PRACTITIONER SELF-CENSORSHIP IN SCOTLAND'S SECONDARY SCHOOL LIBRARIES: A DIGITAL MIXED METHODS STUDY

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this study was to explore the issues of self-censorship and challenge preparedness in Scottish secondary school libraries. It was undertaken in response to a recent consultation on intellectual freedom conducted by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and a literature gap peculiar to the devolved nations of the United Kingdom.

Methodology: Internet-mediated digital mixed methods were used, following an explanatory sequential approach and using the controversial graphic novel format as a gateway to the investigation. The quantitative phase centred upon an online questionnaire disseminated among secondary school library staff throughout Scotland, and the qualitative phase comprised three semi-structured follow-up interviews shaped by emergent themes from the literature and questionnaire.

Findings: Practitioner self-censorship does exist in Scotland's school libraries. Its nature and scope broadly accord with the findings of other studies conducted within and outwith the UK. Promisingly, theoretical agreement with intellectual freedom principles is widespread; limited time and budget are the main barriers to best practice. Despite minimal formal collection defence training, many practitioners perceive their support systems and professional skills to be adequate.

Key recommendation: CILIP and the School Library Association (SLA) should produce fully localised, sector-specific strategies for challenge preparedness.

Keywords: Collection development; graphic novels; intellectual freedom; Scotland; secondary school libraries; self-censorship.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Dissertation structure

This introductory chapter establishes the focus of the research, before identifying the overall aim and individual objectives. Chapter 2 defines key terms and critically evaluates relevant sources, providing further warrant for an investigation into secondary school library staff preparation issues in Scotland. Chapter 3 explains and justifies the data collection and analysis techniques, along with issues relating to the implementation of a Scotland-wide national survey. Using themes identified during primary and secondary research, Chapter 4 compares the questionnaire and interview findings to those of the literature review. In Chapter 5, conclusions are drawn, and recommendations made.

1.2 Background and rationale

Recent research by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) has found that a third of public librarians based in the United Kingdom have faced pressure to censor or remove books (Shaffi 2023). A 2022 SLJ Research survey of school library staff found that self-censorship is an increasing problem in the United States of America; 27% of respondents said that "a formal challenge influenced their book-buying decisions going forward", and some of those who had not yet received a challenge were pre-emptively self-censoring (cited in Yorio 2022 p.35). Count (2022) suggests that relative to their counterparts in the US, school librarians in the UK are more likely to censor and much less aware of available professional guidance on the matter.

Many news stories pertain to challenges and bans in the US, so it is easy to overlook similar cases occurring in the UK. In March 2023, a British private school faced media backlash for stocking Maia Kobabe's graphic memoir Gender Queer (Adams 2023). A year earlier, gay author Simon James Green was disinvited from a talk at a Catholic school in London (Sherwood and Adams 2022); this raised concerns about lagging intellectual freedom practices in denominational state schools.

Hopkins (2003) states that most materials challenges occur in schools, but few challenged librarians seek support, which compounds their risk of experiencing negative psychological and physical effects. For school library staff in the UK, this has grave implications; in comparison to public library staff, they are more likely to be held personally responsible for the contents of their collections, and less likely to have a stock selection policy with which to defend their choices (McNicol 2005b). They may resort to self-censorship in order to avoid receiving a challenge.

However, investigating self-censorship can prove difficult; this type of censorship is sometimes subconscious, frequently deniable (Hill 2010), and perceived by many librarians as a "secret, quiet, shameful practice" (Moeller and Becnel 2020 p.526). "By definition we don't hear about self-

censorship," explains Joan Bertin, Executive Director of the National Coalition Against Censorship (cited in Hill 2010 p.9). To the extent that the phenomenon exists, it will, understandably, be under-reported.

Perhaps, focusing on a relatively new part of the collection is the key. One strong contender is the graphic narrative, a polarising format which has been shown to circulate disproportionately well in school library collections (Gavigan 2014) but gets "censored at a rate that far exceeds its marketshare" due to its prominent visual elements (Mastricolo 2019 n.p.). Research by Becnel and Moeller indicates that the graphic novel is an effective entry point to discussing self-censorship; practitioners often hold strong opinions about the format, and they tend to be forthcoming with their justifications for increasing or restricting access.

1.3 Aim and objectives

The purpose of this research was to advance an understanding of the factors contributing to staff self-censorship in Scottish secondary school libraries. The study was facilitated by two research strategies: an in-depth review of the literature, and the collection and analysis of empirical data.

Within the context of Scottish secondary education, the research objectives were to:

1. Identify the types of material most at risk of censorship, as well as potential contributing factors at the environmental and human levels.

2. Critically evaluate sources which relate to young people's intellectual freedom, and/or the graphic novel as an educational tool.

3. Explore the attitudes and experiences of library staff regarding book selection and challenges, using the graphic novel format as a gateway.

4. Develop recommendations towards inclusive collection management and practitioner preparedness to respond to book challenges.

Objective 1, first explored in the literature review, was used to inform the empirical research. Objective 2 was achieved by the literature review and revisited when comparing those findings to the empirical findings of this study. Objectives 3 and 4 contribute directly to the field of librarianship by collecting primary data and triangulating it with secondary data to produce localised sector-specific recommendations.

1.4 Deficiencies in the literature

In the United Kingdom, and Scotland in particular, little literature exists on either school library censorship or the graphic novel. By addressing a compound topic, this study has explored two intersecting research gaps. Using the graphic novel as a gateway to the discussion of self-censorship has produced data which points to the viability of Scotland as a setting for further research on both topics.

The most notable study on censorship in Scotland focused on public libraries (Taylor and McMenemy 2012), but its finding that youth literature is most frequently targeted for challenges provides a rationale for investigating the prevalence of censorship in Scottish school libraries. A follow-up study (Brooks 2012) found, troublingly, that most book challenges in school libraries are successful. The only Scottish study about graphic novels (Smith 2007) centres upon public library staff attitudes and practices relating to the acquisition and promotion of the format. Other UK-based research has focused on pupil privacy and internet filtering – adjacent issues which CILIP also campaigns on (Codling and Willett 2021; McNicol 2016a).

Recent literature on either subject is predominantly North American, with Becnel and Moeller providing many publications on the compound topic over the past five years. The 2011 "peak" recognised by Markulike (2022 p.15) means that much of the remainder is a decade or more old, with all but one UK-based study being out of date. Count's (2022) research evidenced the continued existence of school library censorship in England, but the low number of responses from the devolved nations left a literature gap.

As the present study shows, Scotland possesses the professional and technological infrastructure needed to access a larger sample. Improvements to online communications and digital access have increased the methodological possibilities, which this research exploits to the fullest.

1.5 Audiences who will benefit

The explicit inclusion of school libraries in CILIP's (2022) intellectual freedom consultation shows that suppression of access is a pressing concern. According to Mosher (2010), research which exposes self-censorship could "help to counter unlawful and unethical pressure from administrators and parents" (n.p.).

Localised to Scotland from the outset, this study has provided the encouragement, insight and justification necessary for professional associations such as CILIP Scotland (CILIPS) and the School Library Association (SLA) to produce sector-specific resources. Colleagues and administrators within the school stand to better appreciate the role that library practitioners play, as well as the legal and ethical basis for the professional values set forth by CILIP, which may differ from those of adjacent professions such as teaching.

School library staff within and outwith Scotland will be directly advantaged by accessible statistics, recommendations, and suggested further reading – all of which are intended to be both reassuring and practical. In addition, other researchers will benefit from methodological transparency, which "allows readers and reviewers to understand the procedures used and make judgments about their quality", while enhancing future students' learning about mixed methods research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011 p.180).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review will first contextualise the study by identifying common targets for library censorship, outlining the debate around how self-censorship is defined, and highlighting legislation and professional standards which apply in the UK. Next, it will discuss global examples of scholarly literature and news coverage concerning young people's intellectual freedom and the use of graphic novels in schools. Finally, it will examine the literature on the topic of self-censorship among school library practitioners.

2.2 Censorship

2.2.1 External censorship

The three main forms of censorship affecting library services are top-down laws and policies, challenges mounted by individuals or small groups, and librarian self-censorship. External censorship attempts garner both press and social media attention. While awareness of threats to intellectual freedom is in the public interest, coverage is often requested by stakeholders seeking support for their cause. A couple of recent cases and their outcomes are outlined below.

In January 2022, the McMinn County School Board voted unanimously to remove Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel Maus from its eighth-grade syllabus due to concerns over nudity and coarse language (BBC News 2022; Gross 2022; Harrison 2022). As it turns out, this approach can be remarkably ineffective nowadays. "[T]o censor a book is not to suppress it, but to rescue it from oblivion, to give it a place in public life and cultural memory", explains Kidd (2008 p.214). Maus, of course, is far from endangered – it is one of the seminal works of graphic non-fiction – but the boom in sales which followed the ban corresponds with that phenomenon (McGreevy 2022).

Graphic novels are often targeted, along with equity-oriented items in the youth library collection. During a single meeting in December 2022, the St. Tammany Parish Library Board of Control addressed two challenged picture books as well as a proposal to house the library's entire graphic novel collection behind the circulation desk. St. Tammany moved to keep the picture books in the juvenile collection, and scheduled an emergency meeting to further discuss the graphic novels (Hutchinson 2023; Pagones 2023; STPLBC 2023a; Hutchinson 2022). Details from this meeting, which took place in late February 2023, suggest that the true motive behind the challenges may be to bring an end to a vital public service by sullying its reputation and diverting resources away from day-to-day library activities (Hutchinson 2023b; Pagones 2023; STPLBC 2023b).

Difficult to miss would be the inference that removal after the fact can become a much more public matter than initial non-selection (Petley 2009). While it is possible to identify conspicuously missing titles through catalogue analysis (Coley 2002), the intent behind non-selection is far more deniable than that of either selection or removal. Internal censorship is often borne of a desire to avoid external intervention (Frost 2021); as such, alertness to the media can either result in better challenge-preparedness or a heightened impulse to self-censor.

2.2.2 At-risk users and at-risk materials

According to Nick Poole, Chief Executive of CILIP, the number of book challenges received by UK public libraries has "increased significantly in recent years", with empire, race, and LGBTQ+ being the most targeted categories of content (Shaffi 2023). Children's books are the most challenged and banned grouping in the US, and these challenges are typically instigated by children's caregivers on the grounds of age-inappropriateness (Frost 2021). Taylor and McMenemy (2012) and Brooks (2012) have demonstrated that this is also true in Scotland. Any discussion of this issue should begin with the most obvious factor: even in contexts where the user community is primarily or exclusively made up of children, it is not standard practice for children to be given much authority over the selection and weeding of communal materials (Aggleton 2018).

Roberts (1996), Jenkinson (2002), Adams (2009) and Count (2022) all found that more than half of challenges come from parents or guardians, with adults who work within the school accounting for much of the remainder. Further, Brooks (2012) found that most challenges to school library materials are successful. An explanation put forth by McNicol (2005b) is that school library collections are more vulnerable to censorship attempts because the public library structure is less likely to position a single member of staff as the perceived, or actual, arbiter of stock.

Aside from the ill-defined concept of "age-inappropriateness", the literature on children's book censorship establishes recurring themes. Objectionable language, violence, religious viewpoint, substance use, sexual content and – both positive and negative – representation of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC characters are frequently listed as trigger points for book challenges (Yorio 2022; Gomez, Brownstein and Mastricolo 2018; Coley 2002). Formats other than print media, such as music and internet-based resources, are often censored (Rosearynandira and Asmiyanto 2020). Within the print collection, the most controversial items are art books, teenage imprints of adult titles, and graphic novels (McNicol 2005b).

In recent years, public librarians in the UK have faced an upsurge in materials challenges, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from media organisations, and personal threats of violence from members of the public – all of which increase stress and reduce the time available to achieve other

objectives (Shaffi 2023). It follows that the potential for harm to more isolated practitioners based in school libraries is enormous. Nonetheless, as Dickenson states, “fear of a challenge is not one of the [materials] selection principles” (2007 p.24 cited in Mosher 2010). The onus is on professional associations to take the lead by developing collection defence strategies and practical support for librarians. In recognition of this, CILIP has conducted research on intellectual freedom (Shaffi 2023).

2.2.3 Self-censorship versus selection

In the field of librarianship, the tension between censorship and selection has long been recognised. Librarian and scholar Lester Asheim (1953) argues that the major distinction is “that the selector looks for values, for strengths, for virtues which will overshadow minor objections. For the censor … the important thing is to find reasons to reject the book” (n.p.). The selector takes a positive approach, and the censor a negative one, but both, as Kidd (2008) warns, run the risk of hyper-focusing on a single attribute of the book. The censor, for Rickman (2010), is often motivated by the protection of others and believes that they are doing what is right. Doyle (1998), on the other hand, posits that rather than “genuine concern for the general welfare”, the censor is ideologically motivated (p.242).

Although, as Rickman explains, “[l]egitimate reasons do exist for the nonselection of titles from the collection, including legal, financial, or policy issues” (2010 p.5), selection and censorship can be externally indistinguishable. Revisiting his prior argument, Asheim (1983) promotes the use of selection policies to ensure fairness: “[A]ny library in which any kind of professional selection policy is in effect (whether written or not) will contain many works that the librarian does not like or agree with” (n.p.). He notes the troubling precedent of librarians losing their jobs for doing “what they were hired to do” as a threat to “future selection and freedom of access” (n.p.). It is under these circumstances that the temptation to self-censor may arise.

The librarian’s duty, for Asheim, is to use professional judgement “[t]o make decisions, to make them for sound reasons, and to be able to defend them when they are questioned” (1983 n.p.). Doyle agrees: the librarian must ensure the inclusion of the full gamut of viewpoints, selecting “dispassionately, judiciously, and representatively” (1998 p.242). This, of course, is not always the case. As experienced school librarian and intellectual freedom advocate Pat Scales notes (cited in Whelan 2009), the perception of librarians as champions of books can afford them unbridled opportunity to suppress the discovery of materials which some people may find objectionable. Whelan (2009) provides a case study: author Barry Lyga had expected his novel Boy Toy (2007) to cause public outrage, but it was silent self-censorship at libraries and bookstores which ultimately refused the title a place in the canon.

2.3 Scotland and the United Kingdom

2.3.1 Legislation

In Scotland and the wider United Kingdom, certain restrictions on the right to intellectual freedom allow it to coexist with obscenity laws, both general and audience-specific. Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998 provides for the freedom to receive and impart information and ideas, while Article 13 of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (1989) makes clear that children's intellectual freedom should not be unduly limited. The right to hold opinions and express views "applies even if these views are unpopular or disturbing" (ECHR 2014 p.45), and its exercise is only subject to such restrictions as "are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society" (Human Rights Act 1998).

The Children and Young People (Harmful Publications) Act 1955, which applies specifically to comic-like works portraying criminal activity, violence, cruelty, or other disturbing incidents, can only be invoked if "the work as a whole would tend to corrupt a child or young person into whose hands it may fall". Very few prosecutions have been made under this Act: two in 1970, and seemingly none since (Index on Censorship 2020; Hansard 2008; Hansard 1982; Hansard 1974). By comparison, the Video Recordings Act 1984, with its robust classification process and clear restrictions on sale, has received considerably stronger enforcement (Petley 2009).

The extent of a law's influence on self-censorship is difficult to measure. The duty to appraise controversial elements of each work in context should be clear; it occurs in the Children and Young People (Harmful Publications) Act 1955, and it is consistent with UK laws concerning the legality of adult materials (Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982; Obscene Publications Act 1959). Nevertheless, the inclusion of such nebulous concepts as "protection of health or morals" (Human Rights Act 1998) and "disturbing incidents" (Children and Young People (Harmful Publications) Act 1955) has the potential to increase any such law's effectiveness at deterring actions against which prosecution has scant precedent.

2.3.2 Professional standards

Count (2022) found that only 36% of UK secondary schools had produced, or were planning, a formal materials policy. A decade prior, Brooks (2012) found that of the ten Scottish Local Authorities which responded to a Freedom of Information request with examples of school library materials policies, eight contained an anti-censorship statement, but only one provided "guidance on the procedure to be followed in the event of a book challenge" (p.44).

In 2022, CILIP conducted an intellectual freedom consultation which explicitly included school libraries. The CILIP, CILIP SLG and SLA Interim Joint Position Statement (2022) states: "We recognise

the significant challenges faced by school librarians in embedding these beliefs into their practice and will be working to provide further support in the coming months". Along with CILIP's strongly held position against internet filtering (n.d.), this shows an awareness of the substantial difficulties around upholding young people's right to intellectual freedom at school, and a commitment to resolving these difficulties.

The resultant policies and guidelines have yet to be published. Ideally, they will provide as much clarity as those produced by the American Library Association (ALA) and the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). Although the interim statement affirms "the principles set out in the AASL School Library Bill of Rights" (CILIP, CILIP SLG and SLA 2022), it makes no direct mention of the following responsibility applying in the UK: "To provide a written statement, approved by the local Board of Education, of the procedures for meeting the challenge of censorship of materials in school library media centers" (AASL 1969). Practitioners in the UK are unlikely to have a copy of this document to hand; the School Library Bill of Rights was officially withdrawn in the 1970s and replaced by a school-oriented interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights (Hopkins 1996).

In its Standards for Secondary School and Sixth Form Libraries (2022b), the SLA recommends: "The collection should include books, graphic novels, poetry and information books. Music, comics and e-books should be considered" (p.9). This distinguishes graphic novels from comics, placing the former at the same priority level as more traditional materials such as poetry. The SLA has also published a list of graphic novel and manga suppliers on its website, along with a recommendation to check the shortlists of the Excelsior Award for suggestions (SLA 2022a). Based on the SLA's unambiguous endorsement, it is reasonable to assume that graphic novels are included in many secondary school library collections around the UK. Practitioners' enthusiasm for the format merits exploration alongside the extent of its uptake.

2.3.3 Previous studies

To investigate the incidence of successful and unsuccessful book challenges within the Scottish public library sector, Taylor and McMenemy (2012) submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all 32 Scottish Local Authorities. The 29 responses relating to the period 2007–2009 showed a total of 15 book challenges spread across eight Local Authorities. The most common actions taken by library professionals were to a) keep the book in stock and explain the rationale to the service user, or b) reshelve the book in another section of the library. Taylor and McMenemy (2012) note that the rate of challenges in Scotland is "lower than that of North America" (p.1), but their finding that two thirds of public library complaints were made on the basis of age-inappropriateness provides warrant for school-based studies.

FOI requests to the 32 Scottish Local Authorities were also used in Brooks' (2012) follow-up study; this has proven to be an effective data collection method for both public and school library studies in Scotland. Brooks (2012) found that records of book challenges were either held centrally by the council, or directly by the school library. Over the period 2006–2011, 43 book challenges were received across 17 Local Authorities. 40% were resolved by relocating the book, and 37% by removing it from the library entirely. Ten Local Authorities provided school library policies, of which eight contained some form of anti-censorship statement, but only one included guidance on the procedure to be followed if a challenge occurs. The key finding was that while the rate of book challenges is proportionally lower in Scotland than in the USA, it is significantly higher in schools than in public libraries.

McNicol (2005a) found that secondary school libraries were more restrictive than public libraries and that librarians with fewer years of experience demonstrated the greatest disparity between their theoretical values and their practice. Her follow-up study (2005b) found that fear of receiving a complaint from a parent was a strong motivation for self-censorship, and many school librarians did not feel that they would have the support of their headteacher or colleagues when dealing with a complaint. McNicol recommends that school librarians be supported in their decisions by written selection policies and complaints-handling procedures, and that CILIP produce a statement similar to the AASL School Library Bill of Rights.

Count (2022) sought to compare secondary school library practitioners' attitudes to censorship in the US and UK. This ambitious study found that while a majority of participants held anti-censorship views, those in the UK lacked collection development policies and awareness of professional guidance around censorship, as well as being comparatively liable "to censor by requiring parental permission, restricting access, and guiding students away from particular materials" (p.1). Count recommends that professional associations in the UK do more to promote, and to assist school librarians in implementing, their standards on intellectual freedom.

In the UK, and Scotland in particular, very few scholarly papers on book challenges or library staff self-censorship appear to have been produced. Although most of the existing data are not recent, these findings establish a solid basis for further research into juvenile collections.

2.4 Graphic novels

2.4.1 Educational value

Graphic novels are an important resource for supporting access to reading for learning and pleasure, especially among pupils who struggle to find materials which cater simultaneously to their reading ability and interest level (Yildirim 2013; Clark 2012). As early as 2007, Rudiger and Schliesman outlined the format's advantages for teaching visual literacy and media criticism, advocating particularly for its use as an educational tool for students with learning difficulties or English as an additional language.

Downey (2009) and Clark (2012) identified a range of uses for the format: supporting visual literacy, aiding reading comprehension, providing a lens through which to examine difficult topics, comparison with paired traditional texts, contextualising alternative perspectives, and increasing historical empathy. The visual literacy argument is becoming increasingly pertinent, with fast-paced modern media requiring multiple levels of comprehension (Moeller 2022; Yildirim 2013; Monnin 2010).

However, research shows that community perceptions of the format, filtered through teachers' own anxieties and preferences, are a significant barrier to its use as an educational resource (Clark 2012; Mathews 2011). Mathews (2011) found that while pre-service teachers agreed that graphic novels could be beneficial as a motivational tool for struggling readers, and as supplemental reading for pupils with high emotional maturity, they were reluctant to incorporate the format into lesson plans for mixed- or middle-ability classes.

Downey (2009) recognises that not all librarians are familiar with graphic novels, or know how to read them effectively. More recently, Moeller and Becnel (2022; 2020) found that school librarians are less confident working with graphic novels than with traditional texts. In combination with the budgetary limitations also noted, this means that the format is likely to require more time per title under consideration at the acquisition stage.

2.4.2 Collection development

By the late 2000s, research into the theory and practice of graphic novel collection development was well underway. Heaney (2007) produced a comprehensive review of the literature on "the usefulness, practicality and appropriateness of graphic novels", with a focus on the school library media centre and implications for collection development. This review found that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, and offered practical advice and strategies for building a graphic novel collection which meets growing demand from young people. To help school library staff best anticipate and respond to any complaints, Heaney recommends the creation of a collection

development plan which explicitly includes the handling of graphic novels. Non-scholarly articles were also common during this period; these ranged from instructional materials to opinion pieces and interviews. Pat Scales published a regular column for School Library Journal wherein readers' questions were answered. An abundance of advice was made available to practitioners who knew where to look.

Rudiger and Schliesman (2007) provide instructions on graphic novel selection for school library practitioners starting a collection. They begin by explaining how wide-ranging the format is, and they helpfully define the graphic novel as "highly visual" as opposed to uniformly "graphic" in the sense of "upsetting or offensive" (p.1). The authors recommend avoiding generalisations about the format, and looking at the work "as a whole" rather than taking "individual components out of context" (pp.1-2). This stance mirrors Asheim (1953) and the relevant legislation covered earlier in this literature review. The same standards should be applied as with any other format, and professional library review journals are a suggested source for stock ideas. Cataloguing and shelving decisions are also addressed, and educating members of the community on the format's benefits is advised.

In the 2010s, the emphasis of academic research shifted further towards investigating the popularity of the format and the barriers to its uptake. For example, using circulation data and interviews, Gavigan (2014) identified variables affecting the circulation and use of graphic novels in middle school libraries. Notably, she found that relative to the proportion of the collection occupied by the format, graphic novels are overrepresented in terms of circulation. Based on these findings, Gavigan recommends that libraries stock literature which will motivate children to become proficient readers. She calls for further school-based research examining the use of graphic novels, "as well as librarians' perspectives on related collection development issues" (p.109). Towards the early 2020s, school librarian self-censorship of the format has become an increasingly common research topic outside the UK.

2.4.3 Censorship

Moodie and Calvert (2018) surveyed New Zealand secondary school library managers to explore the relationship between practitioners' graphic novel selections and self-censorship practices. They found that professional library standards are inconsistently followed by school library managers, with self-censorship identifiable among 56% of participants. Impartiality was not ranked highly as a selection criterion, and participants were unsure as to the applicability of intellectual freedom principles to minors.

Becnel and Moeller (2020) found that most high school librarians felt that the graphic novel format was both popular and accessible within their libraries. 80% stated that they had never received a formal or informal challenge, but some participants had refused to shelve certain titles upon

acquisition. Moeller and Becnel (2020) found that elementary and middle school librarians were dissatisfied with available collection development resources such as professional reviews. This issue was compounded by lack of budget and time – a sentiment echoed by high school librarians in a related study (Becnel and Moeller 2020). The main causes of graphic novel self-censorship appear to be limited understanding of the format, and perceptions of external pressure (Moeller and Becnel 2022).

School librarians and teachers have a complex and often anxious relationship with the graphic novel format, exacerbated by limited experience and interest (Moeller and Becnel 2022; Mathews 2011) which may foster a tendency to uncritically accept complaints. Moeller and Becnel (2020) recommend educational opportunities for librarians to build confidence by better understanding the benefits of the graphic novel format; this should empower practitioners to make choices which they feel positive about and are prepared to defend.

School library practitioners should be aware that maintaining the inaccessibility of reading has historical precedent as a motive for external censorship; English translation of the Bible faced initial resistance on the grounds that it encouraged critical analysis by laypeople (Petley 2009). Early justifications for banning the visual formats, although increasing in sophistication, were quite often disingenuous. According to Sabin, “Officially, the reason for the clampdown [on penny dreadfuls] was given to be their violent nature: in fact, anti-establishment story lines were considered much more of a threat” (1996 p.14).

In 1954, Fredric Wertham made the argument that comic books have a deleterious effect on children (Gomez, Brownstein and Mastricolo 2018; Yildirim 2013; Sabin 1996). Around that time, the format was also proposed as a cause of reading disabilities (Carter 2007 cited in Yildirim 2013); reverse causality is probable, to the extent which this relationship exists. The visual narrative is an enduring victim of moral panic, but its twenty-first century armoury contains an abundance of scholarly literature emphasising its benefits to education and wellbeing (McGrail, Reiger and Doepker 2017; Gavigan 2014; Yildirim 2013; Clark 2012; Monnin 2010; Downey 2009).

2.5 Self-censorship

2.5.1 Methods

Non-selection is likely to be the most common method of librarian self-censorship; it is largely undetectable and can be a subconscious process. The proportion of school librarians who practice it is unknowable, but 97% of respondents in a survey undertaken by School Library Journal said that controversial subject matter was a factor in their purchasing decisions. Almost a third of this number stated that they "often" or "always" take it into consideration (Yorio 2022 p.33). However, one librarian noted that she "frequently" encourages pupils to read books which she is unable to provide directly (Yorio 2022 p.37). This accords with Scales' (2008) recommendation for librarians at particularly restrictive schools to make pupils aware of the public library and its wider remit.

An alternative cause of non-selection is over-reliance upon secondary sources. Habitual outsourcing of judgement to professional award or review is problematic in itself; it tends to reinforce inequity between mainstream and independent publishers, as well as between hegemonic and marginalised perspectives (Moody 2005). As Jenkinson (2002) points out, reviewers are also prone to self-censorship; they face the quandary of whether to acknowledge content which could lead to non-selection of the book. Reviewers know that relying on others' recommendations can lead to the selector giving more weight to undesirable attributes of the book than they might if they had read it personally. Nevertheless, school librarians complain about the quality of reviews and other resources (Moeller and Becnel 2022; Moeller and Becnel 2020; Snowball 2011).

Once the item is in the library, relocation is a common method of restriction. Where the scope of the library collection allows, the controversial material is often moved to another section (Bird 2022; Oltmann and Reynolds 2020; Taylor and McMenemy 2012; Curry 2001). Some libraries allow younger readers to withdraw age-restricted items with parental permission (Count 2022; Yorio 2022; Becnel and Moeller 2021; Brooks 2012). However, at schools which serve a narrow age range, relocation typically takes the form of donation to a public library, or to a school which serves older or younger pupils (Becnel and Moeller 2020; Moeller and Becnel 2020). Mismatched reading ability or interest level may result in non-circulation, but this cannot reliably be predicted from the outset; some pupils do appreciate books which their librarian considers either excessively or insufficiently challenging (Moeller 2022; Moeller and Becnel 2022; McNicol 2006).

Where materials remain available for withdrawal, some school librarians employ deterrents such as verbal guidance, labelling of items, and shelving in an overly exposed or otherwise inaccessible manner (Moeller and Becnel 2020; McNicol 2016b; McNicol 2006). This can contribute to stigmatisation at the individual or group level, for both people and materials. With or without these resources, pupils will encounter complex interactions between fact, opinion and belief. Barriers to

access present perennial risks – particularly as regards sex and relationship education (Rosearynandira and Asmiyanto 2020; Juzoaitis 2007). Practitioners must navigate many interweaving needs, values and possible harms when engaging in professional judgement. As such, the ALA (2019) recommends that parents directly advise their own children, while librarians maintain equitable access to inclusive collections.

2.5.2 Causality

The literature indicates that characteristics of the school, such as its campus size or roll number (Tudor, Moore and Byrne 2023; Garry 2015; Oltmann 2015), city/town or district size (Tudor, Moore and Byrne 2023; Tudor and Moore 2022), religious or secular ethos (Attwell 2020; McNicol 2005b), liberal or conservative locale (Dawkins 2018; Oltmann 2018; Garry 2015; Lukenbill and Lukenbill 2007), state or independent function (Count 2022; McNicol 2005b), library budget (Dawkins 2017; Snowball 2011; Lukenbill and Lukenbill 2007), and pupil age range (Dawkins 2017; Garry 2015; Rickman 2010) may correlate with censorship, although the directionality of these factors can vary between studies, and the data are not always statistically significant.

In every case, it can be argued that an expansive and inclusive library collection would decrease pupil disadvantage. As Schrader (2009) points out, "Young people are particularly vulnerable because they have distinctive needs but limited resources" – especially in rural areas and smaller urban centres where invisible and marginalised needs tend to be overlooked (p.107). When considering the removal of low-circulating materials, analysis of their physical condition is recommended; signs of use on the premises are a strong indicator of impact (Antell, Strothmann and Downey 2013).

Characteristics of the library practitioner have also been investigated; however, aside from relevant qualifications, knowledge or experience, personal traits would be unethical to select for during recruitment even if they were found to be statistically significant. Lukenbill and Lukenbill (2007) state that the two personal characteristics most predictive of librarian resistance to censorship are higher levels of education/certification and knowledge of legal precedent concerning library censorship. McNicol (2016b) found that school librarians involved in professional library associations were less likely to censor.

Rickman (2010) found the following practitioner-related factors to be predictive of censorship: age 60–69, lack of an education degree with library media specialisation, working in a secondary school, and having fifteen or fewer years of education experience. She recommends that school librarians should hold a suitable qualification and receive more professional development opportunities. Garry (2015) found that school library practitioners without relevant qualifications are

more likely to censor, and Dawkins (2018) found that early-career librarians are more likely to self-censor than those with longer tenure.

Conservative religious and political viewpoints in the community have been repeatedly cited as an anticipated barrier. Dawkins (2018) found that readiness to self-censor depends on the librarian's perception of their community's values and predisposition to challenge materials, as well as the principal and school administrators' positions on intellectual freedom. High school librarians studied by Becnel and Moeller (2020) cited mixed reactions from teaching staff, along with concerns raised by parents. Overall, self-censorship within schools is attributable to low professional agency and a preoccupation with parents' reactions (Mathews 2011).

Dawkins' (2018) finding that school librarians rate their own views as more tolerant than those held by administrative colleagues may point to an overly pessimistic view of community values. This concern should be channelled towards the establishment of a strong rationale for inclusive selection, and the creation of written policies with which to defend the collection. As Mires (2003) points out, "having decided that the inclusion of an item will add depth or scope to the school's collection, there must be a commitment to fight for its retention" (p.17). Adapting one's position when confronted with additional data is a beneficial more of the information professions, but if applied single-mindedly to the avoidance of backlash, stakeholders will rightfully question the added value presented by a Chartered Librarian.

Mosher (2010) states that "[f]ear can be transformed into empowerment and self-respect if a school librarian fulfils this job responsibility ethically" (n.p.). To that end, ongoing dialogue between the school practitioner and other stakeholders is imperative (Dawkins 2018; Jenkinson 2002). Professional associations, too, have their part to play: Johns (2007 in Mosher 2010) recommends that library practitioners forward each challenge received to the intellectual freedom department of their library association. To streamline this process, Brooks (2012) proposes that CILIP create a UK-based equivalent of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF).

2.5.3 Implications for the present study

The literature review, which was conducted iteratively throughout this project, suggests that research warrant is intensifying. It has demonstrated a need for fresh, local data on the component topics, and a desire among the international research community for access to comparable data about other locales. The anticipated publication of new policies and statistics from the CILIP (2022) intellectual freedom consultation makes for a natural endpoint to the study and an opportunity to begin anew.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by describing and evaluating the chosen research design and data collection methods. Similarly, the methods applied to the analysis of each type of data are described and evaluated. Next, measures taken to gain ethical approval and implement the actions agreed upon are discussed. Limitations of the study are highlighted, and their implications for further research considered.

3.2 Research design

It was decided that an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach would be most appropriate. Due to the nationwide scale of the study, digital methods were favoured from the outset.

3.2.1 Digital mixed methods

Collecting a combination of quantitative and qualitative data lays a stronger foundation for future research, allowing each method to compensate for the weaknesses of another, and enabling illustration of the findings with a mixture of statistics and quotes. The researcher had considerable prior experience of working at distance, including the use of the chosen methods for a previous piece of research (Lowry 2022). It was hoped that the relative anonymity of internet-mediated communication, in combination with the increased familiarity with technology brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, would encourage the participation of individuals who may otherwise be harder to reach due to barriers such as location, workload or privacy concerns.

3.2.2 Explanatory sequential design

Explanatory sequential research is conducted in two phases: an initial quantitative phase and a qualitative follow-up phase. The purpose of this design is to use the qualitative data to explain the quantitative data. “[T]he quantitative data and their subsequent analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem. The qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain those statistical results by exploring participants’ views in more depth” (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick 2006 p.5). Described by Creswell and Plano Clark as “probably the most straightforward of the mixed methods designs” (2011 p.83), it is suited to projects with limited resources. This design is appropriate because it affords the flexibility to focus the interview schedule on themes arising from the questionnaire responses.

In an explanatory sequential study, the quantitative phase is usually assigned priority because it occurs first in the sequence (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick 2006), so priority in the sequence was granted in this study. However, the data presented in the findings represent a 50:50 priority between the quantitative and qualitative methods; this is because the questionnaire included some follow-up free-text questions and the response rate for those questions was high.

The following table (Tab. 1), adapted from Creswell and Creswell's (2011) criteria for assessing the suitability of the design, establishes the researcher's preparedness to employ it:

Table 1. Prerequisites and groundwork for the explanatory sequential design, adapted from Creswell and Creswell (2018), pp.136-7.

Prerequisite	Groundwork
Familiarity with both quantitative and qualitative methods	Previous research experience; wide academic reading
Adequate time to conduct two-phase study	Two semesters; no major foreseeable commitments
Suitable background information to create quantitative instrument	Literature search (government, industry, and legal sources; relevant studies)
Ongoing access to target population for follow-up purposes	Industry contacts; sector-based networks

3.2.3 Theoretical assumptions

Although generally considered a pragmatic approach (Denscombe 2010; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2007), a mixed methods study need not adhere to a single philosophical perspective. It can be beneficial to shift, between stages, from the postpositive assumptions of quantitative research to the constructivist assumptions of qualitative research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). This affords the opportunity to appreciate more than one way of thinking about research within the constraints of a small-scale project.

3.2.4 Methodological precedent

Scholars who conducted quantitative studies have recommended qualitative follow-up work (Moodie and Calvert 2018; Brooks 2012; Rickman 2010), and those who identified geographical limitations suggested replication or expansion in a similar or contrasting setting (Becnel and Moeller 2020; Gavigan 2014). Where interviewer effects such as participant desire to please are recognised (Moeller and Becnel 2020; Coolican 2019), a partial remedy may be complementary research undertaken by preservice practitioners. Other factors, such as small sample size and self-selection bias can be more difficult to overcome. However, these limitations are less problematic when designing a study which has an exploratory role in relation to possible future research directions.

Precedent in the literature has had a significant impact on the methodological basis for the present study, both in terms of the mix of methods used, and the phrasing of questions directed at participants. Alongside the researcher's existing skills, the frequent inclusion of questionnaires and interviews in the literature established their suitability for the study. The choice was made to replicate the CBLDF (2018) checklist from Becnel and Moeller's (2020) high school study, while certain multiple-choice options were derived from recent studies such as SLJ (2022 cited in Yorio 2022) and Count (2022). Attention was paid to the limitations and challenges identified in research textbooks and scholarly literature; for example, the avoidance of loaded terms such as "censorship". It was hoped that common pitfalls for the novice researcher would thereby be avoided.

3.3 Data collection

In order to collect secondary data, an extensive literature search was conducted. The methods chosen for primary data collection were the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. The questionnaire data was primarily quantitative, but free-text responses were also solicited. Preliminary themes generated from this data served as a bridge between the phases, and early access to qualitative data furnished the study with a far greater variety of authentic perspectives than could realistically be gathered by interview.

3.3.1 Literature search

Literature was gathered on the research topic, its component topics, and adjacent topics which could help with contextualisation. In response to administrative delays encountered during the project, the literature search became multi-phase, with further details incorporated into the review. This resulted in the aggregation of many sources, which were analysed for authority and relevance before being compiled into an annotated bibliography for private reference.

The search strategy included the use of discipline-specific scholarly databases, general academic databases, and research-oriented search engines. Advanced search techniques such as truncation, Boolean logic and citation chaining were applied. When searching EBSCOhost, it was possible to specify multiple databases and filter results. The Internet Archive and Wayback Machine helped to locate older materials. For ease of manual annotation and mitigation of the non-static nature of websites, snapshots of key web pages were also taken.

3.3.2 Sampling

The minimum target sample size for the questionnaire was 36, calculated as 10% of the estimated 360 state secondary schools in Scotland (Scottish Government 2023). The target number of interviewees was between 4 and 6. Census sampling was used, whereby the entire eligible population is included in the possible sample (Bryman 2016); this should increase the likelihood of receiving a suitable number of responses. In the explanatory sequential design, it is typical for the qualitative sample to be much smaller than the quantitative sample, and where ethics permit, the follow-up sample is selected from the initial sample (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). To enable the anonymity of other questionnaire respondents, it was decided that members of the follow-up sample would verbally confirm their belonging to the same eligible population, rather than proving that they participated in the questionnaire.

3.3.3 Questionnaire

Due to the online questionnaire's effectiveness with large and dispersed populations, this method was deemed most appropriate for quantitative data collection (Sue and Ritter 2012). School librarians can be found almost everywhere from Shetland to the Scottish Borders, and it would not be realistic for a student researcher to collect this amount of data via postal questionnaire or structured interview. Jisc Online Surveys was chosen for its relative data security when compared to alternatives such as SurveyMonkey.

As recommended by Sue and Ritter (2012), the bulk of the questionnaire comprised of closed questions, while strategically placed open questions enabled participants to clarify inconsistencies and express themselves in more detail. Contingency questions were employed to enhance the feeling of personalisation and genuine interest where clarifying questions were asked. The use of a digital platform also presented the advantage of automatically skipping inapplicable questions (Sue and Ritter 2012).

RGU students, CILIPS employees, and the CILIPS School Library Group (SLG) Committee were invited to pilot the questionnaire. Pilot testers were encouraged to indicate any elements which they found difficult to answer, or perceived that members of the target population may struggle with.

Dissemination was achieved using industry contacts, so the researcher did not have access to the identities or contact details of respondents. CILIPS and the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) publicised the questionnaire via organisational social media accounts and School Librarian Basecamp. On the introduction page, potential participants were informed of this, and assured that these organisations would not have control over the research direction or access to the raw data. The questionnaire remained open for three weeks.

3.3.4 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were identified as a desirable method because they allow in-depth discussion of both planned and unplanned topics (Denscombe 2010). This enabled the investigation of a priori themes and encouraged the breakthrough of emergent themes. In-person interviews are much more widely described and recommended in the literature; however, recent advances in technology and changing requirements for computer competency in the post-2020 workplace mean that the advantage gap is closing. As recently reported by library practitioners based in Scotland, online meetings can in many cases be more accessible than in-person meetings (Lowry 2022). To this study's advantage, the researcher and interviewees shared a time zone.

Video interviews more closely recreate the conditions of an in-person interview, providing "greater spontaneity" (Chen and Hinton in O'Connor et al. 2011 p.6) and retaining many of the "visual,

non-verbal cues" missing from remote non-video interviews "which can help to contextualise the interviewee" (O'Connor et al. 2011). Therefore, video was presented as the primary method, and audio-only or text-based options as alternatives. Some complexity in setting up synchronous interviews was anticipated, particularly because of workplace policies on which video conferencing software may be used (Lowry 2022).

An interview schedule was issued to participants ahead of time, but each interview was allowed to flow naturally, enabling the interviewer to capture richer, more individual and spontaneous data. The interviews were limited to 30 minutes, with a pre-acknowledged allowance for up to 10 minutes of overrun. The researcher placed buffer time between interview slots, but otherwise accepted all bookings made with more than 12 hours of notice. Calendly was used for live visualisation of the researcher's availability, and the researcher's student email address was used for all correspondence. The interviews were undertaken and recorded in Microsoft Teams.

3.4 Data analysis

The chosen approach to quantitative data analysis was descriptive statistics, and for qualitative data, thematic analysis was used. Descriptive statistics are used to describe patterns, whereas inferential statistics "draw on probabilistic arguments to generalise findings from sample to populations of interest" (Rudestam 2015 p.45). Similar mixed methods studies often use a mixture of the two, but descriptive statistics were sufficient to meet the research objectives. Thematic analysis "is not dependent on a specific epistemology and can be used in a variety of ways on a variety of data types" (Coolican 2019 p.267). More complex approaches such as content analysis were not deemed necessary, heeding Coolican's warning to the novice researcher against giving "their approach a label beyond its borders" (p.279).

3.4.1 Literature review

The positioning of the study's quantitative strand before the qualitative strand meant that the study benefited from the compilation of a substantial literature review (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The initial review written for the proposal helped to establish a rationale for the research questions. Cyclical revisiting of the literature enabled the identification of key techniques, terminology, and occasionally whole questions which merited replication. Two main computer programs were used: Notability for annotation, sub-categorisation and term-searching, and Scrivener for planning, writing and editing.

3.4.2 Questionnaire data

During questionnaire design, plans were made for the responses to certain questions to be analysed together in order to draw out patterns and suggest which relationships merit further investigation in the UK. Alongside Microsoft Excel, the inbuilt functions of Jisc Online Surveys were used to analyse the quantitative responses. Inductive thematic analysis (described below) was used on the qualitative free-text responses. Key themes identified from this data were followed up in more detail in the interviews; they also provided a starting point for thematic analysis of the interview data. When presenting the findings, percentages were rounded to one decimal place for readability.

3.4.3 Interview data

The automatic transcript generated by Microsoft Teams was used as a transcription aid, but each line was verified and manually edited using the captured audio. Preliminary coding was largely facilitated by the Comments feature in Microsoft Word, with further detail achieved using the advanced highlighter tool in Scrivener.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.79). They consider thematic analysis to be “a foundational method for qualitative analysis” (p.78) which is “accessible to students and those not particularly familiar with qualitative research” (p.77). In order to demonstrate to the reader that the process was “thorough and exhaustive” (Coolican 2019 p.279), the exact method of data analysis will be detailed below (Tab. 2). This level of procedural detail will benefit “other researchers carrying out related projects in the future” (Braun and Clarke 2006 p.80), including student researchers (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).

Table 2. Phases of thematic analysis, adapted from Braun and Clarke 2006 p.87.

#	Phase	Description of the process
1	Familiarisation	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2	Generation of initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3	Search for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4	Review of themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic “map” of the analysis.
5	Definition and naming of themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analyst tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6	Production of report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

3.5 Design reappraisal

The researcher was able to uphold the ethical commitments set out in the SPER form and participant information sheets. As an exploration into the warrant for further research on youth library issues in Scotland, the study was relatively successful. However, the execution of the questionnaire was significantly more sophisticated than that of the interviews. General limitations of the explanatory sequential design became evident during primary research; despite favourable technological conditions and seemingly adequate resources, conflict arose between the narrow timescale of Master's research and the extended period needed for data collection and analysis (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick 2006).

3.5.1 Ethics

Willing participation is of vital importance to research (Kumar 2014); as such, potential respondents were informed that they were not obligated to participate in either phase of the study. A withdrawal period was allowed for interviewees. The information sheet and consent form were placed on the initial pages of the questionnaire. Informed consent was required, and an appropriate screen-out message was included. Demographic questions were limited to traits strictly relevant to the research; these included characteristics of the school and professionally relevant personal characteristics of the practitioner. Only the researcher had access to the raw questionnaire data, and details were redacted as necessary from all quotes derived from the qualitative responses.

Administrative data relating to interview sign-ups was requested via a separate form. A single invitation email was sent to each of the people who signed up, complete with Essential Information, Interview Schedule, and Consent Form. For the avoidance of perceived pressure, the individual who did not respond to the initial invitation was assumed to have withdrawn. Adequate time to absorb the information was provided before interviews were timetabled. Verbal consent for the recording of audio and video was reconfirmed at the start of each interview. Either both parties' cameras would be switched on, or both switched off, to avoid excessive imbalance of vulnerability (Martzoukou, K., personal communication by conversation. 2022).

The sign-up form required relevant contact details and also included a set of optional demographic questions for use during selection. However, due to the low number of sign-ups, all were selected. Each interviewee was presented with the same set of topics derived from the overall questionnaire results, and asked for any explanation(s) they could think of. This mode of indirect questioning had proven successful in a previous study; it was perceived to put participants at ease (Lowry 2022). Any identifying details disclosed in the interviews were redacted from the transcripts. Due to time

constraints, it was not possible to attempt participant validation; however, the relevant passages were shared with interviewees ahead of publication.

3.5.2 Achievements

The nature and quantity of the data were manageable, and the scope of the study was a good fit for Master's research. The diversity of the data gathered by combining methods provided a more complete understanding of the research problem than would either approach taken alone (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

The questionnaire dissemination was successful; including the two eligible pilot testers, it received 42 responses. Placing the completion prompts in industry network spaces satisfactorily resolved the tension between visibility of reminders and anonymity of participants which was recognised at the proposal stage (Tuten 1997 in Keusch 2013).

Only one interview sign-up was received during the first two weeks that the form was live. It was deemed likely that the sign-up link had been overlooked due to its placement on the questionnaire form, so it was decided that CILIPS and SLIC would be asked to promote the interviews directly by way of a dedicated post. Three more sign-ups arrived during the final week.

Interviewees and sector insiders volunteered explanations for low representation where it occurred, along with secondary perspectives on the issues faced by unrepresented groups of practitioners and suggestions on how to reach them for future research purposes.

3.5.3 Limitations

It was not possible to carry out Rowley's (2012) recommendation to conduct pilot interviews. Important insights were missed by not interviewing a larger and more diverse pool of practitioners, but the low turnout was somewhat mitigated by the high number of thorough qualitative follow-up responses to the questionnaire. Data collection should have begun much earlier, and unexpected administrative delays could have been resolved by switching to a convergent design which would allow better use to be made of the available time (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). The phrasing of some questions was not precise enough, especially when intended for direct comparison to other results. Providing some guidance on the scope of these questions would have improved confidence in the results. FOI requests to councils were not attempted because the literature search repeatedly missed a study (Brooks 2012) which demonstrated the applicability of this technique to Scottish school libraries. It is worth noting that the study has limited generalisability, although generalisability is not the aim of an exploratory study which intends to scope the topic and provide directions for further research. The questionnaire received low or nil responses from practitioners based in independent schools and special schools, as well as unqualified practitioners and those who have never been members of professional associations. Self-selection bias is also probable, especially among interviewees who are likely to be comfortable discussing the research topic.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the findings from the survey questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. Discussing the results together under their corresponding thematic headings makes fuller contextualisation of the data compatible with conciseness of reporting. It should be noted that survey respondents were allowed to skip individual questions. Some questions were designed to enable each person to provide multiple answers, and others were filtered to participants who gave a particular response to the parent question. Therefore, not all statistics are directly reflective of the full sample of 42.

4.2 School and practitioner demographics

State-funded schools accounted for 41 (97.6%) responses, meaning that any generalisations drawn could only apply to the state sector. Schools of a religious character accounted for five (12.2%) responses. This is a suitable representation of the population because 85% of state-funded schools in Scotland are non-denominational (Scottish Government 2022). None of the schools were designated as special schools. Responses covered 23 of the 32 Scottish Local Authorities, and the nine unrepresented were mainly clustered on the West Coast, as visualised on the map (Fig. 1). The data include both densely and sparsely populated areas, covering several of Scotland's largest and smallest secondary schools.

Reasons suggested for the limited sample were the impact of strikes and redundancies, as well as the occasioning work-related pressure (sector insider, personal communication by email. 21 Feb 2023). As established by one interviewee, the number of Scottish state secondary schools which have dedicated libraries and qualified school librarians may be significantly lower than the number of state secondary schools in Scotland. If the number of state schools with secondary provision is taken to be ~360 (Scottish Government 2023), the 41 respondents representing state schools account for over 10% of the possible population.

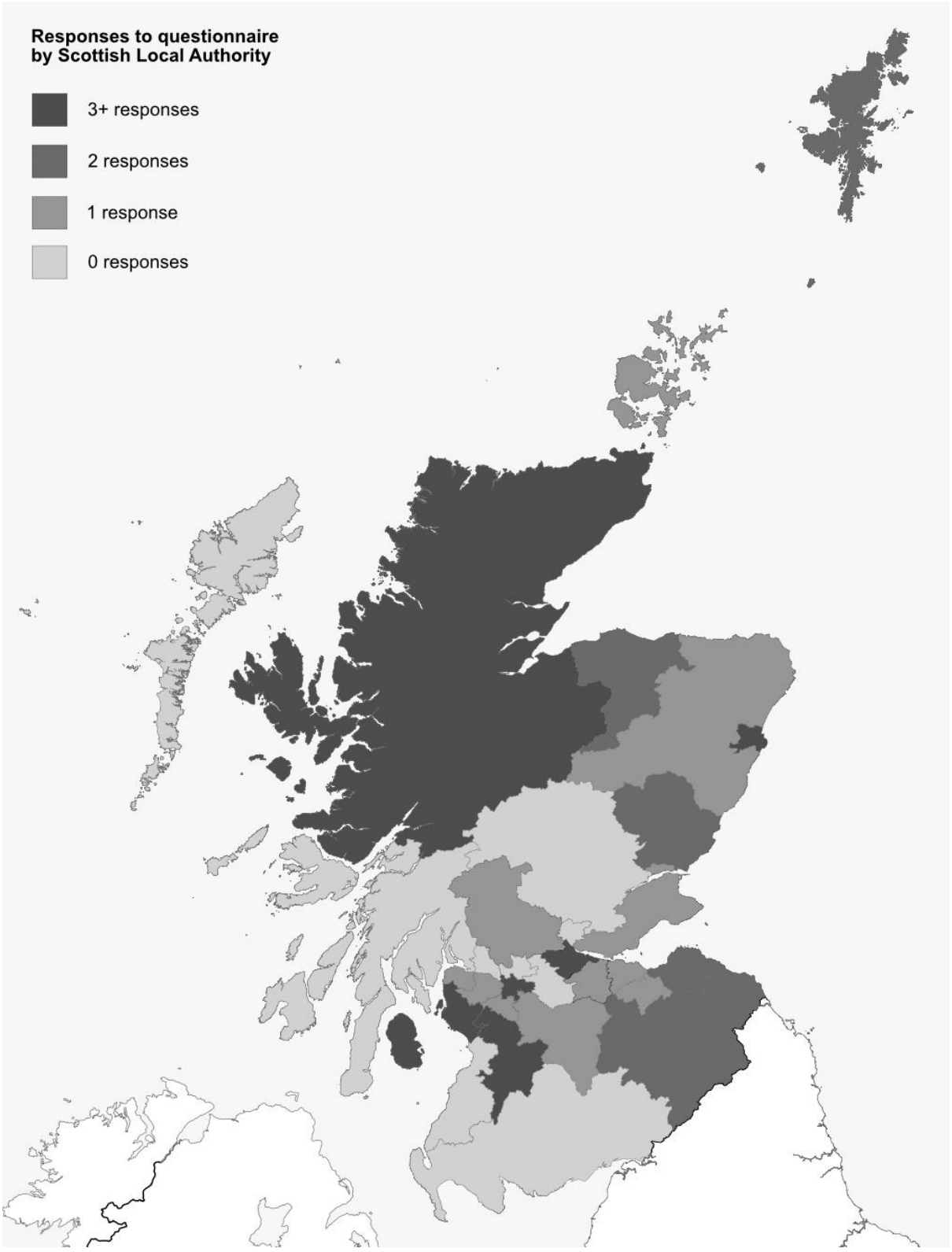

Figure 1. Questionnaire responses by Scottish Local Authority, adapted from Nilfanion and Ordnance Survey 2011 (Wikimedia Commons).

Considering the small sample size, the three interviewees differed sufficiently in terms of age, gender and locale (Tab. 3), but they all identified as white, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled and non-religious. This is in line with CILIPS' membership statistics (2021). In correspondence with the questionnaire responses, none of the interviewees worked in an independent school, a special school, or a school with religious character.

Table 3. Interviewee demographics.

Interviewee #	Gender	Locale	Age group
1	Woman	Urban	35-44
2	Man	Rural	25-34
3	Woman	Suburban	45-54

Unsurprisingly, given the dissemination technique, the findings of this study will be biased towards the experiences of qualified information professionals who engage with their library association to some extent. Of the questionnaire respondents, 38 (90.5%) held a degree in Library and Information Studies or similar, with 25 (59.5%) having completed a postgraduate qualification and 13 (31.0%) holding an undergraduate qualification. Additionally, 23 (54.8%) had achieved CILIP Chartership, and 37 (90.2%) were currently or previously members of a library association.

Perhaps more surprising was the low number of respondents who were relatively new to the role: 25 (59.5%) respondents had worked in school libraries for more than 10 years; within this group, 17 (68.0%) had relevant experience spanning 20 or more years. The interview sample skewed younger than that of the questionnaire, which may reflect participants' level of comfort with online video-calling platforms. One interviewee was able to suggest reasons for the lower-than-expected representation of certain characteristics (see 4.8).

4.3 Attitudes towards censorship

Recurring themes include a strong belief in the individual's freedom to choose, the idea that young people find materials labelled as controversial exciting, confidence that young people "self-filter" library material effectively, and the cautiously hopeful belief that censorship "doesn't happen" in the UK. However, there were also some descriptions of behaviours which could be interpreted as self-censorship, and some justifications thereof put forth.

4.3.1 "I thought of the UNCRC…"

When presented with an extract (Article 13) from the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (1989), the majority of respondents expressed their support without reservation (Tab. 4). Much later, the questionnaire asked practitioners how they overcame personal hesitancy in the role. Exemplifying this attitude came the statement, "I thought of the UNCRC and how the children have the right to choose what they read".

Table 4. Percentage of respondents in agreement with Article 13 (UN 1989).

Extent of agreement	Percentage of respondents
Yes	82.5% (33)
Partially	15.0% (6)
Unsure	2.5% (1)
No	0.0% (0)

Conversely, one respondent wished for Article 13 to expressly state that children do not have a right to access violent, abusive or pornographic content, and another wanted it to lay out explicit differences in the intellectual freedom rights of older and younger children. It should be noted that Article 13 already enables such restrictions on access as provided by national law. For example, the UK Government has full authority to make age ratings for books statutory, as is the case in New Zealand.

Respondents cited children's individual circumstances and lagging critical thinking skills as justifications for their belief that an absolute right to intellectual freedom should not apply to minors. Reverse causation has also been argued: lack of a manual override for internet filters serves as a barrier to information literacy teaching; therefore, ill-equipment of young people to distinguish appropriate and reliable sources is one of the harms of overzealous internet filtering (McNicol 2006).

CILIP's stance is anti-filtering (2017), with recognition that "some filtering of children's terminals is regarded as a necessary part of safeguarding" (p.10). Indeed, McNicol (2016b) found that fewer

than 10% of UK school librarians disagree with the use of internet filtering. The filter, as one respondent pointed out, is typically applied indiscriminately at the Local Authority level. It does not appear that school library practitioners have been consulted about legitimate use cases for a manual override.

4.3.2 "The kids self-filter it anyway…"

The viewpoint that librarians have a responsibility to facilitate reading which challenges the young person to think critically was common among participants with strong support for intellectual freedom. An interviewee explained:

> I do think children know what they're responsible enough to read. They know that, because they get that sort of, like, dangerous thrill when it's not. … I want them just on or just below that sort of cutting edge of things they ought to be reading, because those are typically going to be the materials best for them to develop reading.

The example provided was of an 11-year-old with top-percentile reading comprehension who was deemed mature enough to read a young adult book with complex anti-racist themes. This interviewee clarified that their professional judgement was invoked because of the need to override restrictions built into the library management software. They stated that micromanaging children's access to reading material is unnecessary:

> The kids self-filter it anyway. … You know, you can recommend a bunch of books to kids and they'll pick what they want to read, and they'll self-monitor. And if they don't like it, they're gonna stop reading it.

This interviewee's belief that children self-filter applies to pupils of all abilities, and their unease about "age-appropriateness" primarily concerns pupils who exclusively read below their ability level. Some practitioners feel that these pupils require encouragement to broaden their palate (Moeller and Becnel 2022), and this interviewee perceives that children who are uninquisitive or unaccustomed to reading are especially vulnerable.

Other practitioners provided examples of pupils whom they perceived as not being ready for the responsibility of self-filtering. While many young people may intuit that they need not finish a book which makes them uncomfortable, some require frequent reminders. When selecting books to borrow, certain pupils are believed to benefit from gentle guidance and personalised recommendations. The explanation provided is usually that these pupils have additional needs.

4.3.3 "It just makes it seem more exciting than it is…"

Among the participants in this study, there is evidence of reflection upon the practitioner's power to supply or deny oxygen to the debate around a controversial book. A questionnaire respondent explained, "We've found that once they know that the adult collections aren't forbidden fruit, pupils will happily select from the YA and JF stock anyway!" and one interviewee noted that "Quite often … if you're making a really big deal of it, it just makes it seem more exciting than it is."

This exemplifies Kidd's (2008) belief about how the literary canon is made: prizing manipulates perceptions of value, and events such as Banned Books Week make an active contribution to the desirability of texts. For rebellious or demand-avoidant pupils, awareness of controversial books can undoubtedly ignite an interest in reading. From the perspective that developing literacy is desirable at all costs – an ideological position perhaps more germane to English teaching than librarianship – this can straightforwardly be argued as a net positive.

Despite their benevolent justifications, school library practitioners do make use of age rating systems and verbal attempts to influence pupils' reading habits. This is library censorship (ALA 2019), but it merits contextualisation as a survival strategy borne out of profound structural limitations. Many schools are seemingly incapable of prioritising the information literacy and pastoral support which would complement free access to information. Settings such as these enable a harm-reductionist construction of censorship to persist.

4.3.4 "You don't want to court that controversy…"

School library practitioners envision their role as that of the thoughtful selector, but they are sharply aware of the conditions under which someone who shares their views might not uphold certain professional principles. This reveals a rational preoccupation within the sector.

In defence of the librarian as selector, one interviewee said:

> You're making judgement calls about it before it even reaches the shelf. And I think that, I mean, that's a big benefit of the school librarian. … Their thing is to kind of look at this stuff and make a judgement call about it – using various resources. … There is no doubt that school librarians are making choices about what we buy and what we add to the school library.

However, that was swiftly followed by: "If your school's particularly sensitive to trans issues, you might well choose not to buy those books because you don't want to court that controversy." Outspoken about the added value of providing an LGBTQ+ club and curating a strong collection of LGBTQ+ resources, this interviewee was eager to explore the reasons that someone in a less supportive environment might choose not to do so. Here, indirect questions readily elicited the

desired insight because the justification being entertained was one step removed from the interviewee's own circumstances.

4.4 Selection decisions

The number of respondents who had a written collection development policy was higher than expected based on the findings of previous studies. Count (2022) found that 36.4% of UK school librarians either had or were currently developing an official materials policy, and Brooks (2012) found that only 10% of Local Authorities could provide a stock selection policy in response to an FOI request. Materials restrictions, internet filtering, and parental access to borrowing history have all been identified by the ALA as imperfect practice (2020; 2019; 2017). As discussed earlier (see 4.3.1), most schools in Scotland have internet filtering in place, but the nature of materials restrictions and the circumstances under which borrowing history would be shared do vary.

4.4.1 Policies

A written collection development policy was present in 20 (48.8%) schools, but only six (30.0%) of those policies explicitly mentioned graphic novels. Nonetheless, in 36 (85.7%) cases, the selection process for graphic novels was functionally the same as for conventional books. Additional steps, where noted, also applied to picture books. In answer to a compound question, 30 (76.9%) respondents replied with certainty that their school library did not have a written reconsideration policy which parents could view. One interviewee had a written reconsideration policy for personal reference and was considering publishing it for other stakeholders to view.

Some respondents who did not have a written reconsideration policy did however have a standard process which they were confident describing. For example: “Receive the challenge. Discuss with my Line Manager. Formulate a response. Explanation accepted - no further action. Challenge pursued - escalate to senior management but with strong support for our school policy of no-ban.” By comparison, SLJ (2022 cited in Yorio 2022) found that 79% of surveyed US school librarians had a formal book challenge procedure.

When asked about materials restrictions, 28 (66.7%) respondents stated that some items are restricted from use by certain pupils. Mature content was the most frequently cited reason for items being assigned restricted status. Typically, the restriction would be age-related, but some reference materials might be held behind the desk for rapid access, or because they are considered appropriate only in the context of a particular Advanced Higher course. Publisher’s age rating, which is often provided for manga, sometimes plays a role in the decision to restrict.

However, practitioners with age-restricted sections often allow younger pupils to borrow those materials with written parental permission. One interviewee stated that although they ideologically align with unrestricted access, they would safeguard themselves against complaints by requiring parental permission “if a twelve-year-old wanted to read a Stephen King”. As Curry (2001) contends,

the use of permission slips can engage parents with their children's reading. This is a common compromise when the alternative is complete removal of the material.

On the other hand, parental consent requirements have the potential to stigmatise the book and make pupils hesitant to request it, whether the content is about wizards or sexual health (Hill 2010). In the United States, there is legal precedent against it (Counts v. Cedarville School District in Scales 2010). Instead of designating materials a special status whereby parental permission is required, it is recommended that parents communicate with their own children about expectations around reading material (ALA 2019) and take an active interest in materials their child borrows by engaging directly with them (URILIS 2018).

In response to a question about parental access to borrowing records, 18 (45.0%) participants knew of at least one circumstance under which their system could allow this to occur. Borrowing history might become accessible when a child shares their login details with a parent, when a parent's help searching for an overdue book is needed, or only when a parent requests access directly from a library practitioner. Several respondents expressed concern about the OPAC used by their partner public library, which automatically assigns the adult designated "head of household" permission to view the borrowing data of service users under 16. CILIP should give this issue closer attention; in the wake of its consultation on privacy (2017), no school-specific guidelines have been produced by either CILIP or the SLA (Codling and Willett 2021). During this period, the ALA (2020) has been more proactive about protecting pupil privacy.

4.4.2 Priorities

Non-selection priorities among school library practitioners in Scotland are similar to those of practitioners in the United States. In Scotland, the factor with by far the most influence upon decision-making was "inappropriate content", but reviews and media coverage were also commonly considered, along with the publisher's suggested age range (Tab. 5). In comparison, SLJ (2022 cited in Yorio 2022) found that the three most influential factors were publisher's suggested age range, inappropriate content, and reviews.

Table 5. School library practitioners' non-selection priorities in Scotland and the USA.

	Scotland (Lowry 2023)	USA (SLJ 2022)
Inappropriate content	81.0% (34)	55%
Reviews/media coverage	40.5% (17)	53%
Publisher's suggested age range	31.0% (13)	56%

Possible reaction from parents/guardians	26.2% (11)	33%
School/council guidelines	16.7% (7)	23%
Possible professional consequences	9.5% (4)	14%
Possible reaction from pupils	9.5% (4)	–
Challenged at another library	7.1% (3)	–
Possible reaction from administrators	4.8% (2)	22%
Personal views	4.8% (2)	–
Possible reaction from community	2.4% (1)	22%
Possible reaction from colleagues	0.0% (0)	–

The SLJ survey (2022 cited in Yorio 2022) found that practitioners in urban schools were especially unlikely to be concerned about professional consequences or community values. Indeed, none of the respondents based in major Scottish cities cited either of those concerns. Studies in the United States have assigned significantly more weight to practitioners' perceptions of community values and administrator discomfort than the statistics for Scotland would suggest (Dawkins 2018; Garry 2015). Nonetheless, an interviewee helpfully explained their thought process when weighing community and school values against "personal whim":

> I need to make sure I can defend it, but I'm relatively confident the school would back me on it, I think, as long as I wasn't bringing the school into disrepute. You know, that's the thing about it. The school will always side with the school. … If there's any suggestion that the school or council were going into disrepute, they would run away from me A MILE.

Responses to the question about ever having felt hesitant to stock a title requested by a pupil were split 50:50 between yes and no, but when asked about books recommended by industry award or review, 30 (73.2%) had never felt hesitant. Asked how often they take controversial subject matter into account when making purchasing decisions, 15 (35.7%) respondents in Scotland said that they often or always consider it (Tab. 6). Among respondents in the US, it was 32% (SLJ 2022 cited in Yorio 2022). Apart from practitioners in Scotland being twice as likely to state that controversiality was "always" a factor, the findings were similar overall.

Table 6. Comparison of the significance of controversial subject matter to selectors in Scotland and the USA.

	Scotland (Lowry 2023)	USA (SLJ 2022)
Always	14.3% (6)	7%
Often	21.4% (9)	25%
Sometimes	47.6% (20)	50%
Rarely	14.3% (6)	15%
Never	2.4% (1)	3%

However, as one questionnaire respondent helpfully pointed out, "[b]eing hesitant doesn't equate to deciding not to buy or do something – it's just a 'stop and think' moment". Questions about "feeling hesitant" or "taking into account" do not collect data about practical outcomes; they ask about subjective internal processes which may not necessarily be externalised. It is, of course, plausible for practitioners in Scottish schools to identify as more introspective about their decisions while being just as likely to go ahead with these purchases. This data indicates the existence of preoccupations which have the potential to contribute to self-censorship when magnified by other factors.

4.5 Graphic novels in context

A recurring theme within collection management was the benefit of materials – often, but not always, graphic novels – which encourage reading and aid in the development of literacy. In terms of barriers experienced, a limited budget was by far the most common explanation for non-selection.

4.5.1 Benefits

Across all formats, the average number of items in secondary school library collections was 8230. 24 (66%) respondents stated that their secondary school library collection contained between 6,001 and 12,000 items, and seven (19.4%) collections contained between 3,001 and 6000 items. The average number of graphic novels (inclusive of manga and comic books) was 246, putting graphic novels at ~3% of the collection. The number can be as low as 30 in tiny schools, or as high as 565 where the school and public library have a shared catalogue.

While circulation statistics were not collected, there was support for Gavigan's (2014) finding that the popularity of graphic novels is disproportionate to their share of the collection. Of the respondents, 20 (47.6%) perceived that the graphic novels in their collection were more popular than the conventional books, and an equal number perceived no difference. Most respondents felt that the graphic novels in their collection served more than one purpose. Supporting reading for pleasure was a unanimous perception, selected by all 42 respondents. The perception of graphic novels as

supporting developing readers or language learners was also strong; this option was selected by 37 (88.1%) respondents. Supporting visual or media literacy was acknowledged by 30 (71.4%) respondents, and supporting curriculum learning was the least common response at 23 (54.8%).

According to one interviewee, fiction receives higher selection priority than non-fiction across all formats. Within non-fiction, curriculum relevance is not a priority because hobby-related books are in higher demand. The data show no relationship between the belief that graphic novels support curriculum learning and providing access to Maus, a graphic memoir understood to enrich pupils' learning about the Holocaust (Markulike 2022; Gavigan 2014; Mathews 2011; Chun 2009; Downey 2009). Perhaps school library practitioners overlook their personal lack of confidence in the format as an educational tool and buy it because of the other merits outlined above. Another plausible explanation is that Holocaust education is either not a Curriculum for Excellence topic, or not universally perceived as one (Savva and North 2022; Stewart Henderson 2022).

4.5.2 Barriers

Limited budget is by far the most common barrier to selection; it amplifies the issues of theft and damage which interact acutely with school administrators' aversion to library fines. Lack of time available to thoroughly check content is perceived as a significant barrier to the acquisition of graphic novels. Problems inherent to series works are particularly obstructive to the maintenance of healthy manga collections. Due to the high cost and short reading time per item, it can be more difficult to justify buying manga. When stolen or damaged, the cost to replace manga is more problematic than with conventional book series or standalone graphic novels. Manga sits between conventional book series and standalone graphic novels on the Venn diagram (Fig. 2), and as one interviewee put it, "The benefit per pound may be lower."

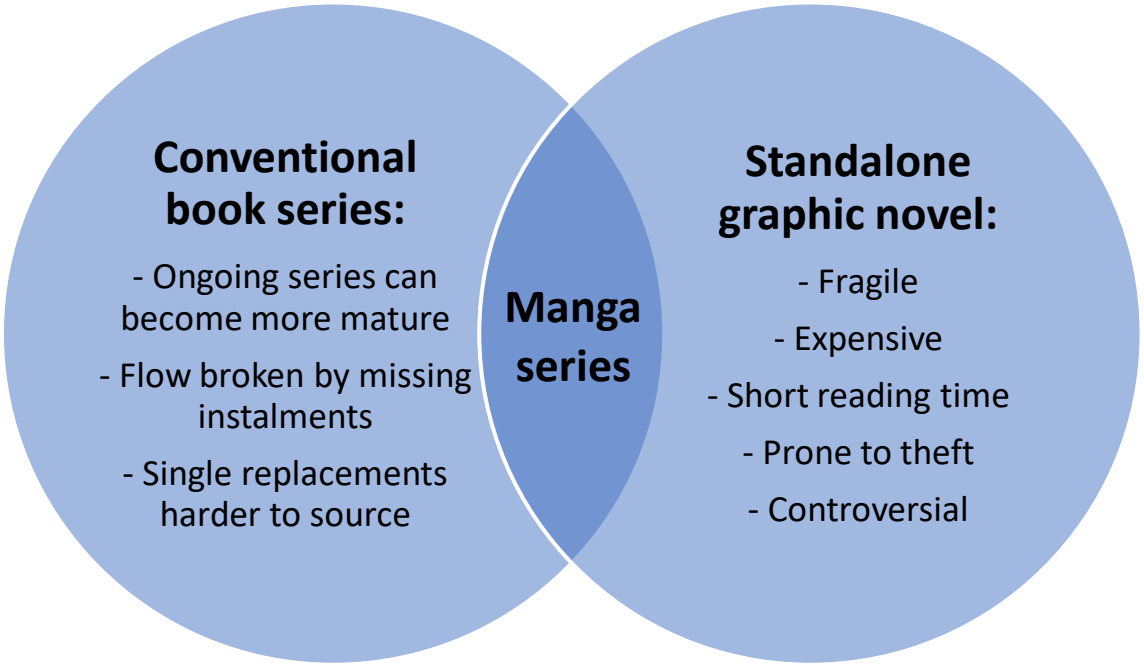

Figure 2. Barriers to the collection of manga series noted by school library practitioners (author's own).

Some practitioners gave availability for inter-library loan as a justification for not acquiring certain titles. This is an imperfect solution because access is reliant upon pupils' confidence in making requests, but the compromise makes sense for low-demand titles when allocating a limited budget.

4.5.3 Checklist exercise

To investigate the extent of school library collections, the longlist of controversial graphic novels (Becnel and Moeller 2020; CBLDF 2018) was used for the checklist in the questionnaire. For comparison, a shortlist will be the main basis of discussion. The table below (Tab. 7) lists books indicated by Becnel and Moeller as "appropriate for young adult or older teen readers" according to professional review, and "recognised for high literary quality and/or mass appeal" by professional award or industry review (2020 p.127):

Table 7. School library collections which include challenged and banned graphic novels in Scotland, UK and North Carolina, USA.

Graphic Novel Title	Scotland (Lowry 2023)	North Carolina (Becnel & Moeller 2020)

The Graveyard Book	81.0% (34)	33.3%
Drama	70.0% (28)	29.6%
Persepolis	64.1% (25)	74.1%
Dragon Ball	46.2% (18)	51.9%
Watchmen	35.5% (14)	33.3%
Sandman	28.2% (11)	18.5%
This One Summer	20.5% (8)	55.6%
Bone	16.7% (6)	63.0%
Fun Home	15.4% (6)	0.0%
Pride of Baghdad	7.9% (3)	18.5%
Y The Last Man	5.3% (2)	7.4%
Blankets	2.7% (1)	11.1%
Barefoot Gen	2.6% (1)	7.4%
Stuck in the Middle	0.0% (0)	11.1%
Sidescrollers	0.0% (0)	3.7%
The Color of Earth	0.0% (0)	0.0%

The second most commonly stocked graphic novel among questionnaire respondents in Scotland was Maus at 32 (80%). This title features on the extended list but is not included in the shortlist (Becnel and Moeller 2020). The Scottish study took place a full year after the media furore over the suitability of Maus for middle school pupils, so it is possible that some libraries had in the meantime prioritised acquiring it. The first, third and fourth most common titles were The Graveyard Book, Drama, and Persepolis; more than 50% of Scottish school libraries surveyed had these books in their collections. Three titles from the shortlist – The Color of Earth, SideScrollers, and Stuck in the Middle – did not appear in any of the Scottish secondary school library collections. The most consistent result between Scotland and North Carolina was that none of the library collections included The Color of Earth, which may be explained by it being the first title in a trilogy.

The biggest disparities between Scotland and North Carolina were the number of collections which included The Graveyard Book (47.7%), Bone (46.3%), and Drama (40.4%). The controversy over Raina Telgemeier's Drama makes it a particularly good case study. Drama centres upon characters in seventh grade (aged 12–13), and it is rated by its publisher as suitable for readers aged 10+. However, perceived lack of interest among high schoolers does not appear to be the primary reason for Drama being selected less often in North Carolina; Moeller and Becnel found that elementary and middle school librarians expressed reservations about its positive acknowledgement of gay adolescents

(2022; 2020). Practitioners in Scotland, on the other hand, showed high enthusiasm for stocking material with socially progressive themes – especially LGBTQ+ titles.

4.6 Materials challenges

Only seven (16.3%) respondents had experienced a formal challenge, but 15 (35.7%) had experienced an informal challenge. The majority of challenges targeted books in the fiction collection.

4.6.1 Format

In Scottish secondary school libraries, the conventional book is the most challenged format. Fiction attracted 15 (68.2%) of the challenges received, non-fiction seven (31.8%), and graphic novels six (27.3%). According to Schrader (1996), those titles which are present in most libraries are statistically more likely to be challenged. On average, graphic novels make up ~3% of Scottish school library collections, so it may be the case that conventional books are challenged at a higher rate because they constitute the bulk of the collection. An alternative explanation is that conventional books are challenged more because they are well-established. Cornog and Byrne (2009) suggest that parents who hold the view that comic books are inherently childish or trivial may either be unwilling to engage with a graphic novel, or simply not think to check its content.

4.6.2 Source

The most common source of materials challenges to Scottish secondary collections (Tab. 8) was parent or guardian with 17 challenges (77.3%), distantly followed by teacher with seven (31.8%). This matches the findings of Roberts (1996), Jenkinson (2002), Adams (2009) and Count (2022); they all found that more than half of challenges come from parents, with adults who work within the school accounting for much of the remainder. Only 11 (26.2%) respondents took the possible reaction of parents into account when making purchasing decisions, and none expressed concern about how colleagues would react. However, it is possible that respondents associated the latter question with peers in the library profession rather than non-library staff at their school. Practitioners' assessment of the likelihood of receiving a challenge from a pupil was highly accurate; four (9.5%) respondents worried about reactions from pupils, and two (9.1%) of the challenges reported had been from a pupil. The likelihood of receiving a challenge from an administrator was, however, underestimated; two respondents (4.8%) expressed concern about this, whereas three of the challenges received (13.6%) had been from an administrator.

Table 8. Sources of materials challenges in Scotland and the wider UK.

Source	Scotland (Lowry 2023)	United Kingdom (Count 2022)
Parent or guardian	77.3% (17)	53.3%
Teacher	31.8% (7)	53.3%
Administration / senior staff member	13.6% (3)	5.6%
Pupil	9.1% (2)	14.0%
Other (bookseller recall)	4.5% (1)	–
Teaching assistant or support staff	0.0% (0)	5.6%
Parent-teacher association	0.0% (0)	1.9%
Board of governors	0.0% (0)	0.9%
Education authority	0.0% (0)	0.9%
Political or religious group	0.0% (0)	N/A

4.6.3 Reason

The most common justification provided for a challenge was age-inappropriateness in general, which was associated with 11 (50.0%) challenges (Tab. 9). Variations of this term have been used by the ALA, as well as other researchers (Count 2022; SLJ 2022 cited in Yorio 2022; Taylor and McMenemy 2012); even the SLA's primary stock selection guidance invokes the concept of "inappropriate behaviour" when suggesting types of material to avoid stocking (2020 n.p.). Although undoubtedly the full extent of some complainants' explanations, the definition is highly subjective (see 4.5.3). It is unhelpful to researchers because of its overly broad and non-descriptive nature (Brooks 2012).

The most common sufficiently descriptive justification on the list was nudity or sex, followed by religious viewpoint and objectionable language. SLJ (2022 cited in Yorio 2022) also found that sexual content was the most influential subject matter when deciding not to purchase a book, with 66% of respondents stating that they had avoided it. Nudity or sex accounted for seven (31.8%) of the 35 formal or informal challenges reported by school librarians in Scotland. However, Count (2022) found that school library practitioners in the UK overestimated their likelihood of receiving a challenge for almost every category of content.

None of the questionnaire respondents selected prejudicial content as the reason for a challenge. However, one interviewee had refused to shelve some old, donated children's books which would fall

foul of UK hate speech laws. The same interviewee had once pulled a book from the collection after a pupil pointed out that it contained a racial slur. A questionnaire respondent also noted their decision not to acquire a particular book because of its pervasively transphobic content.

Table 9. Complainants' objections by content type in Scotland and the wider UK.

Reason stated	Scotland (Lowry 2023)	United Kingdom (Count 2022)
Age-inappropriateness in general	50.0% (11)	24%
Nudity/sex	31.8% (7)	34%
Religious viewpoint	22.7% (5)	5%
LGBTQIA+ content	18.2% (4)	15%
Profanity / vulgar language	18.2% (4)	22%
Witchcraft / supernatural	13.6% (3)	10%
Author's behaviour or beliefs	9.1% (2)	2%
Political viewpoint	9.1% (2)	3%
Violence	4.5% (1)	11%
Factual inaccuracy	0.0% (0)	N/A
Drug/alcohol use	0.0% (0)	1%
Self-harm / suicide	0.0% (0)	N/A
Prejudicial content: Age, ability, body type	0.0% (0)	N/A
Prejudicial content: Class, culture, race	0.0% (0)	N/A
Prejudicial content: Gender, sex, sexual orientation	0.0% (0)	N/A
Characters modelling inappropriate behaviour	N/A	8%

4.6.4 Response

Responses to materials challenges range from ignoring the complaint entirely to removing the book from stock. Justifications provided for removal include coincidentally poor physical condition, agreement that it is not age-appropriate, or being asked to remove the book by school management. Some practitioners temporarily remove the book from the shelf while it is under review. If found

unsuitable, the book may be kept in a closed collection so that it remains available if requested in the future.

The interviewee who had received a donation box of racist books stated that the items were retained in the office for potential repurposing in anti-racist education. The pupil's complaint was resolved by ordering a newer edition of the book – an Agatha Christie novel – because the slur was isolated and virtually irrelevant to the plot. When answering the quantitative questions, most respondents did not rank their own opinion as a factor in non-selection, and none identified external challenges regarding prejudicial content. However, it is clear from the qualitative data that informal – and especially internal – complaints do occur on this basis. Moreover, practitioners' knowledge of anti-hate legislation and social justice principles can play a part in their decision-making.

In cases where a book is retained, it is sometimes moved to a different section of the library, or an effort is made not to loan books of this nature to that pupil in the future. Typically, however, the complaint is resolved by explaining the collection development policy to the complainant. In one case, the school administrator in charge of complaints challenged the complainant on their views in return. Some practitioners stated that their approach to resolving a book challenge depends on whether the complainant has read the book in full, and especially whether the complainant has a child who attends that school.

The diversity of responses to book challenges described by practitioners in Scotland suggests that clear communication of best practice from CILIP and the SLA would be beneficial. Several practitioners expressed the perception that book challenges are uncommon in the UK, so there is a likelihood that they will be caught unprepared in the near future.

4.7 Professional guidance

Only eight (20.0%) respondents felt that they had received adequate training to respond to materials challenges, but 27 (67.5%) were aware of individuals or groups who would provide practical support. Advice, discussion, and dealing with the complainant directly were supportive actions which respondents perceived to be available from various sources.

The few who had received relevant training recalled that it had been offered by CILIP, CILIP Special Interest Groups, SLIC, Scottish Book Trust, their Local Authority, or as part of their CILIP-accredited postgraduate degree. Those who were "self-taught" relied largely upon personal experience, independent reading, and peer discussion. Direct managers were by far the most frequently mentioned source of support within the school. Named sources of support at the national level were CILIPS, SLA, SLIC, Scottish Book Trust, Educational Institute of Scotland, and online professional networks.

Of the external sources of support cited, CILIPS was the most mentioned, but not by a large margin. One interviewee noted that the SLA offers member-exclusive resources which non-members are unlikely to be aware of. A recurring suggestion was that the professional associations should provide guidance from a UK perspective to help with writing stock selection and reconsideration policies. Specific CPD courses would be valuable to practitioners who wish to better prepare themselves, but policy-writing resources should allow individual schools and councils to adapt these to their budget and ethos.

In comparison to teachers, lone working and low visibility within the school were identified as disadvantages. It has been argued that school library practitioners should be treated as education specialists in their own right; alongside their classroom-teaching colleagues, they should be provided with opportunities to both receive and deliver in-service training (Shaper 2014; Williams, Wavell and Morrison 2013). The inclusion of school library practitioners at meetings would increase their visibility and attract the support of workplace colleagues.

4.8 Other observations

Questionnaire respondents and interviewees raised a number of additional issues which merit further investigation, but lack of budget was by far the most common. As Tudor, Moore and Byrne (2023) point out, this is a huge factor in the extent of the collection. Receiving a budget of zero for a secondary school collection was not unheard of among respondents in this study. Differences between primary and secondary schools were also highlighted: dedicated library provision appears to be less common in the primary phase, and budgets are even tighter. There are overlapping limitations in terms of access to technology, intellectual freedom, and the ability to timetable information literacy teaching.

Participants who have worked in the sector for a long time noted that the nature of the job has changed. On one hand, social attitudes appear to have become more accepting, which makes the development of a broad collection somewhat easier. However, many school librarians have not been replaced upon retirement, and where qualified librarians are still sought, salaries have not kept pace with the cost of living. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pupil behaviour and learning progress means that more pupils in the current cohort struggle to access the curriculum. One interviewee stated, “I’m having to lower the level of things I’m trying to talk to them about … It’s right above their heads because they’re not understanding it. Where just a few years ago, it wasn’t.”

In terms of training preferences, interviewees corroborated the findings of Lowry (2022): due to issues of time, money and location, online platforms are the most practical way to interact with

Scottish library and information professionals. However, the methodology of the current study should be refined in order to reach practitioners working in independent and special schools, as well as those with non-traditional qualifications, fewer years of experience, or limited involvement with professional associations. Despite efforts to make the call to action inclusive, these sections of the eligible population are largely unrepresented in this study.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter begins by summarising the research findings. Following this, topics which would benefit from further research are considered, and suitable approaches to data collection suggested. Next, it reflects upon how the research findings have met the aim and objectives of the study. Finally, recommendations drawn from the literature and primary data are put forth.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings of this research offer much-needed insight into the barriers to upholding intellectual freedom in Scottish secondary school libraries. This study has found that secondary school library practitioners value and promote potentially controversial materials such as graphic novels. Further, it has demonstrated that mutual awareness of polarised public perceptions of the format positions it as an effective gateway to investigating youth intellectual freedom and the pressure to self-censor. The participants in this research have engaged generously in the discussion of youth-inclusive intellectual freedom at a time when budget cuts, de-professionalisation and COVID-19 recovery are topics of equal or greater concern within the sector. This speaks highly of their ethical principles as educators and as information custodians.

5.3 Directions for further study

Further research could explore how school library practitioners' perceived knowledge of legal precedent impacts their stock decisions. There is significant scope for comparison studies involving teachers, public librarians, or practitioners based in primary, independent or special school libraries. Via FOI request, Local Authorities could be asked to provide policies currently used in schools, or information which would indicate the degree of job loss in this sector. This study would also benefit from replication in Wales and Northern Ireland.

5.4 Aim and objectives revisited

This study aimed to improve understanding of the barriers to best practice in intellectual freedom affecting school library practitioners based in Scotland. This section will summarise the key findings under each objective heading.

5.4.1 Objective 1: Establish risk factors for self-censorship

While recorded cases of censorship are generally too localised and outdated to contribute to risk measurement, materials likely to be targeted can be identified by the following intersecting features: format, content, and intended audience. Based on the literature, high risk can be assigned to materials in the youth library collection – particularly those in a non-traditional format or which deal with controversial topics. Graphic novels accounted for six (27.3%) of the 22 complaints despite occupying around 3% of the collection. "Inappropriate content" was stated as a priority factor in non-selection by 34 (81.0%) respondents. Perceived or actual lack of a professional support network is a crucial factor in the decision to self-censor. Encouragingly, while only eight (20.0%) respondents rated their prior training as adequate to respond to a potential book challenge, 27 (67.5%) were able to name at least one source of practical support available to them. Those who perceive themselves to have support display higher confidence, even if they are not a member of CILIP or the SLA.

5.4.2 Objective 2: Evaluate sources to identify best practice

Preference was given to UK sources, but where a relevant statement from CILIP or the SLA could not be located, guidance from the ALA was used. According to the Interim Joint Position Statement (CILIP, CILIP SLG and SLA 2022), the responsibilities of the school library practitioner include: promoting intellectual freedom; opposing all forms of censorship; working in partnership with school leadership and teachers; providing a diversity of materials; teaching information literacy; equitably representing all groups within society; adopting a neutral perspective when selecting materials; prioritising the needs of service users; and censoring only those materials which contravene the law (e.g., hate speech). Furthermore, the SLA (2022b) states that the library collection should include graphic novels, and provides the recommendation to begin with the Excelsior Award shortlist (2022a).

5.4.3 Objective 3: Investigate views and experiences in Scotland

School library practitioners in Scotland rated the popularity of the graphic novels in their collection as equal to or greater than that of the conventional books. Every respondent believed that the graphic novels in their collection support reading for pleasure, and a majority rated the format's

support for general literacy and alternative literacies highly. Materials restrictions had been applied in 28 (66.7%) school libraries, and 18 (45.0%) participants believed that there was at least one method by which parents or guardians could access their child's borrowing history. Theoretical support for young people's intellectual freedom was established: when presented with Article 13 of the UNCRC, 33 (82.5%) respondents approved of the statement without reservation. However, 15 (35.7%) respondents stated that they often or always consider controversial subject matter when making purchasing decisions. While the overall number of challenges was low, practitioners may proportionally underestimate the likelihood of receiving a challenge from a parent or guardian.

5.4.4 Objective 4: Develop recommendations

Localised recommendations were produced by combining the primary data with existing notions of best practice derived from the literature. The first set of recommendations is aimed at UK-based professional associations which specifically support school library practitioners. It should be noted that at the time of writing, CILIP and the SLA are working in partnership to produce updated guidance for the promotion of intellectual freedom in school libraries. The remaining sections aggregate specific, actionable advice for implementation by local stakeholders in the school library service such as administrators, practitioners, and pupils' caregivers. These recommendations, along with the upcoming official guidance, may also be of interest to UK-based unions which support school library practitioners or library staff more generally.

Professional Associations

- Produce a catalogue of paywalled resources and provide clear terms for any practical support offered in order to enable members and non-members to correctly estimate the assistance available to them
- Promote resources on graphic novel collection management which provide practical direction and outline the history of censorship so that practitioners can increase their familiarity with the format and more easily identify disingenuous complaints
- Produce equivalent guidance to that of the ALA, making clear any points on which UK and US practice should differ in emphasis
- Continue campaigning for information/digital/media literacy teaching and against internet filtering, explicitly connecting these two objectives wherever discussed in relation to young people
- Produce editable templates for collection management policies which schools and Local Authorities can use as a foundation

- Encourage library practitioners to forward relevant details of formal and informal challenges to a dedicated department so that trends in external censorship attempts can be pooled with those of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom

Councils and Senior Administrators

- Do not wait for a crisis – instead, proactively discuss intellectual freedom with school library practitioners
- Respect library practitioners' professional judgement and agency in line with their qualifications and experience
- Include a manual override in internet filtering software so that library information literacy sessions can be delivered in a realistic environment
- Develop a pathway towards reflecting the SLA's recommendations for school library staffing and salaries in your budget
- Engage library practitioners in policy production and review processes
- Encourage the free transmission of "best practice" by releasing library practitioners for relevant CPD, and inviting them to share their knowledge at all-staff meetings

School Library Practitioners

- Familiarise (or re-familiarise) yourself with the professional standards put forth by CILIP and the SLA, and relevant human rights legislation
- Pay attention to the recommendations made by professional associations in other countries (e.g., the ALA), and ask professional associations in the UK to produce localised guidance
- Reinforce graphic novel bindings and request a library-bound option directly from publishers
- Face graphic novel covers outwards when shelving – if inter-shelved with other materials, they will draw the eye to that section
- Ensure that your library has both a written collection development policy and a written reconsideration policy available to the public
- Proactively consider how you will defend all parts of your collection – draw upon UK-specific professional guidelines, school library policies, the school curriculum and ethos, relevant laws, and youth-oriented interpretations of human rights
- If you are unable to remove an access restriction or privacy risk, support pupils to make informed choices about their use of the service by making these limitations overt

Parents and Guardians

- Whether or not your child is an independent reader, discuss the situations and ideas in their reading material with them
- Discuss your values with your child, along with any expectations you may have about reading material
- Remember that collection management decisions are made in the best interests of the pupils collectively
- Ask to see the school library collection development and reconsideration policies – these should already be accessible
- Before making a complaint, read the whole book and consider the intended purpose of any objectionable passage(s)

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