to purchase items that other librarians might not, it also means that there are some items not available to all children at the school, whether or not these children's parents would wish to restrict their access. It is important to remember, as well, that some items restricted to fifth graders are recommended for younger grades by publishers and professionals.

Helen's middle school library also employs a restricted collection, including items only eighth graders can check out. In an explanation similar to Kendall's, Helen described this collection as housing items aimed at students in eighth grade or above, but, like Kendall's restricted collection, it includes more than that description would suggest. Her eighth-grade collection includes items recommended for grades eight and above, as well as items including sexual content and/or profanity, regardless of reviewer or publishers' recommendations regarding recommended age ranges. Helen added that she is thinking about creating a letter by which parents can opt out of access to this area on behalf of their eighth-grade children so that part of the collection would be forever inaccessible to a certain element of the student population.

"Finding the Right Fit": Mediation through Readers' Advisory

Middle school librarian Kyra explained that her library includes a young adult section where items with "tougher, more adult, more serious topics" are located. As examples, she mentioned *The Hate U Give*, *Speak*, and *The Hunger Games*. The section is not age- or grade-restricted, but is used as a way to signal mature content to both students and their families. Kyra described orienting sixth graders to the section with a conversation about content. She tells them that they can access the section if they are interested and provided their choices are acceptable to their parents, though she does not require permission forms. Kyra tells the sixth graders, "Everyone has different parents and different rules."

Kyra said that the books in the young adult section are checked out often, usually by seventh and eighth graders. When a younger child chooses a title like, for example, *The Kite Runner*, Kyra explained to the child that "there are things that happen in this book that might be difficult or uncomfortable," adding that the child can opt not to finish the book and simply return it if they decide they are not comfortable with the content. Kyra sums up her decision making as "about trying to find the best fit more than anything."

Elementary school librarian Kendall also reported trying to find good fits through conversation, though her motivation, as she expresses it, is to try "to head off any concerns from families." She explained:

> Occasionally somehow a first grader ends up going home with a book about war and I think I got a note from a parent saying this is not appropriate so I try and be maybe more thoughtful now than I was when I first started as far as when a first grader picks up Harry Potter and wants to take it and I'm like hold on, what is your family going to say when you come [home] with this. Is this really a good choice? Sometimes they are like yeah, we read it together. Sometimes they are like no, maybe I better put it back.

Narratives of Anxiety and Loss Internalized

"You Better Watch It": Fear for Livelihood

Lee described the advice she got from teachers when she began working at Zephyr, which was to be careful not to rock the boat. She recalled comments like "ooh you better watch it. You don't want to get yourself in hot water, you don't want to open a can of worms." Lee also revealed that before her tenure, but in the recent past, there was a book removed from Allen Elementary because of an allusion to a same-sex relationship. She explained, "I'm just afraid. If it hadn't been for this other librarian who was forced out, she was involved in a same-sex relationship. She was very open about it, and I think the deck was stacked against her from the beginning." Lee's sense of anxiety and fear came through at several points in the interview, including when she lamented her position being shared between two schools. She sighed: "At least I have a job."

Middle school librarian Helen also told a story from before her tenure about a teacher who read *King and King*, a picture book that features a homosexual relationship, to her class. After parental uproar, the teacher ended up resigning her position.

Elementary librarian Deidre reported the advice of her media supervisor: that purchasing *Drama* is "probably not a good idea for the county that we live in." Deidre herself concurred, explaining that "it wouldn't be best" for her mostly rural community school, whereas "in a public library setting, it would be a whole lot easier to be like this is a great book, it shows how the world is today, but you've gotta step more on eggshells in a public school." She paused and added, "Unfortunately. *If you wanna keep your job*!"

"Books Like That": Culture of Prevention and Restricted Access

Recalling when *Drama* was first published, Deidre reported that one of the librarians in her county bought it without reading it. When a student checked it out, it was returned with a parent complaint, at which point the librarian read the title and decided to keep it behind the desk and require parent permission for other students to check it out. Similarly, Helen recounted a complaint by an elementary school teacher in her county who requested *Drama* for a literature circle. Once she realized the storyline of the book, she requested it be removed from the library. In the end, the principal ordered the book to be kept behind the circulation desk and available only to students who requested it. Helen also explained that based on incidents such as the teacher reading *King and King*, the elementary schools in her area "tend to be preventative." They now contact parents if "they're going to be reading books like that aloud to the whole class."

Discussion

What is clear and troubling in this data is the power differential that exists in the perceptions of most of the librarians interviewed. Principals and parents appear to exert more control over the process of collection

development than do librarians—who are professionally trained for this task—and students, whom the collection exists to serve. In this context, students lose their right to intellectual freedom because librarians are not empowered to uphold the values, standards, and ethics of their profession. Stories of librarians who have suffered consequences for prioritizing students' right to access a diverse collection of materials serve to both explain the powerlessness that librarians feel and to continually reinscribe it in the minds of new librarians. The moral of these stories seems to be that parents have the ear of administration, and administration has the ability to censure or fire a librarian whose collection decisions spark complaints. The way to avoid this, for some librarians, is to engage in self-censorship for self-preservation.

A librarian who is not empowered to perform the duties of her profession in good faith cannot protect students' right to freely pursue a diverse collection of materials deemed suitable for their age range by the professional community. The substantial danger here is compounded by the fact that librarians who engage in self-censorship are not simply capitulating to demands of parents or administration; they are imagining or trying to predict possible complaints to be "proactive." Therefore librarians may be reacting to objections that do not, or do not any longer, actually exist. As an example, asked whether the school library had any items with LGBTQIA+ content (fiction or nonfiction), Deidre replied that it did not and that she probably could not add any because in "the type of community that we're in I don't think it would be well received. Just hearing that we've had issues in surrounding schools makes me think. . . maybe not." However, when Deidre checked her district's online catalog to verify that no other elementary libraries in the county have *Drama* in their collections, she was surprised to discover that three of them do. She offered as an explanation that those particular schools are in the more urban areas of the district. This surprise suggests that Deidre's understanding of what is acceptable in her area may not be entirely accurate or current, as perceptions of LGBTQIA+ issues have evolved rapidly since the 2012 publication of *Drama*, when discussions of the novel took place among librarians in her county.

The tendency to focus on negative stories and use related, potentially false assumptions to make collection decisions, as happened in Deidre's case, has real consequences for the student body. While *Drama* and other titles may be available elsewhere in the district, at Diedre's school, students—whether they identify as LGBTQIA+ or not—are unable to explore or better understand related issues through literature found in the library. Further, though Deidre says that there are only a "couple" of students who identify as LBGTQIA+ at her school, there are almost certainly more. Two students make up only .5 percent of her school's student body, while an an "estimated 4.5 percent of U.S. adults identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender" (Trotta 2019). The library has no material that reflects or represents students who identify as LGBTQIA+ or have family members or friends who do, thus rendering an entire population invisible and silent.

One factor that contributes to the pressure to self-censor is a lack of clear collection management policy. Three of the five librarians interviewed for this study had no policy detailing selection criteria or providing a process for handling concerns about materials. It is important to recognize that establishing a thorough collection management policy with the input of administration, teachers, and families, can not only make selection criteria transparent but also normalize the healthy discussion of intellectual freedom and community values. In fact, strong policies endorsed by diverse stakeholders can simultaneously aid in holding librarians accountable for adhering to the professional standards identified in the document and protecting them from becoming a scapegoat in a community dispute. The more robust discussions and shared responsibility for decision-making are embraced, the likelier it is that counter-narratives of acceptance and growth will start to gain purchase where stories of fear and isolation once held sway.

Limitations and Future Study

While the elementary school librarians who participated in the study came from both liberal and conservative communities, the middle school librarians classified the areas in which they live and work as moderately liberal to liberal. We put out a specific call for a middle school participant from a more rural/conservative area to create a more balanced sample, but were unable to secure an additional subject. This is not surprising, and it highlights a particular difficulty in a study of this sort. Research subjects can feel pressured to provide responses that will please the interviewers, and it is likely that the interviewers here, as library science professors, are presumed to prize intellectual freedom and to oppose censorship. Therefore librarians, particularly those in conservative areas facing community pressure to censor, might feel uncomfortable engaging in this type of interview.

On a related note, this study focused on a small number of school librarians in North Carolina. Thus, though the results are revealing, it is unclear how generalizable

they might be. Similar research with school librarians in other states throughout the country would be illuminating. It would also be helpful for more research to be done on strategies that work to dismantle identity censorship so that library schools could better prepare students for handling community resistance to the collection of LGBTQIA+ resources.

Conclusion

The study makes clear how critical it is that school librarians understand the school library as a place for "extracurricular learning based upon the principle of voluntary inquiry" where "the intellectual freedom of public school students and librarians" is to be preserved (Peltz 2005, 107). Only with this strong sense of professional ethics and purpose can school librarians navigate their complex environments, continually and unapologetically advocating for students' right to read and intellectual freedom. If students graduate from library science graduate programs with this sense of purpose firmly in place, they can begin to educate their communities and, as Adams (2011) has written, they can recruit allies in the fight to "[protect] students' First Amendment right to access library resources" (34). In other words, instead of being buffeted around and silenced by whispers of complaints or stories of reprisals, librarians should be prepared to initiate tough conversations in the complex contexts of their schools and communities. Some suggestions for creating a professional culture that supports librarians in their efforts to protect intellectual freedom and children's access to information follow.

- Establishing trusting, collaborative relationships with teacher colleagues, administrators, parents, and students can provide librarians with the assurance that starting critical discussions will not necessarily lead to being transferred or terminated from their position.
- Developing policies and procedures collaboratively with their community may also provide librarians with the confidence to encourage concerned stakeholders to engage in a formal reconsideration process, rather than the librarian putting herself in the position as the sole gatekeeper of the collection.
- In addition to building relationships and implementing policies, librarians can advocate for daily free checkout periods so that if students are not pleased with "the books they've checked out, then they may return them immediately—within 30 seconds or sometime that day." If students select something that they are not interested in or that their families object to, they simply exchange it for something else. As Kerby suggests, "This is how they learn, by making 'mistakes" in their selections" (Kerby 2019, 53).
- Given the prevalence of censorship of LGBTQIA+ materials in particular, LIS programs should be sure that students are aware of identity censorship and that they are provided with opportunities to explore strategies that can work to counter it.
- LIS students would also benefit from practice leading conversations with audiences of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. They should be encouraged to reflect on when compromises might be inevitable and when they are unacceptable, and they should know where and to whom to go when they are faced with demands they cannot ethically meet.
- Because LIS students often don't have first-hand encounters with censorship until they are practicing librarians, LIS programs may consider extending their educational offerings beyond students' graduation by developing alumni cohorts that meet periodically to discuss issues of practice, thereby providing new school librarians with a ready-made network of professionals with whom they can continue to share and learn.

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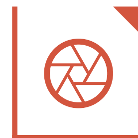

Appendix A: *Drama* Interview Questions

- Have you read *Drama*?
  - If so, what do you think about it?
  - If not, what have you heard about it?
- Tell me about your experiences with *Drama*.
- Have you heard from other librarians about their experiences with *Drama*?
- Let's imagine that you had *Drama* on the shelf. How do you think that would be?
  - Or, can you describe the response to having *Drama* on your shelf (if any)?
- Tell me about any [other] graphic novels that you have decided not to include in your collection.
- Have you had any experiences with censorship?
- Tell me how you typically handle concerns you have about certain library materials.
- Tell me how you typically handle concerns from others about certain library materials.
- How do you feel your decisions are supported (or not) by the school community?
- How does support from the school community look like to you?
- Are there instances when you feel your collection development choices are not supported? If yes, what do those instances look like?
- Ideally, what support would you like to have from your community? What do you feel is preventing those support mechanisms?