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What You Should Know about Challenges to School Library Materials

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A national intellectual freedom study was conducted by questionnaire in Spring 1990, focused on public secondary schools and challenges to library media center (LMC) materials as reported by the school's library media specialist[1]. The study looked specifically at the factors that mattered in whether the outcome to challenged LMC material was retention, restriction, or removal.[2] (See Survey Methodology at end of article.)

Six Outcome Factors

Overall, there were six general factors which were found to influence the outcome of challenges to LMC materials:

• the existence of a school board-approved district materials selection policy and the degree to which it was used when LMC materials were challenged;

• the school environment, including the influence and power of the school principal and the support
of classroom teachers;

• the community environment, through support received outside the school district in which a challenge occurred;

• the initiator of the challenge;

• selected characteristics of the library media specialist including gross degrees of dogmatism and internal/external locus of control;

• complaint background, including whether there was active support for retention or removal of materials, and whether the challenge was oral or written.

Oral vs. Written Challenges

The great majority of reported challenges were oral. One finding particularly stood out: oral challenges fared differently from written challenges. Oral challenges were more likely to result in removal than written challenges, while written challenges were more likely to result in retention than oral challenges (Table 2). This article focuses on the differences between oral and written challenges as revealed in the national intellectual freedom study, and as reported by the library media specialists who experienced the challenges.

Differences in oral and written challenges were found for aspects of each of the six general factors known to relate to challenge outcomes. The discussion that follows reflects statistical test examination. Statistical analyses included chi square analyses (used to determine if the proportions between rows or columns of tables are statistically significant or due purely to chance) or analyses of variance (used to test the statistical significance of the response level), as appropriate. Where finding indicate differences in form of complaint, they represent statistical significance at the p<.05 level (This means there is a five percent probability that the researcher will reject a hypothesis that is actually true). I offer here a discussion of the findings at U.S. Secondary level library media centers with challenges, and some recommendations.

The term "oral complaint" refers to challenges submitted verbally only, while the term "written complaint" includes challenges submitted only in writing as well as challenges initially submitted verbally and later submitted in writing.

What Was Found

Characteristics of the Library Media Specialist: Female respondents were more likely to report that challenges were oral, with 74.2 percent reporting challenges to be oral, compared to 62.6 percent of male respondents (Table 3).

Materials Selection Policy Use: The literature of the profession is replete with recommendations noting the importance of a school board-approved written materials selection policy. Library media specialists are also urged in the literature to see that the policy is followed during a challenge. The national study found the use of the policy to make a difference in overall retention of challenged LMC materials. Closer examination of the data found that there was more use of the policy when challenges were written. In fact, when challenges were written, the policy was reported to be used in full almost half the time. In oral complaints, almost half the time, the policy was reported as not being used at all (Table 4).

School Environment: Internal support received within the school or district was found to relate to the overall retention of challenged LMC materials. When examined more closely, it was found that the support of the principal as well as teachers for retention was higher for challenges that were written than for those that were oral only. For support of the principal, on a scale of 1-6, with 6 indicating the highest level of support which was "partnership role," 58.4 percent of those with oral challenges selected a 5 or 6 compared to 72.5 percent of those with written challenges (Table 5). Similarly, for teachers, 73.3 percent of those with oral challenges selected a scale of 5-6 compared to 91.8 percent of those with written challenges.

Assistance sought within the school or district by the library media specialist also varied according to whether complaints were written or oral. When challenges were written, library media specialists were more likely to seek support. On a scale of 1-6, with 6 indicating much assistance sought, 13 percent of those with oral challenges selected 5 or 6, compared to 45 percent of those with written challenges (Table 6).

Assistance received during the challenge process differed according to form of complaint. Those with written complaints were more likely to receive assistance from other inside the

district than those with oral complaints.   Library media specialists with oral complaints received some type of assistance 62 percent of the time, compared to those with written complaints, who reported receiving some type of assistance 87.4 percent of the time.   There was more assistance provided for written complaints by all others named in the questionnaire, including other library media specialists in the district, district, library media coordinator, principal, local teachers organization, and others.   Thus, whether the challenge was oral or written made a difference in the support that was received within a school or district.

Community Environment: Support received from the community was found to be all overall factor in the retention of challenged library media materials.   While most respondents generally indicated that they did not seek assistance outside the district regardless of whether the challenge was oral or written, differences could be seen here, as well.   Of those with oral challenges, 93.2 percent reported seeking no assistance outside the district compared to 75.7 percent of those with written challenges.   Library media specialists who indicated they sought a great deal of assistance from outside the district were limited.   On a scale of 1-6, where 6 indicated much assistance sought, 2.2 percent of those with oral challenges selected scales of either 5 or 6, compared to 10.4 percent of those with written challenges (Table 7).   Thus. While most respondents clearly did not seek assistance outside the district when material was challenged, those with written challenges were more likely to do so than those with oral challenges.

Library media specialists with written complaints were more likely to receive assistance outside the district than those with oral complaints.   Overall, written complaints received some form of outside assistance 30.3 percent of the time, compared to oral complaints, which received some outside assistance 12.1 percent of the time.   There was more assistance provided for written complaints from library media specialists outside the district, local public library and/or public library system staff, state professional library or media associations, as well as state Departments of Public Instruction/Education.   No differences in support by form of complaint were found for state teachers' organization or national organizations.   Thus, whether the challenge was oral or written related to differences in support received from persons or groups outside the district.

Whether the challenge was oral or written was looked at in terms of local media awareness of the challenge.   In the overall study, it was found that few outside the school or district were aware that a challenge to LMC materials had occurred.   The majority of respondents indicated that local media were not aware of the challenge regardless of whether the media were newspapers, radio, or television.   However, the local media were more likely to be aware of a challenge if the challenge had been submitted in writing.   Those with oral challenges indicated there was no knowledge of the complaint from local media 97.8 percent of the time compared to 85.4 percent of those with written challenges.   Those with oral challenges indicated there was extensive knowledge 1.4 percent of the time, compared to 6.3 percent of those with written challenges.

Initiator: In overall findings, the person who initiated the challenge made a difference in the outcome of challenges.   Principals and teachers were more likely to have their challenges result in removal than parents, whose challenges were more likely to result in retention.   An

examination of the initiator of the challenge and form of complaint also showed differences between oral and written complaints.   Challenges initiated by district administrators, the principal, or teachers were more likely to be oral challenges when compared to parents or conservative groups that challenged materials.

For example, 80 percent of challenges from district administrators were oral, 93.6 percent of challenges from principals were oral, and 88.,7 percent of challenges from teachers were oral. This compares to 67 percent of challenges from parents and 47.1 percent of challenges from conservative groups reported as oral (Table 8).

Complaint Background: In the overall study, it was found that where there was active support for retention, there was a greater likelihood that challenged LMC material would be retained.   Similarly, where there was active support for removal, the materials was more likely to be removed.   Form of complaint was also examined in terms of whether there was active support for retention and removal.   Written challenges were more likely to generate active support for retention than oral challenges.   Of those with written challenges, 20.5 percent indicated there was no support for retention, compared to 43.6 percent of those with oral challenges.   Similarly, 37.8 percent of those with written challenges indicated a high level of support for retention, compared to 20.6 percent of those with oral challenges (Table9).

Other Categories: The form of complaint was not statistically significant for other categories including school or district enrollment sizes, number of library media specialists, level of school, I.e., middle junior, senior high school, or active support for removal.   Statistical significance was also not found for education level, age, or racial background of the library media specialist.

Results

The form of complaint was found to make a significant difference in many aspects of the challenge process for secondary school level LMC challenges.   Oral and written challenges differed in some important ways in terms of the materials selection policy, school environment, community environment, challenge initiator, and characteristics of the library media specialist. The study found that most challenges to LMC materials at the secondary level were made orally and that oral challenges were more likely to result in removal than written challenges.   The study found that women were more likely to receive oral challenges than men.   It found that challenges from district administrators,principals, and teachers were more likely to be made orally, and that these internal challenges were more likely to result in removal.   Yet, materials selection policies were more likely to be used when challenges were written.   In addition, support fort the retention of challenged material form persons/organizations within or outside the district was greater for written challenges.   In fact, library media specialists were more likely to seek support when challenges were written.   While there was little likelihood that local media would learn of any LMC challenges, challenges had a greater chance of being known when they were written.

Implications

What does all of this mean?

• It means that due process is more likely for challenges that are submitted in writing, and that the result of due process is more likely to be retention of LMC materials on open shelves.

• The study raises questions about internal challenges to LMC materials made by district administrators, principals, and teachers.   Are materials selection policies intended to exclude school administrators or faculty, or is there the expectation that a challenge is only "serious" enough to be place in writing if someone outside the school community initiates a challenge?

• Does pressure come to bear more heavily on the library media specialist when the challenge is internal?   What can the library media specialist learn from these findings?

Recommendations

Based on the results of my study, I make the following recommendations:

1.   Examine your district's materials selection policy carefully.   Is the wording inclusive enough to show that challenges initiated by administrators, teachers, and other school personnel are to be included in reconsideration steps outlined in the policy?   If not, contact your state library or media association and/or LMC consultants at the Department of Public Instruction/Education.   See a critique of the current policy as well as sample policies to review.

2.   Assure, possibly through in-service opportunities, that principals and teachers are aware that the policy is intended for all who challenge the appropriateness of LMC materials.

3.   Take every challenge to LMC materials, whether oral or written, seriously.

4.   Follow the reconsideration section of the policy fully.   After initial discussion with the complainant, if concern still exists, have the complaint submitted in writing.

5.   Seek support when an oral or written challenge occurs.   Have a clear understanding of the type of support that may be available.   Be certain to communicate your expectations.   For example, if you wish the discussion to be confidential, say so.

6.   Remember, communication at all levels is necessary to assure that challenges are handled in an effective, objective manner.

7.   Recognize that as a library media specialist, you can be the key person in shaping the outcome of challenges to library media center materials.

References

by Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., The Institute on Race and Ethnicity, University of Wisconsin System, and The Graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Madison.   The research consultant for the study was Douglas L. Zweizig, Professor, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A paper based on this study received the 1992 Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) Research Paper Award.

The study is reported in articles by the author in several library and information science journals, including "Challenge to Materials in Secondary School Library Media Centers: Results of a National Study." *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* 4 (Winter 1991): 131-40.

"A Conceptual Model of Factors influencing the Outcome of Challenges to Library Materials in Secondary School Settings." *The Library Quarterly* 63 (January 1993).

"Perspectives of Secondary Level Library Media Specialists About Material Challenges." *School Library Media Quarterly* 21 (Fall 1992), p. 15-23.

Individual copies of the full U.S. Department of Education report, which includes the questionnaire, are available for $20 from School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706; Title: "Factors Influencing the Outcome of Challenges to Materials in Secondary School Libraries: Report of a National Study." Also available in ERIC ED 338266.

Survey Methodology

A proportionate, stratified sample of 6,557 schools in grades seven or higher from each state in the United States was sent an initial questionnaire about whether challenges to LMC materials had occurred.   The resulting response rate was 72 percent, with 4,736 returning the completed questionnaire.   Of these, 4,625 answered a question about LMC materials complaints.   It was found that 35.9 percent or 1,661 library media specialists reported that one or more challenges to library media center materials occurred during the school years 1986-87, 1987-88, or 1988-89.   NO challenges curing the three year period were reported by 64.1 percent or 2,964 of the respondents.   Thus, about one secondary school library media specialist out of three reported experiencing one or more challenges to LMC materials within the three year period studied.

To answer the more complex question of the factors that made a difference in whether challenges resulted in materials' retention, restriction, or removal, those library media specialists reporting challenges received a more detailed questionnaire than sought information about the most recent challenge that had been resolved between September 1987 and Spring 1990.   Of the 1,171 or 70 percent who responded, 739 reported challenges and of this groups, 606 indicated that challenges to materials resulted in retention, restriction, or removal.   Results are listed in Table 1.   When only the outcomes - retained, restricted, or removed - were examined, 52.2 percent of materials were retained, 21.6 percent of materials were restricted, and 26.1 percent

were removed.

Tables

Table 1: Results of LMC Materials Challenges

Outcome	Frequency
Retained	317 (44.2%)
Restricted	131 (18.2%)
Removed	158 (22%)
Other	112 (15.6%)
Total	718 (100%)

Table 2: For of Complaint and Outcome

complaint	Retain	Restrict	Remove	Total
Oral	212 (49.1%)	95 (22%)	125 (28.9%)	432 (100%)
Written	103 (60.9%)	35 (20.7%)	31 (18.3%)	169 (99.9%)
Total	315 (52.4%)	130 (21.6%)	156 (26.0%)	601 (100%)

Chi square (2,N=601) = 8.60967, P<.05

Table 3: Gender and Form of Complaint

Gender	Oral	Written	Total
Female	465 (74.2%)	162 (25.8%)	627 (100%)
Male	57 (62.6%)	34 (37.4%)	91 (100%)
Total	522 (72.7%)	196 (27.3%)	718 (100%)

Chi square (1,N = 718) = 5.31879, P<.05

Table 4: Policy Use and Form of Complaint

Scale	Oral	Written	Total
1 (not used at all)	212 (45.2%)	25 (14%)	(237 (36.6%)
2	56 (11.9%)	16 (9%)	72 (11.1%)
3	46 (9.8%)	16 (9%)	62 (9.6%)
4	31 (6.6%)	14 (7.9%)	45 (7.0%)
5	44 (9.4%)	22 (12.4%)	66 (10.2%)
6 used fully	80 (17.1%)	85 (47.8%)	165 (25.5%)
Total	469 (100%)	178 (100.1%)	647 (100%)

chi square $(1, N = 718) = 5.31879$, $P < .05$

Table 5: Principal Support and Form of Compaint

Scale	Oral	Written	Total
1 not suportive	68 (14.8%)	11 (5.9%)	79 (12.2%)
2	30 (6.5%)	9 (4.8%)	39 (6.1%)
3	46 (10%)	14 (7.5%)	60 (9.3%)
4	47 (10.2%)	17 (9.1%)	64 (9.9%)
5	66 (14.4%)	33 (17.7%)	99 (15.4%)
6 partnership role	202 (44%)	102 (54.8%)	304 (47.1%)
Total	459 (99.9%)	186 (99.8%)	645 (100%)

Analysis of variance: $F (13.9365, df = 1,643) = P < .05$

Table 6: Assistance Sought within the School or District and Form of Complaint

Scale	Oral	Written	Total
1 no assistance sought	296 (57.9%)	47 (25.1%)	343 (49.1%)
2	44 (8.6%)	19 (10.2%)	63 (9.0%)

3	50 (9.8%)	12 (6.4%)	62 (8.9%)
4	55 (10.8%)	25 (13.4%)	80 (11.5%)
5	33 (6.5%)	33 (17.7%)	66 (9.5%)
6 much assistance sought	33 (6.5%)	51 (27.3%)	84 (12.0%)
Total	511 (100.1%)	187 (100.1%)	698 (100%)

Analysis of variance: F (103.8636, df = 1,696) = P<.05

Table 7: Outside Assistance Sought and Form of Complaint

Scale	Oral	Written	Total
1 no assistance sought	481 (93.2%)	146 (75.7%)	627 (88.4%)
2	13 (2.5%)	7 (3.6%)	20 (2.8%)
3	1 (.2%)	5 (3.6%)	6 (.8%)
4	10 (1.9%)	15 (7.8%)	25 (3.5%)
5	6 (1.2%)	12 (6.2%)	18 (2.5%)
6 much assistance sought	5 (1%)	8 (4.2%)	13 (1.8%)
Total	516 (100%)	193 (101.1%)	709 (99.8%)

Analysis of variance: F(46.9880, df = 1,707) = P<.05

Table 8: Initiator and Form of Complaint

Initiator	Oral	Written	Total
School Board Member	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	8 (100%)
Liberal Group	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
District Administrators	12 (80%)	3 (20%)	15 (100%)
Principal	44 (93.6%)	3 (6.4%)	47 (100%)
Teachers	86 (88.7%)	11 (11.3%)	97 (100%)
Parents	308 (67%)	152 (33%)	460 (100%)

Conservative Group	8 (47.1%)	9 (52.9%)	17 (100%)
Other	59 (79.7%)	15 (20.3%)	74 (100%)
Total	523 (72.7%)	196 (27.3%)	719 (100%)

Chi Square (7,N = 719) = 39.16232, P<.05

Table 9: Active Support for Retention and Form of Complaint

Scale	Oral	Written	Total
1 no support	129 (43.6%)	32 (20.5%)	161 (35.6%)
2	23 (7.8%)	6 (3.9%)	29 (6.4%)
3	20 (6.8%)	22 (14.1%)	42 (9.3%)
4	29 (9.8%)	10 (6.4%)	39 (8.6%)
5	34 (11.5%)	27 (17.3%)	61 (13.5%)
6 high level of support	61 (20.6%)	59 (37.8%)	120 (26.5%)
Total	296 (100.1%)	156 (100%)	452 (99.9%)

Analysis of variance: $F_{(30.0659, df = 1,450)} = P<.05$