

THEY DON'T GOTTA BURN THE BOOKS, THEY JUST REMOVE 'EM:  
THE IMPACT OF BOOK CHALLENGES ON  
NORTHEASTERN LIBRARIANS

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By

Cara Elizabeth Berg

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## ABSTRACT

In 2021, after years of relatively stable book challenge numbers, libraries noted an exponential rise in book challenges, and the number has continued to rise each year. This matches a rise in “anti-woke” backlash amplified by social media and conservative media outlets; most of the books commonly challenged are books with LGBTQIA+ and/or antiracist themes. Librarians now experience threats and harassment. Previous research on book challenges occurred before the current exponential rise.

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of northeastern United States public and school librarians who have responded to book challenges, focusing on their overall morale and feelings about administration support. All respondents’ interviews were analyzed through thematic coding to find common experiences among the librarians. Results showed that the librarians reported more low morale than high morale overall. Many reported that they felt either unsupported or mixed support from their administrations during this process. Librarians’ common experiences included harassment, feeling their expertise questioned, and seeing their administrators not follow policy. However, there were some positive responses: librarians reported finding strength in their communities and students, as well as gratitude for the colleagues and larger library organizations that helped them during the process.

As more books are challenged each year, this study has wider implications for the profession. Understanding the experiences of librarians who go through these challenges is imperative to maintain a thriving library profession.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Phillip, who absolutely insisted that I should do this degree, bought me three giant tubs of Curly's ice cream my first night as a doctoral candidate, and brought me chocolate the last night I was finalizing the dissertation. Thank you for everything.

To my parents, brother, and sisters—thank you for being amazing cheerleaders.

To the best friends a girl could ever ask for.

To my nephews and nieces, who deserve to live in a just world.

To my brilliant aunt, who did this too!

Finally: to Carl, to Stefani, to Daniel, and to Theresa.

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To my auditor, I so appreciate your detailed assessment of my qualitative analysis.

To my 14 librarian participants: thank you for sharing your stories with me. Without you, I would not have been able to complete this process. I hope the following work does your stories justice.

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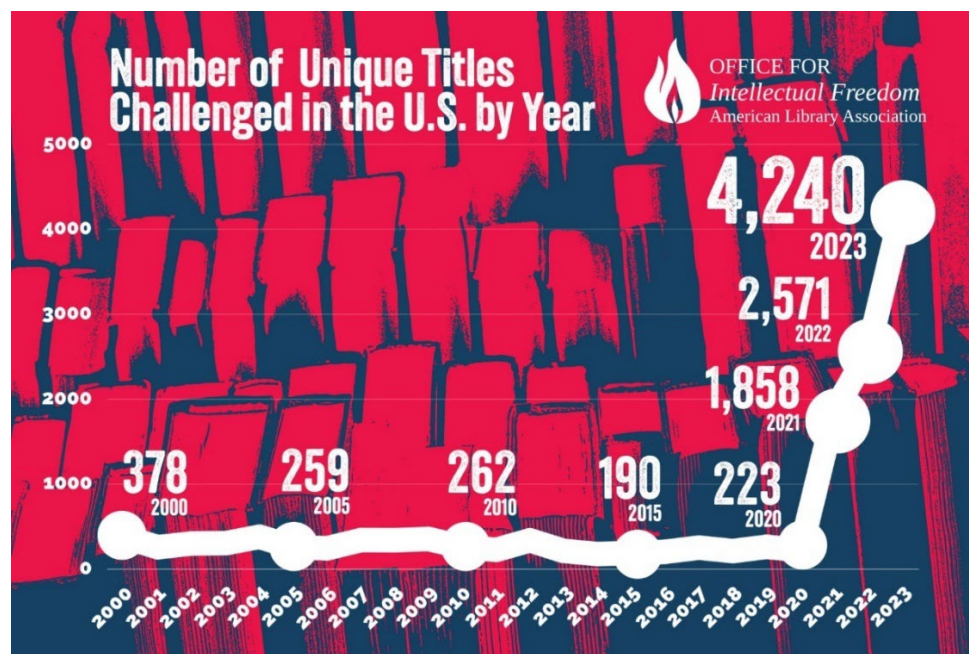
NORTHEASTERN LIBRARIANS

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, libraries have been centers of communities, schools, and universities where free access is provided to a wide variety of information. Today's libraries offer not only reading materials, but programming, spaces to learn and collaborate, and credentialed professionals who maintain the space, build the collection, and assist people in finding information. Once a seemingly universally beloved cornerstone of public life, libraries are now enmeshed as a flash point in the culture wars: since 2021, there has been a sustained increase in pressure on libraries by right-wing groups to remove certain books.

Often referred to as "book bans," challenges to books in library collections hit record-high numbers in 2021, 2022, and 2023, with each year's increase surpassing the one before (American Library Association [ALA], 2024; Figure 1). Data from 2024 also show an increase over 2023 (ALA, 2025).

**Figure 1***Number of Unique Titles Challenged Each Year*

*Note.* Copyright 2024 by the American Library Association.

The credentialed professionals who curate the collections and devote time and energy to keep their libraries running now find themselves and their professional obligations scrutinized and vilified. While attempted book bans have long been a part of American library history (Jaeger et al., 2022; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019a; Knox, 2014, 2017; Oltmann, 2017a; Steele, 2018, 2020; Wiegand, 2020), the increases now come against a backdrop of backlash to progressive change, inflamed by political polarization. Today's book bans go beyond a simple challenge and often include contentious public meetings, outside legislators trying to remove materials from libraries, and harassment of librarians by the public that they serve.

To explore why the book challenges and the vitriol are happening today, it is imperative to look at the current state of political polarization in America. Today's polarization is more complicated than in previous years: political affiliations match more with other identities (e.g.,

the “liberal coastal elite”) and thus have become stronger (Klein, 2020). This has been exacerbated by the rise of partisan news sources and social media, as both liberals and conservatives have different sources they trust and distrust (Barrett et al., 2021; Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

Since the earlier 2020 studies, significant cultural events have occurred that have continued to divide the country further. The COVID-19 pandemic, instead of unifying the country in fighting a common enemy, turned into heated disagreements on science, lockdowns, masking, and vaccines. The 2020 election, instead of a peaceful transfer of power, resulted in the losing candidate claiming without evidence that he had actually won and led to hundreds of angry supporters taking part in the January 6 insurrection. Finally, George Floyd’s murder in 2020, which led to a racial reckoning across the country, saw conservative Republicans cry out against racial progress in government and education and attack diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and legislation.

Polarization is a topic studied at length. Research has found that social media, with its algorithms, continues to aid and abet polarization (Barrett et al., 2021). Unfortunately, polarization often has people believing in two different realities: a significant percentage of Republicans think that the 2020 election was stolen and that Donald Trump won a second term (Bump, 2023). There is ample evidence to contradict that belief, but years after the 2020 election and the insurrection, it still persists. In addition, affective polarization has increased—the idea that your side is good and fighting for justice whereas the other side is evil and immoral. A Pew Research Center (2022) survey on attitudes within the political parties showed that members of each party described members of the other party as “more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans” (para. 1). Beyond elections, polarization extends to the

full educational landscape, including both P-12 and higher education. In higher education, 80 individual pieces of legislation looking to ban DEI programs and initiatives have been proposed in multiple states; eight have passed with several more in consideration (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024).

After splitting people ideologically in traditional classroom education, polarization has come to another educational institution usually immune from targeting, rhetoric and politicalization: the library. The effects of polarization now see organized identity groups target titles—typically titles with LGBTQIA+ and antiracist themes, and in some cases, diverse characters—for removal from library collections. These challenges play into a fear of replacement, or of not being a part of traditional conservative values. Since the book challenge spike began, conservative hosts and publications have used incendiary language to describe libraries and librarians: a Fox News chyron called libraries “drug-infested sex dens” (Anstice, 2024), a *New York Post* headline read “Librarians Go Radical as New Woke Policies Take Over” (D. Kennedy, 2022), and a *National Review* article described the “radical left-wing takeover of the profession” (Blaff, 2024), among others.

These recent book bans are coordinated campaigns backed by special interest groups and target multiple books at once. Librarians who select these materials and defend them from removal have been harassed, doxed, and threatened by members of the public. Those same librarians continue to do their work and attempt to build inclusive collections with the specter of challenges in the background; some may be processing a traumatic incident and some may be too intimidated to add inclusive materials to the collection. Socially just practices support diverse and inclusive materials for community use, and the attempted book bans threaten that. This

research examined librarians' experiences of book challenges, focusing on morale, library leadership, and librarian experiences among different identity groups.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Book challenges affect the fundamental principle of libraries as spaces that serve everyone. With some exceptions, libraries are not private enterprises: they are publicly funded entities. As such, libraries are designed for everyone in the community—all community users have technically “financed” the library, therefore a library’s collection should have something there for everyone to read. Today’s libraries are spaces that not only hold traditional books and periodicals, but provide meeting spaces, services, and programming curated by credentialed librarians.

Librarians are experts in accessing and evaluating information. They build collections by selecting materials for all age levels and making them available for free for users to borrow. Librarians work in spaces designed to serve their communities: public libraries serving the surrounding town or county, school libraries serving the school or school district for K-12 students, and academic libraries serving the college or university. Most libraries, with the exception of some smaller entities, require their librarians to possess a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree; librarianship is a specialized field requiring this advanced credential. Without credentialed librarians working to build and create these spaces, libraries as we know them today would not exist. When outside entities attempt to remove books from the collection or cancel programming, they are attempting to do the job of the credentialed professional.

As curators of community spaces, librarians can encounter a number of issues on a daily basis. School librarians are on the receiving end of budget cuts; in New Jersey alone, the number



of school librarians has dropped significantly in recent years (Valenza et al., 2022), increasing the number of students each librarian supports. The burnout felt by K-12 teachers also applies to school librarians and media specialists. Public librarians are also on the receiving end of cuts, and can encounter issues of underfunding, hostility from users, and in some cases, harassment from members of the communities they serve. In addition, they may encounter situations outside of their traditional role, including assisting unhoused patrons, administering naloxone, and dealing with active shooter threats in school libraries. While some embrace these “other duties” of being a librarian, others feel stressed and burnt out (Ford, 2019). Fobazi Ettarh (2018) coined the library-specific concept of vocational awe, describing libraries as a sacred space in which librarians feel they have a calling, often work for little pay, and take on extra work. She reminded readers, “Mission creep is definitely a major problem in librarianship ... we’re not trained to dispense medical anything. We’re also not social workers” (Ettarh, as cited in Ford, 2019, p. 46). The pandemic hit librarians hard as well—in addition to the usual patron issues, librarians encountered angry antimask patrons and in some cases, protests (Saperstone, 2022).

Against the backdrop of all these issues, Anne Helen Petersen’s (2022) “The Librarians Are Not Okay” presentation and follow-up article from the Conference on Academic Library Management described librarians as burned out and taking on the work of multiple people. Petersen stressed the need for librarians to establish boundaries and reach out for a larger support system outside of work, as well as mentioning the culture of scarcity in libraries. A 2022 study by the Urban Libraries Institute also showed that librarians were experiencing trauma in their jobs and stressed that this should not be the norm (Dudak et al., 2022).

In addition to the struggles of working as a librarian, BIPOC (referring here to Black, Indigenous, People of Color) librarians and members of the LGBTQIA+ community experience

an additional set of challenges. Although conversations at the national level have occurred about this disparity, librarianship remains a profession of mostly White women (VanScoy & Bright, 2019).

In 2021, after years of budget cuts and scarcity, while still attempting to perform their duties during the COVID-19 pandemic, librarians found themselves embroiled in a debate over intellectual freedom and censorship as book challenges began their exponential rise. Williams (2022) pinpointed the beginning of this to Chris Rufo's appearance on Tucker Carlson's Fox News show, where he insisted that critical race theory (CRT) was taught in K-12 schools and being weaponized to indoctrinate children to have "woke" values. After Rufo's appearance, conservative media talked about the concept of CRT significantly more than their liberal counterparts (Wright et al., 2023). However, these conservative media used *CRT* and *DEI* as umbrella terms to mean anything that discussed social justice and equality. The discourse on CRT devolved into challenging what was taught in the schools and then what was on the shelves in school classrooms and libraries. Book challenges in libraries began to increase with the backing of conservative legislators and interest groups.

Politicization has also led to a shift in how books are challenged: book challenges have gone from individuals challenging single titles to members of extremist parents' rights groups and even elected or appointed officials challenging multiple books at a time. One such group is Moms for Liberty, a conservative-values group formed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The group, who described themselves as "joyful warriors" seeking to end school overreach in teaching their children, rallied against COVID-19 mandates in schools and have vocally opposed certain books in the classroom (Stanford, 2023). Weisman (2023) noted that Moms for Liberty potentially would not have formed without the pandemic mandates and unified earlier concerns

on the right about education. Using the term *parental rights* to describe their opposition to school policies, Moms for Liberty has advocated for anti-trans policies, banning of gender and sexuality discussions in the classroom, and removal of anything they consider “CRT.” The Southern Poverty Law Center classified them as a hate group in 2022, describing them as “at the forefront of the battle for book bans” and noting their associations with additional named hate groups, such as the Proud Boys, a right-wing extremist group (Yousef, 2023).

A common argument by Moms for Liberty is that children should be protected from harmful content to preserve their innocence. What this misses is that by removing materials, this one group of people are deciding what other people’s children can and cannot read. Moms for Liberty is not the only group behind the book bans: elected officials have begun to advocate for removal, including Senator John Kennedy of Louisiana reading a passage aloud from the often-banned *Gender Queer* in an effort to remove the book from school libraries. The intention behind highlighting the books and passages is to say that this is an immoral way to live and that living this way destroys society (Knox, 2015). Other local conservative interest groups have also filed challenges. In some instances, these groups have targeted schools that their children do not attend over content they find objectionable.

These groups champion parents’ rights, but ultimately play to the fears of their members and other parents who may not be extremely right-wing or affiliated with these groups, but worry about outside influences “corrupting” their children. A *Washington Post* report reviewed book challenge complaints and found that many parents expressed concern that the books in question would “cause children to alter their sexuality or gender” (Natanson, 2023a, para. 5). Conservatism as a movement wants to maintain the current power structure and not deviate much from the “traditional”—access to these books and materials ultimately threatens that. Further,

parent groups concerned with morality are not a new phenomenon. The National Conference on the Crisis in Education in 1968 had parent groups like Mothers for Moral Stability railing against sex education in schools and using sensationalized stories to make their case (Perlstein, 2008).

The books that are challenged today are not all new books: for example, *This Book Is Gay*, a frequently challenged book, was published in 2014. Mike Curato, the author of often-banned *Flamer* and a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, noted:

Book banners talk a big game. They say they are protecting the children, or that we're peddling porn. They make misleading accusations based on passages taken out of context ... yet anyone who has read the entire book will know that these scenes are not in any way pornographic. (Curato, 2023, para. 5)

Attempted book bans violate the tenets of librarianship while questioning the expertise of credentialed librarians. Library collections need to encompass materials for all readers; diverse books are vital in libraries as a way for users to see themselves represented and for other users to expand their worldview and understand different groups' experiences and identities. The ALA, the professional organization of librarians, firmly supports the notion that librarians build their own collections and that information should be accessible to all. For example, the ALA's Library Bill of Rights includes language such as "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation" (ALA, 2019, para. 2). Ideally, libraries utilize a collection development policy to build their collections, which assists librarians in selecting and eventually deselecting materials from their collections over time. These policies often detail the types of resources the library will acquire. Libraries also have different policies depending on the type of

library and the population served: an elementary school library serving grades K-5 would not have the same materials as a high school library. In public libraries, books for adults are shelved separately from books for teens and those separately from books for children.

Collection development policies often include language and procedures for handling patrons who are upset by a book in the collection. They may mention the need for diverse materials for everyone, and many libraries refer patrons to a “request for reconsideration” form if the patron feels a book should not be in the library. As the literature review will demonstrate, there is a long history of patrons attempting to remove books from library collections across the United States due to material they deem inappropriate or offensive. The ALA began compiling book challenge data in the 1980s; previous titles challenged include *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Chocolate War*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* (ALA, n.d.). Annual numbers of book challenges stayed relatively consistent from 1990 to 2020 with no dramatic increases.

PEN America (2023), an anti-censorship nonprofit organization, referred to the increase in book challenges after 2020 as the “Ed Scare,” calling it “a nationwide effort ... to foment anger and anxiety about public education; to restrict or prohibit instruction about race, sexuality, and gender; and to ban books that address these topics” (para. 1). In 2023, the ALA reported a 20% increase in the number of challenges over 2022, already a record year. 2023 also marked a dramatic increase in challenges in public libraries as opposed to school libraries, which saw the earliest spike—nearly 49% of the challenges as opposed to 16% in 2022 (ALA, 2024b). Another PEN America report described the phenomenon as being exacerbated by elected officials and small groups—such as Moms for Liberty—that expanded to have national reach (LaFrance & Friedman, 2023). The push from elected officials and these groups all contributed to the issue.

Many of the cases receiving national attention have occurred in Texas and Florida. Texas lawmaker Matt Krause submitted a list of 850 books to school libraries, noting that those books could make students uncomfortable (Chappell, 2021). Three hundred books were removed from Florida schools in 2023, contradicting Governor Ron DeSantis's claim that Florida did not ban books (Baeta et al., 2023). The Florida "Don't Say Gay" law led to some Florida schools removing anything with LGBTQIA+ content (Spencer, 2023). Red state attacks on libraries expanded beyond book removals when several state libraries left the ALA. Montana, the first state library to leave, cited a tweet by president-elect Emily Drabinski in which she referred to herself as a "Marxist lesbian"; her language was used to describe the ALA as having Marxist beliefs (Natanson, 2023b).

While national attention is on Texas, Florida, and other conservative states, book challenges and the vitriol that come with them occur in traditionally liberal states as well. Challenges, contentious meetings about them, and harassment of librarians have occurred in multiple libraries in the northeast. A librarian at Roxbury High School in New Jersey sued parental groups for defamation after they attacked her on social media (Johnson, 2023). In Westport, Connecticut, a banned books display at Staples High School resulted in multiple complaints, some referring to the books as "pornographic" (Watrobski, 2022). These are two examples reported in local news; many more have not been reported on.

To combat this increase, actions have occurred beyond traditional book ban displays and policies. Illinois was the first state to pass a law against book banning (Mayorquin, 2023); New Jersey followed suit with the passage of the Freedom to Read Act (Livio, 2024); and Connecticut has a bill under consideration (Austin, 2025). However, while some states may be passing legislation, and perhaps the number of books banned may eventually return to pre-2021 levels,

the challenges and the vitriol directed at librarians around the challenges still occurred. As such, the impact on the librarians who dealt with those challenges needs to be examined.

### **Research Questions**

This research examined how experiencing a book challenge or book ban affected northeastern “blue state” public and school librarians. The overarching research question was “What is the experience of northeastern public and northeastern school librarians who have had to respond to a book challenge?” This was divided into three subquestions:

RQ1: What is the impact of book challenges on northeastern librarians’ morale?

RQ2: How supported do librarians feel from library leadership during and after a book challenge?

RQ3: How do the challenges or threat of challenges affect LGBTQIA+ librarian morale?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research drew upon the frameworks of servant leadership theory/radical servant leadership theory and queer theory. Librarianship is considered a “helping” profession, and such professions are often associated with Robert Greenleaf’s (1977) servant leadership theory, where the leaders of the organization look to empower their followers. In libraries, followers include both library colleagues and the communities they serve. Servant leadership as it applies to social justice has been further explored through radical servant leadership, where members of the organization work to enact social change and justice. Radical servant leadership (Letizia, 2014) may also include the concept of empirical leadership, where leaders are not necessarily those who manage people or have control of their organization. Letizia described these leaders as emergent leaders, giving examples of people in the field of education (such as college professors). This idea of emergent leadership can be extended to librarianship, also an education

profession. Even if librarians do not manage people or make major decisions in the operations of their organization, they are leaders in their own areas within the libraries, within the collections they develop through book selections and the programs they plan. These librarians are likely the people who are handling book challenges: not always the library directors, but the librarians who select the materials for the collection. Librarians, even those without a traditional supervisory role, participate in the leadership of the library. Radical servant leadership applies a social justice lens to servant leadership: radical servant leaders want to empower followers as well as change embedded systems of oppression and uplift minoritized voices and communities.

Queer theory, named by Teresa de Lauretis (1991), describes sexuality as a construct and notes that while heterosexual relationships are considered “the norm,” they are just a type of possible relationship that happens to be reflected in the dominant cultural narrative (Sullivan, 2003). The tenets of queer theory are wide-ranging and encompass a number of fields, including politics, law, and medicine. In addition, queer theory focuses on homonormativity, noticing that in some instances there are spaces designed by the dominant culture that cater to what they (the dominant culture) consider to be appropriate LGBTQIA+ content (Wagner & Crowley, 2020).

Queer theory has been applied to the library and information science (LIS) world in the area of cataloging and classification systems, noting that past practice presented a disservice to LGBTQIA+ resources (Drabinski, 2013; Wagner & Crowley, 2020). Librarians who are working to build inclusive collections need LGBTQIA+ books as part of those collections. In addition, queer theory challenges the power structures in place. In a study on nonprofit research and queer theory, after seeing a deficit in nonprofit literature, the researchers “call[ed] for centering queer voices from the margins rather than treating all experiences as equal” (Meyer et al., 2022, p. 580). LGBTQIA+ voices cannot be ignored or put to the side: they need to be uplifted.



Collectively, these two theoretical frameworks grounded this study. In examining servant leadership and radical servant leadership, we look at how librarians as leaders can not only best support their followers to enrich them, but also work to create a socially just space. Queer theory demonstrates the need for inclusive library collections that incorporate LGBTQIA+ materials and programming, as well as the need to hear from LGBTQIA+ librarians and understand that their experiences may not be the same as those of their colleagues.

### **Significance**

Lost in the conversation on book challenges is the effect of the dramatic increase in challenges on the librarians themselves. When a parent or parent group files a challenge request, the librarian often has to defend the book to the library's administration, the school's administration, the town, and/or the board of trustees/board of education. In some cases, this turns into a public fight where parent groups are harassing the librarian in front of their boards at public meetings. Outside of those meetings, librarians have reported doxing, harassment, and threats. Furthermore, book challenges are not always official: in some instances, parents complain about books they find objectionable without actually going through reporting. Those instances also require librarian time, effort, and emotional labor.

Like those in other helping and passion professions, librarians can be burned out and overwhelmed. This issue has recently begun to be discussed by the profession in the hope of finding solutions, although many solutions pertain to the employer and not necessarily the librarian (Dixon, 2022). Fobazi Ettarh's (2018) vocational awe theory described librarians as often overworked and underpaid, yet willing to settle and not advocate for themselves, as they see the profession as a calling. Now facing a new crisis while already dealing with everyday challenges, librarians are at risk of not only developing burnout but also leaving the profession.

It is essential to examine these experiences from librarians' perspectives. It is possible that librarians may leave the profession after having negative experiences with patrons, including harassment about their collections. It is also possible that these actions will prevent people who are considering joining the librarian profession from doing so. Librarians may not feel comfortable speaking up about their experiences; showing what they are feeling could bring additional awareness to leadership both in and out of the library.

Examining librarians' morale is also important. Organizational morale has multiple definitions. S. P. Kennedy and Garewal (2020) defined it by looking at two factors: employee satisfaction and employee feelings. All of the issues mentioned above can affect employee morale in any organization, including libraries. Katrina Davis Kendrick (2017, 2020, 2023) has written extensively on librarian morale and described low morale as having an "inciting incident"; a traumatic experience with a book challenge would qualify as such. Inciting incidents were also examined by Dudak et al. (2022) in their research on trauma in urban libraries.

If libraries are to continue as spaces for the community, diverse books and programming are an essential component. Of the top 10 most challenged books of 2022, eight were challenged for LGBTQIA+ or DEI content or contained a protagonist of color (ALA, n.d.). Books that have continuously appeared on the list since 2021 include Maria Kotobe's *Gender Queer*, Mike Curato's *Flamer*, and George M. Johnson's *All Boys Aren't Blue*, all of which contain LGBTQIA+ content. While those books are recent, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, has also continuously made the list (ALA, n.d.). When these and other diverse stories are eliminated, libraries are left with books pertaining to a specific experience and worldview. Such homogenized collections directly contradict the ALA's Library Bill of Rights and directly harm minoritized populations, who need to see themselves represented in literature and have access to

those stories. A socially just approach to this research also requires an examination of minoritized librarians handling the book challenges, who may be experiencing a different type of response than their colleagues. While there is no significant literature on this topic, a recent Associated Press article noted the challenges LGBTQIA+ librarians have faced during this time (Savage, 2024).

### **Equity, Fairness, and Social Justice**

Inclusive leadership in libraries requires an approach of equity and fairness to create spaces that serve everyone. A major component of social justice leadership is acknowledging the systems of oppression that exist and working to change that while understanding one's privilege. I note my privilege while noting the attack on minoritized populations through the attacks on library spaces and materials. However, my position as a doctoral candidate and practicing librarian allowed me the time and space to explore this issue and help the librarians encountering it by sharing their stories.

Social justice leadership requires an examination of the current issues in the landscape that threaten equity and fairness. The challenges to books and library spaces are a direct attack on equity, fairness, and justice. As noted earlier, these challenges and the vitriol from the community that often comes with them may result in librarians leaving the profession or librarian candidates deciding it is not worth the risk. If librarians leave the profession en masse, the library as it strives to be—a place where there is reading material for everyone who can see themselves represented, at absolutely no cost to the patron—will not exist. Instead, it will revert to a model where materials are curated based on the specific worldview of the ones in power. Socially just and democratic societies need libraries and professionally credentialed experts to staff them.

This research is important because it explores the issue of librarians being attacked for doing their job—building a collection that serves everyone. When members of the public decide that “everyone” does not truly mean everyone, but leaves certain populations out, the notion of what libraries could be is threatened.

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of public and school librarians in northeastern blue states who had dealt with book challenges, allowing their voices to be heard. The data were analyzed to explore how librarians felt during and after a book challenge and how much support they received from their administrations and employers. Significant work exists on intellectual freedom and censorship in libraries, but not on the librarian experience, and especially not on the librarian experience after the most recent trend of challenges. As stated above, a diverse collection is a fundamental part of a library: all readers need to see themselves and their experiences represented in the literature. This research focused on the professionals who curate collections with diverse materials, highlighting their experiences and what leadership within the library can do to support them.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As the number of book challenges rises, it is essential to research the experiences of those librarians who are handling the challenges, including defending the books from removal while potentially being on the receiving end of actions and comments from angry community members and organizations. To fully understand the background of these challenges, this literature review explored several facets of the issue: the history of censorship in libraries, White backlash and how conservative media amplifies it, the need for diverse books in libraries for all readers, libraries and librarians' social justice efforts, and finally librarian leaders and the overall library leadership structure.

#### **Censorship in Libraries**

A core value of the ALA is intellectual freedom, including the freedom to read. Censorship is antithetical to this core value, and since the 1939 adoption of the Library Bill of Rights, the ALA has taken a position against censorship. However, censorship in libraries has been prevalent throughout history: earlier instances included censoring of fiction thought to pollute the mind, paperback books, or anything deemed communist (Steele, 2020). Censorship of books and authors perceived as communist was advocated in the California state legislature in the mid-1950s (Wiegand, 2020), similar to the arguments in the Florida and Texas legislatures today against materials considered “woke.”

Often censorship involves content deemed obscene (Steele, 2020), but it also frequently relates to diversity and inclusion (Oltmann, 2017a). In the 1950s, Oklahoma librarian Ruth Brown was fired for providing access to Black magazines and literature, as well as reading to

students at a Black school. The complaint was lodged as an anti-communist effort (Robbins, 1996).

The United States Supreme Court has gotten involved in school library censorship and free speech cases. Censorship in school libraries specifically was decided by *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico* (1982), in which high school students fought against a parent group looking to ban books. The Supreme Court decided that the First Amendment rights of the students were violated, and the students won their case (Steele, 2020). This did not stop book challenges and bans; although the decision stated that a book could not be removed from the shelves due to someone disagreeing with the content politically, later challengers found language to exploit to go around this decision. In an earlier case, *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969), students wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War were suspended. The students sued the school, and eventually the Supreme Court ruled in their favor (an anti-censorship ruling), noting that the students had the freedom to engage in activities as long as they did not interfere with the classroom or cause a disruption. This case pointed to free speech being protected, even for students.

Knox (2017) observed that censorship “centers on ... power, identity, and the nature of knowledge” (p. 270). Books on racial justice and LGBTQIA+ themes challenge the dominant culture and provide insight into a world outside of White supremacy; it is not a surprise that those books are the ones most frequently challenged (ALA, n.d.). Similar books were challenged prior to the recent spike, including *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *And Tango Makes Three*. Like other public institutions in America, the library is racialized (Ray, 2019): an institution built by and for the dominant culture. The ones in power cannot remain in power if literature that challenges that power is available to everyone.

Book challenges can also be tied to the idea of White Christian nationalism (Burke et al., 2023), in which predetermined hierarchies are threatened by diverse materials. Downplaying or whitewashing slavery is a component of this ideology, beginning with its justification of enslaving humans. White Christian nationalism is prevalent in the anti-CRT push and the language around “parents’ rights” as well as in book challenges (Burke et al., 2023). For example, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* was challenged in Virginia when a student “became upset by how awful slavery was” (Jaeger et al., 2022, p. 322).

In examining reasons for challenging diverse titles, Knox (2019) found that complaints often claimed the content (e.g., LGBTQIA+ themes) was acceptable, but took issue with how it was presented. However, censors’ complaints about diverse books were different from censorship complaints about non-diverse books in that they targeted “elements that are constitutive to life as a member of a non-majority group” (Knox, 2019, p. 29). This was similar to findings from Knox’s (2014) earlier study on a challenge in the West Bend Library that asked for LGBTQIA+ books to be labeled and relocated within the library. The language in the complaints described it as not censorship, since the books were not being removed; the complainers took issue with being described as book banners (Knox, 2014). An additional theme in complaints was suggestions of other materials: Ben Carson’s *Gifted Hands* instead of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, or a book with a more positive representation of the minoritized experience as opposed to Sherman Alexie’s often-challenged *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In both instances, the dominant culture (White, heteronormative) looks to silence the voices of minoritized groups by presenting more sanitized narratives that they can agree with. Furthermore, Tucker (2024) described book challengers as having a notion of what the ideal childhood should look like and fighting when a book threatens that notion. When Alexie’s book

was challenged as something that could destroy a child's innocence, he noted, "They are simply trying to protect their privileged notions of what literature is and should be. They are trying to protect the privileged children" (Alexie, 2011, as cited in Tucker, 2024, p. 144).

While there is talk in the LIS literature about the need for diverse books in collections, in actual programming there may be deficiencies. A 2021 study of storytime programs in public libraries across three states found a significant lack of diverse books utilized (Cahill et al., 2021). This study pointed out the "lip service" mentioned in other LIS literature on inclusion, where libraries acknowledge there is a problem but fall short on addressing the issue.

Libraries provide services to the community beyond physical textbooks, including access to information and additional programming. Kitzie et al. (2020)'s study on drag queen storytime programs discussed these programs, noting that even if libraries are unaware of their communities' LGBTQIA+ members, they exist, and the programs benefit the greater community as a whole. Drag queen storytimes are also a way to introduce diversity to programming that may not be inclusive.

Some challenges call for other forms of censorship as opposed to removing materials altogether. Knox (2014) examined a case in which parents advocated for moving certain book titles from the young adult section to the adult fiction section and labeling the books with parental advisory stickers. However, the language in their complaints was similar to that of other book censors, including references to protecting children from harm, with one complaint focusing on the "gay agenda" (Knox, 2014, p. 747). Protecting children is a major theme in book challenges (Knox, 2015), where complainers often view the child as a blank slate that needs to be saved from corruption by the state. In a study on intellectual freedom that interviewed multiple public librarians, Oltmann (2016) found that challenged books often stayed on the shelf after a



polite discussion with the challenger explaining why the library had different materials for different interests and beliefs.

Today's severe rise in book challenges centers around LGBTQIA+ books and books about racial inequality (ALA, 2023). While the initial focus was on school libraries, public libraries are now targeted (Jaeger et al., 2022). LGBTQIA+ materials are heavily challenged, and the language of those challenges often mentions exposing children to sexuality and pornography (Steele, 2020). Groups who target LGBTQIA+ content often claim to be anti-pornography (Watson, 2020). Jaeger et al. (2022) noted that in the terminology used by book challengers, anything LGBTQIA+ related was described as "grooming" and anything about racial inequality was "woke" or "CRT." These three terms have been weaponized; using *grooming* paints librarians to the public as sexual predators. *Woke* and *CRT* are both co-opted to mean anything progressive.

In several instances, multiple books have been challenged at once, such as the list of 850 titles challenged by Texas House of Representatives member Matt Krause, who claimed they made students feel bad due to their race or gender (Jaeger et al., 2022). Social media makes these claims easy to amplify: challengers can find passages from the books with content they find questionable and share them out of context with a large audience (Jaeger et al., 2022), a practice that also takes place at board meetings. However, Clark-Hunt et al. (2024) reported that in some cases, while the social media posts contained harmful language, most of the comments supported the library and intellectual freedom, showing general support.

An additional censorship practice, referred to in the literature as preemptive, quiet, stealth, or self-censorship, occurs when librarians do not purchase materials that they fear will result in a book challenge (Jaeger et al., 2022; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019a; Knox, 2017; Steele,

2018; Tudor et al., 2023; Wiegand, 2020). Historically, self-censorship practices have been quite common; surveys and research from 1979-2009 found percentages as high as 70% of school librarians admitting to self-censorship (Wiegand, 2020). A different analysis (Tudor et al., 2023) examined school library collections in Texas for controversial books that should be on the shelves based on reviews and popularity, to determine if self-censorship was happening without asking librarians themselves to comment. While their number was significantly less than the 70% self-censorship figure (at 19%), Tudor et al. (2023) showed that schools with larger populations were more likely to have collections that included the commonly banned books. When libraries practice self-censorship, collections become less diverse and less inclusive, especially in smaller schools. Self-censorship may be partly a funding issue; Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) discovered that some towns pulled funding when controversial material was defended. Self-censorship was also practiced during the McCarthy era, including actively pulling potential controversial materials as well as not purchasing them at all (Wiegand, 1999).

When preservice teachers and librarians were surveyed about *The Higher Power of Lucky*—a title often receiving complaints due to the first page including the word *scrotum*—they mentioned fear of backlash from parents as well as the need to maintain children’s innocence (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019b). In this hypothetical exercise, they were practicing self-censorship. The idea of maintaining the innocence of children is often visible in the language of censorship requests (Knox, 2014, 2015, 2017). Other forms of self-censorship are more deliberate. Owners of Little Free Libraries, an institution managed by general community users, select materials they want to have displayed and remove titles that they feel are inappropriate. This can result in materials being showcased to the community that are not representative of it as a whole and diverse content being “weeded” out (Kozak, 2019). It is unknown what effect the

recent wave of book challenges will have on self-censorship of future collections. As librarians do not run self-censorship collection reports, these numbers and instances would only be reflected in the literature.

Library programming has also faced censorship and backlash: a recent target of hate is drag queen storytime programming, where drag queens read library books to children. Performers and library staff who hold these programs have been doxed and threatened. In some cases, the libraries have canceled the programs (Ellis, 2022; Kitzie et al., 2022). These threats to programming often come from groups outside the library's community using a strategy known as astroturfing, where the opposition is inflated to look larger than it actually is, giving the library's staff and board a false representation of how many people are opposed (Kitzie et al., 2022).

Libraries typically build their collections under guidelines, referred to in the field as collection development policies. These policies shape the collection and are accessible to the public. A good collection development policy can be an ally in fighting censorship efforts; multiple studies (Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2023; Clark-Hunt et al., 2024; Nelson, 2023; Watson, 2020) have noted that strong and detailed collection development policies are essential to fighting censorship, including language on procedures for challenges to all stakeholders. Community allyship and involvement are also recommended as potential tools to stop challenged books from being removed. Knox (2017) recommended knowing what local organizations may become allies in the event of a book challenge, and Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) described community as what "might be the most powerful combative tool that libraries have against the push for censorship" (p. 17). Clark-Hunt et al. (2024) noted the need for transparency between the library and the community regarding how materials are selected and collections are built.

Knox (2017) observed that challengers were very concerned with the way things are today and saw themselves as fighting a morally corrupt society. Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) noted that challengers believed the content they challenged was harmful. Knox (2015) described challengers as feeling that by reading the content, children would visualize a disturbing image they could not forget. However, all of these researchers pointed to the value of the right to read as a vital component of library policies. Strong policies should utilize intellectual freedom as a value on its own (Knox, 2017), a concept embedded in the Library Bill of Rights and with the ALA.

Community members attempting to relocate or remove books from library shelves and cancel programs they do not agree with has been a reality for librarians throughout public library history. The challengers often perceive themselves as needing to fight to maintain their idea of what society should be like; the current politicized environment amplifies this belief. Strong library collection policies and a good relationship with the community are ways to fight potential censorship, but they will not solve it altogether. An additional concern is the possibility of self-censorship, where librarians avoid content or programs that could be seen as controversial.

### **Backlash to Progressive Gains**

Progressive gains in recent years have included the election of America's first Black president, the legalization of marriage equality, and the racial reckoning of summer 2020 after the George Floyd murder. While progress has been made in some areas, American history shows that when there is progress, there is also White backlash (Anderson, 2016). Over the past 200 years, this backlash has resulted in legislative changes, codified racism, and in some cases, murder.

After the end of the Civil War, Confederate soldiers returned to a devastated economy and felt the need to not be seen as failures—they needed their effort to be respected (Hartley, 2021). The failures of Reconstruction, from allowing Confederate generals to become revered to the rise of Jim Crow to the fall of Mississippi into the hands of White supremacists after electing a Black legislature (Lemann, 2007), allowed White supremacy to continue in the South. Lynchings were spectator events, with families attending to watch and memorabilia commemorating them (Hartley, 2021; Henderson et al., 2021; Wilkerson, 2022). The numbers of Confederate monuments erected spiked in years immediately following racial progress (Henderson et al., 2021). In addition, pro-Confederacy groups, most notably the United Daughters of the Confederacy, in the late 1800s tried to reframe the Civil War as a “lost cause,” shaping American memory to see Confederate soldiers not as traitors to the republic but as fallen heroes fighting to preserve their way of life (Hartley, 2021). Anderson (2016) examined how backlash manifested in attacks on voting rights of minoritized populations in the early 2010s, noting that it was a “catalyst for voter suppression activities that had not been seen so clearly or disturbingly in decades” (p. 148).

Libraries are not immune to White backlash and have often been complicit in it. Wiegand (2024) detailed the story of Juliette Morgan, a librarian in 1950s Montgomery, who spoke up about racist practices she observed on buses and was immediately harassed at her workplace and in her residence. She took a leave of absence and, eventually, her own life, but “the library profession hardly noticed” (Wiegand, 2020, p. 91). Wiegand speculated that what happened to her could have prevented other librarians from speaking out. After integration, in some cases when librarians attempted to remove racist material from the shelves, they were overruled (Wiegand, 2024).

The election of Donald Trump after the Obama 8-year presidency and progressive gains is a more recent example of backlash. Trump's election showed the anger White Americans felt at having a Black president (Anderson, 2016). Trump ran on racial resentment, but was not the first to do so: Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan ran on similar platforms and used "colorblind" language to hide their racist positions from the greater electorate (Alexander, 2020). Robin (2018) described modern-day conservatism as defending the power structures already in place while reacting to progressive change, believing that change will lead to a revolution of sorts. This applies to book challenges too: many of the challengers view society from 30-50 years ago as the model or best version of society. This "idyllic" time was before many progressive laws and norms were enacted, when the dominant culture had more power. A recent, although gradual shift in conservatism is toward White Christian nationalism, the belief that "America should be a Christian nation, or a nation ruled by Christians ... who counts as 'White' and what counts as 'Christian' has changed over time" (Gorski & Perry, 2022, p. 6). Burke et al. (2023) described the country's diversification as feeling like an attack on White Christian nationalists, noting that the governorship of Ron DeSantis "appealed to the sense of persecution and victimization with White Christian men as his primary audience" (p. 290).

Conservative media, through online news stories, cable news shows, and talk radio, is a powerful force in maintaining White anger and backlash to racial progress. Fox News presents itself as providing a "balanced" approach to what it decries as the liberal media (Hoewe et al., 2020). One target of this anger is CRT, although this is often used as a catchall phrase to ban anything diversity and inclusion related (Benson, 2022). Wright et al. (2023) found that between right-wing and left-wing media sites, right-wing sites posted significantly more content about CRT (76% of the sample studied) after the George Floyd murder and subsequent Black Lives

Matter protests. The right-wing media posts utilized racist language, inciting their users and garnering more interactions via likes and clicks. Sobieraj and Berry (2011), in an analysis of “outrage speech,” found that conservatives were significantly more likely to use outrage talk in programming (such as cable news and radio) as opposed to liberals.

More troubling, LaPierre and Aubrey (2022) found that “heavy” viewers of Fox News, when presented with information on White privilege, did not change their minds even when provided with evidence. In the same study, those who felt they were “losing their freedom” reacted negatively to the messaging about White privilege, showing that White backlash when minoritized groups make progress is still occurring. This study also demonstrated the complicated issue of trying to show someone with deeply held beliefs evidence of change. Chou et al. (2021), in a study on COVID-related misinformation, found that correcting someone might lead to a backfire effect: when someone was presented with correct, factual information that proved a piece of misinformation wrong, they just believed their initial piece of misinformation. Benson (2022) found similar trends in misinformation between the COVID-19 pandemic and the understanding of CRT. Conservative media pushed the false narrative and spread misinformation that CRT was being taught in K-12 schools. This resulted in a wave of anti-“CRT” legislation (Benson, 2022), which not only banned “CRT” from the classrooms but in some instances, eliminated any DEI content.

A 2022 study found that only 10% of Republicans “supported CRT,” compared to 85% of Democrats, and 91% of Trump voters reported feeling “very unfavorable” about it (Kaufman, 2022). As the literature shows, conservative media ran programs on CRT, playing into and amplifying the White rage within their audience. Hoewe et al. (2020), in a review of studies

on conservative media, noted that “previous research suggests Fox News consumers, who are mostly Republican, may be more susceptible to persuasion from cable news” (p. 380).

It is to be noted that while conservative media may be fanning the flames of White anger, Zhang (2021) found instances of colorblind racism in both liberal and conservative programming after the Charlottesville rally and murder of Heather Heyer. In this case, both sides of the media perpetuated institutionalized racism. By not calling out what that rally was—a gathering of angry racists protesting statue removal and chanting—the media essentially whitewashed the event.

White rage and backlash to progress are inflamed by conservative media. Earlier targets included President Obama, the Affordable Care Act, and COVID-19 vaccination and masking. Book challenges and bannings are the latest iteration of this White backlash, as many of the books challenged are diverse books that question White supremacy and are inclusive of all genders and sexualities. Libraries, once considered an institution of unquestioned trust, are now on the receiving end of complaints and mistrust from the public (Wiles & Britz, 2022). The attempted censoring of books “discussing racial inequity which get labeled ‘critical race theory’ or the more ominous-sounding abbreviation ‘CRT’” (Jaeger et al., 2022, p. 322) shows a clear link to conservative media and White backlash.

While censorship in libraries has occurred throughout history, the recent uptick in challenges aligns with White backlash against recent progressive change. In using the terms *CRT* and *woke* to mean anything progressive outside of the dominant culture, and in longing for an idyllic past that never existed, conservative thinkers and media create and amplify a narrative that these materials are dangerous and need to be removed.



### **Representation in Libraries Matters**

Censorship often targets “diverse” materials in library collections—books that showcase main characters and points of view from populations of minoritized race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. The practice of collection development often involves librarians choosing materials from curated lists or book reviews. However, those making the lists and reviewing the books are not always from diverse populations. Wiegand (2024) noted that those making the lists were not attempting to diversify materials and see beyond their worldview. If a librarian is selecting books from a list and the list does not contain diverse materials, the collection will remain homogenous.

The underrepresentation of minoritized characters in books began to gain mainstream publicity in mid-20th-century America, although it was highlighted earlier in the century by Black writers, librarians, and activists. Black activists highlighted the major disparity in children’s literature (Hughes, 1931), including not only the lack of books but also the content of the books. New York Public Library branch librarian Augusta Baker went through the collection and deselected anything racist or insulting; the remaining collection contained only 41 books (Wiegand, 2024). Another early pioneer in diversifying collections was Charlemae Rollins of the Chicago Public Library (Mabbott, 2017; Wiegand, 2024). She advocated for books with Black characters to be high quality, proposing criteria that would allow selectors to pick books that represented people of color, not just stereotypes of them. Described as the “quintessential children’s librarian” (Mabbott, 2017, p. 515), Rollins created a list in 1941 to assist in building a collection that included books by Black authors. This bibliography was rereleased multiple times, the final time in 1967. Mabbott (2017) noted that the We Need Diverse Books campaign shared some of the ideals of Rollins’s initial bibliography.

During the Jim Crow era, librarianship did not fight against segregation. In 1943, only 17 of 34 library schools were admitting Black students; nearly all of them were in the northern states. Pre-integration saw segregation in both library associations and in Southern libraries (Wiegand, 2024). When the ALA and American Association of School Libraries did bring up integration and what they could do to ensure support in 1966, Wiegand (2024) noted that their efforts were paltry compared to the National Education Association, which had supported integration for years by then.

Larrick (1965) highlighted the disparity between books for White children and books for BIPOC children. In analyzing 5,206 books sent to her from multiple publishers, she found only 349 had Black characters. When she performed the same analysis with larger publication houses, 4.2% of 866 books had Black characters. She also noted that in some cases the characters were racist depictions such as an enslaved African “smilingly serving his white master” (Larrick, 1996, p. 3). Sims (1982) noted that in the year the Larrick study was published, Malcolm X was assassinated and the Watts Rebellion took place, “making the American public aware that all was not well with the souls of Black folk in the United States” (p. 3). A study published 14 years later saw a positive change in representation in books, but it was still quite low at 14.4% (Chall, 1979, as cited in Sims, 1982). Olmann (2017) described the practice of librarians selecting from the New York Times bestseller list, which includes primarily White authors. To develop a more inclusive collection, librarians need to look beyond traditional sources and search elsewhere. However, if diverse books are being challenged, it is possible librarians will not make that leap outside of what they are comfortable with: they may stay with their initial sources and continue to build collections as they have always been. A positive note is that in recent years, there has

been an increase in representation in LGBTQIA+ material, including picture books (Izienicki, 2024).

The importance of representation in books cannot be understated: children need to see themselves in literature (Knox, 2019; Oltmann, 2017). It is also not enough to have books with BIPOC characters; Sims (1982, 1983) described the trend of “melting pot books,” where there were BIPOC characters, but they were given American middle-class values, which could invalidate the experiences of people of color. Sims’s (1982) influential phrase “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” described why children’s book collections should be diverse: mirrors for underrepresented children to see themselves, windows into the “multicultural world in which they [White children] were living and were in danger of developing a false sense of their own importance in the world” (p. 9), and sliding glass doors to act as more of an opening than a window and allow the book to provide empathy. Hadaway and McKenna (2007) echoed Bishop’s phrase in their work on multicultural literature, noting the lack of diverse voices in U.S. children’s books.

Diverse books are not just essential for BIPOC students to see themselves: they are essential for White readers to expand their worldview (Hadaway & McKenna, 2007; Mabbott, 2019; Nguyen, 2022; Oltmann, 2017). Oltmann (2017) described reading diverse books as an action that “[leads] to more empathy and respect... [that] can influence people’s decisions in their daily lives” (p. 415). Oltmann further stated that simply reading and having access to these materials could lead to positive changes in society due to increased empathy. Providing students with access to diverse books can be a component of achieving cultural competence. Nguyen (2022) showed that when interacting with antibias children’s books, children were able to note instances of inequity; however, they were not able to figure out supportive actions to address the

issues without help. This shows that diverse books need to be present, but the adults in children's lives (parents, teachers) also need to work with them to read the books.

Recent campaigns to address this issue include We Need Diverse Books (Mabbott, 2017), an organization that champions libraries to diversify their collections beyond White voices. We Need Diverse Books also advocates for more instruction within LIS programs to better prepare librarians for creating and maintaining diverse collections. Nelson (2023), in recalling experiences as a school librarian, discussed a situation where her colleagues happily supported a LGBTQIA+ teacher, but hid the children's book *And Tango Makes Three* from circulation (an often-challenged book, based on a true story, about two male penguins who raise a baby chick). Nelson pushed back against these colleagues and started a diverse book club within their school. This example demonstrates that librarians need to take action beyond lip service and actually put these materials into circulation, regardless of any fear of book challenges. Garry (2015), in an analysis of school library catalogs with LGBTQIA+ materials, found a link between different factors (e.g., large population size) and representation of those resources; this could mean that smaller libraries would not have these resources, a disservice to their populations.

Diverse books are an essential component of a library collection, as they are vital for all children. Bishop's concept of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors can only be achieved with a collection that represents all identities. When these books are challenged, the library's collection becomes more homogenized and does not support the community in the way it was intended to.

### **Libraries and Social Justice**

Libraries are viewed as a public good, a neutral space, and a community gathering point. However, underneath the good feelings about libraries is the fact that libraries are racialized

organizations. Library workers of color experience racist behavior from their colleagues, and libraries may not be serving their communities as well as they think they are. In addition, programs preparing librarians may not focus on coursework in social justice; practicing librarians today may have not engaged with social justice or equity issues in the profession or in the surrounding community.

In detailing the issue of librarianship as a profession that remains mostly White, Morales et al. (2014) explored social justice and how the concept relates to libraries. They noted that social justice goes beyond simply diversifying the profession: it is promoting equity while examining systems that oppress the marginalized. This concept is sometimes seen as clashing with the idea of neutrality as it relates to librarianship.

Neutrality is one of the governing principles of the ALA code of conduct. A common interpretation of this is that aligning oneself with a belief is not neutral: for example, if a library refuses to allow a documented hate group to meet in the library's space, that is seen as not neutral, and by some accounts, violating the code of conduct. However, recent literature has argued that libraries were never neutral in the first place, and that claiming neutrality actually goes against the code of ethics (Cheshire & Stout, 2020; Gibson et al., 2017). If a library is to be an open space to the community, it must reject oppressive actions. Neutrality also acts as a "neutralizer" to social justice and DEI efforts in libraries (Seiter, 2019). By maintaining neutrality, librarians shut the door on true equity initiatives and maintain the racialized organization already in place. The discussion on neutrality in libraries is not new—Wiegand (1999) described the 1970s ALA as having "weathered a revolt occasioned by hundreds of its younger members who saw in the principle of 'neutrality' most often advocated by veteran librarians as an excuse not to address inequities in library practice caused by racism, sexism, and

homophobia” (p. 19). These same conversations continue to happen 50 years later, and yet many librarians still claim neutrality.

The concept of neutrality also directly contradicts the fact that libraries, like other public organizations, are racialized (Ray, 2019) and only recently have begun to understand their place in perpetuating White supremacy. Neutrality can be considered a form of epistemicide—the concept of erasing a system of knowledge—in that taking a neutral stance could invalidate and devalue other stances by providing credence to harmful ones (Sebastian et al., 2022). Gibson et al. (2017), Steele (2020), and Wiegand (2020) noted the fact that libraries in the South were segregated during the Jim Crow era; while the ALA stated that they disagreed with segregation, these libraries were still operational. Wiegand (2020) described the practice of librarians “sanitizing” their past, comparing it to Americans on tour at Monticello and not wanting to hear about the enslaved people in bondage there, or the whitewashing of the Civil War. It was only recently that libraries renamed the prestigious Melville Dewey award; Dewey himself was forced to leave the ALA in 1905 after multiple complaints of sexual harassment (Wiegand, 2020). Yet for over 100 years his name was tied to that award, and a major system of cataloging is still named after him to this day. Libraries have begun looking at other honors and awards to be potentially renamed; recently, the Laura Ingalls Wilder award was renamed the Children’s Literature Legacy Award, citing Wilder’s problematic cultural descriptions (Dankowski, 2018).

Part of this effort is foundational, as LIS programs may not incorporate social justice concepts into their coursework. N. A. Cooke et al. (2016) described integrating new coursework on social justice into an LIS program while noting that social justice classes had not been taught recently. With new librarians entering the field unprepared and veteran librarians not having explored these concepts, the onus is on individual librarians or larger library organizations to get

their workforces to become socially just. New LIS students need to learn social justice work in order to create a more equitable and inclusive library (N. A. Cooke et al., 2016; Garnar, 2023); this also applies to learning how to build diverse collections (Mabbott, 2017).

During the “racial reckoning” of summer 2020, libraries around the country made statements denouncing racism and put out antiracist reading lists; however, these efforts have not been assessed and those actions are not enough to sustain antiracism activities. Figueroa and Shawgo (2022) discussed one library’s antiracist work, which went beyond lists and statements and included task forces, funding for programming, and assessment. However, what is more likely to have happened in libraries after the summer of 2020 is reflected in Gibson et al. (2021): BIPOC workers in libraries reported seeing antiracist statements but no concrete action from their workplaces.

Social justice for libraries also requires examining the disparity between the diverse populations they serve and the library staff, who are still majority White (VanScoy & Bright, 2019). In addition to its segregationist past, the institution of the library has struggled to support its BIPOC workers, as BIPOC librarians face microaggressions from their colleagues and the public they serve (Cunningham et al., 2023; Dalton et al., 2018; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019; Garnar, 2023). BIPOC workers may also see a toxic environment their White colleagues do not see. Cunningham et al. (2023) described a workplace where, in the words of one of their respondents, “the culture is, you know, the almighty white woman” (p. 130). Kendrick and Damasco (2019) pointed out that the “overwhelming whiteness in the LIS field” (p. 207) added to the overall low-morale experiences of BIPOC librarians.

The LIS field has attempted to diversify the profession. However, attempts to create a more inclusive environment and diverse staff have not been successful, as few BIPOC workers

are enrolling in MLIS programs (Jennings & Kinzer, 2022). Garnar (2023) recommended that White librarians have discussions with their BIPOC colleagues on how they can best support them, and observed that BIPOC workers have been waiting for their White colleagues to have these discussions. The practice of “lip service”—White colleagues saying that diversity is important but not acting on it—was observed in a study on BIPOC retention (Caragher & Bryant, 2023; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019). It is not enough for libraries to say they are not racist and support everyone: staff members actually need to have dialogue with each other, establish policies, and put funding toward antibias activities.

Recent literature has shown an increase in studies on emotional well-being and burnout in libraries. However, much of this literature examined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but not the recent spike in book challenges. Some studies focused on the experiences of BIPOC and other marginalized LIS workers, noting trends in librarians leaving toxic jobs where they described experiencing active racism and an overall issue of retention (Caragher & Bryant, 2023; Cunningham et al., 2023). In examining the low morale of BIPOC librarians, Kendrick and Damasco (2019) looked at several factors that could influence morale, including outside events such as the Trump election and attacks on higher education; the increase in book challenges and bans would be another such outside event that could affect morale.

LGBTQIA+ representation exists in libraries; however, there are questions about how those librarians are counted and supported. There is minimal information about the number of LGBTQIA+ librarians in the profession. Drescher and Reed (2024) in a study on academic librarians noted, “We in the profession do not know how many academic library workers are part of the LGBTQIA+ community” (p. 2). Kuecker (2017) also noted the lack of counting of LGBTQIA+ librarians and suggested future quantitative research to explore that. Drescher and



Reed (2024) found positive results regarding how academic librarians felt supported as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, but recommended additional research in this area. J. Cooke's (2005) piece on why the profession needed an LGBTQIA+ subgroup (referred to their paper as GLBT) noted an example of how librarians marched during a Pride parade and while many in the library community supported them, several openly rejected their actions. It appears that librarian attitudes have shifted as progressive gains in LGBTQIA+ rights have been made: Siegel et al., (2020) found that an overwhelming majority of librarians felt comfortable assisting with LGBTQIA+ informational needs. However, the research still yielded negative responses and revealed a need for additional training of librarians, including those who did feel comfortable (Siegel et al., 2020). The need for additional training and the experience of discomfort with selecting any sex-related material were also noted by Jefferson and Dziedzic-Elliott (2023), who framed their research against the rising number of book challenges. Often, the literature looks at collections and how to create a more inclusive collection with LGBTQIA+ themes.

LGBTQIA+ librarians, like their BIPOC colleagues, also face microaggressions. Kuecker (2017) noted that the literature did not fully address this issue and that microaggressions could be extremely harmful to both recruitment and retention. They suggested employing initiatives similar to the ones offered by ALA for BIPOC librarians, including diversity residencies.

In addition to burnout, librarians may experience trauma within their libraries. In a study of urban librarians, Dudak et al. (2022) noted that many were experiencing traumatic incidents in the workplace, and implored the profession to take these concerns seriously. They also noted that these traumas could be felt differently by different identities. Recent research on sexual harassment in libraries, an additional form of trauma, showed a widespread problem of librarians being harassed by patrons and colleagues (Benjes-Small et al., 2024). The Urban Library

Institute has begun work on trauma in libraries, including publishing a wide-reaching study about the issues public librarians face. Dudak et al. (2022) noted that as of their publication, there was a small amount of literature on library trauma.

The library profession has fallen short of creating a field that is inclusive, although there is work as well as recent literature and conversation around it. With the concept of neutrality and the library's role in it being questioned, there has been work done in the profession to not only diversify, but provide a workplace safe for minoritized populations. However, there is still much to be done in protecting and supporting those populations, both among employees and in the communities libraries serve.

### **Leadership in Libraries**

Librarians exist in a larger ecosystem: a school or public library has a supervisor, a governing board and/or local elected officials, and finally the larger library organizations, both state and national. At the meso level, a librarian's immediate supervisor may or may not be a credentialed librarian; library directors report to a board of trustees and school librarians report to their department head or a principal, who reports to a superintendent and a school board. Each level of leadership provides librarians with an opportunity to advocate for the freedom to read, or in some cases, cede control to outside complaints about the collection.

While there is a lack of information in the LIS literature about the role of administrators in assisting librarians with book challenges, administrators in libraries do have a large impact on librarian morale (S. P. Kennedy & Garewal, 2020). This was further shown in a post-COVID return to campus study where frustration with administrators was a theme shared by many respondents (Berg et al., 2022) and a 2019 study on librarian retention (Fyn et al., 2019).

Librarians of color have also reported struggles with their own administrators (Kendrick & Damasco, 2019).

Librarian leaders themselves can feel trapped between the needs of their subordinates and the demands of upper leadership (Kendrick, 2023). In the case of book challenges, while the first level of contact is generally librarians or library administrators, sometimes challengers will bypass that level. Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) found that sometimes the book challenge was made directly to the town, not the library administration.

Public library boards, while not operating in the day-to-day confines of the library, are elected or appointed by the community. The board has a role in the library's planning and personnel decisions, and board members often see themselves as representatives of their constituents in the community (Henricks & Henricks-Lepp, 2014). This can give them influence over the selection of materials for the library's collection, even though they are not librarians and do not have the correct credentials to build a collection (Steele, 2018). The Ruth Brown dismissal occurred when the library board aligned themselves with the community's challenge to the diverse books Brown had added to the collection (Robbins, 1996). Having a board aligned with community groups calling for book bans can lead to self-censorship or avoiding diverse programming like drag queen story time (Floegel et al., 2020). Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) reported multiple mentions of elected officials in interviews with public librarians where some libraries received budget cuts from the local government after a book challenge. Kendrick (2023) described an instance where a library employee received a death threat and reported it to the city manager, who ultimately did not act. Kohlburn (2023) interviewed five Missouri librarians who had handled intellectual freedom challenges; four mentioned their boards, and one of the librarians suggested education on the library's purpose for board members.

Boards can be allies, as in the West Bend case (Knox, 2014), where the challenge was not for the books' removal but for labeling and moving the questioned materials to the adult section. The board held a public hearing, but did not acquiesce to the challenge, and the books remained in the correct section as determined by the librarians' expertise. A 2007 study on library trustees in times of crisis found that trustees rated leadership skills of integrity and ability to mobilize quite high, showing how board members saw their board colleagues in times of crisis (Arns, 2007).

School boards operate in a larger ecosystem where the school library is not their only concern. While there are not many studies on relationships between school boards and the educators they employ, recent studies point to anti-DEI work in schools, encompassing the boards. An ethnographic study of contentious board meetings in a high school that implemented an ethnic studies program found that the White parents against the programming organized a group to fight the requirement, citing issues including discrimination against their children and anti-Christian sentiment (Chang, 2022). An examination of Iowa's HF802 (colloquially described as an "anti-CRT" law) found parents reporting complaints about violating the law to the school's board and the state's board of education. Many of the complaints were about books deemed "problematic" under the new law (Locke & Knox, 2024).

Schroeder (2021), in reviewing court cases about book removals, observed that it was easy for school boards to remove books for political reasons because there were no concrete, objective guidelines set by courts to review book challenges. Schroeder noted that while the *Island Trees v. Pico* (1982) case was a victory for the students, it left a lot of room for challengers to use different language for "successful" challenges, ultimately resulting in the book's banning.

The literature has discussed the history of challenges, but there is a gap in the literature about how leaders in libraries, including boards, principals, and administrators, support the librarians who handle book challenges. While there is research on trustees' perceptions of each other's leadership skills (Arns, 2007), the perception of librarians employed by those boards is missing.

The ALA, the professional organization for United States librarians, has worked toward promoting intellectual freedom and supported librarians through publishing yearly statistics about book challenges. In addition, the ALA holds a yearly "Banned Books Week" where challenged books are highlighted, and provides "help kits" for librarians. The ALA has divisions and offices that directly deal with intellectual freedom and book challenges, and librarians who experience book challenges are encouraged to reach out to the ALA for support.

However, these efforts are not always seen as complete. Seiter (2019) examined social justice in libraries and noted that in responding to McCarthyism, the ALA softened its initial antifascist stance from the 1930s to become more about neutrality as opposed to truly fighting censorship. Kidd (2009) looked at the "prizing" component of the ALA's work around banned books and noted that it could take away from the issue at hand on book banning and censorship; it could also draw attention to the books that had been banned in a negative light. Knox and Oltmann (2018) reviewed a controversy about a poster for ALA Banned Books Week 2015 that many found insensitive. The poster was eventually rescinded, but in responding to the incident, the ALA said it was being censored. Many of the librarians surveyed were not happy with the ALA's handling of the situation; they also noted that the books highlighted in that year's Banned Books Week were not current titles being banned but "classic" works such as *The Catcher in the Rye*. These instances reported in the literature show a disconnect between how the ALA is

fighting banned books and how librarians would like to see them respond to instances of censorship.

When encountering a book challenge, librarians not only have to defend their collection, but may experience a hostile public and contentious encounters. In many cases, angry challengers claim librarians are “indoctrinating” children by providing these books and refer to librarians as “groomers” (Jaeger et al., 2022). These challenges, fueled by conservative anger over what they call “CRT,” can become personal. Although some recent studies have explored this issue, there is little in the literature that examines librarians’ feelings and experiences during this current time of exponentially increased challenges. Both Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) and Kohlburn (2023) showed that experiencing a book challenge did impact librarians personally. Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) found that librarians felt many challenges were politically motivated. Clark-Hunt et al. (2024) noted empathy for librarians going through the issue, and recommended that they separate the challenge, try not to get involved in contentious discussion with patrons, and remember that it is not personal. Much of the literature does not show how librarians’ supervisors or administrations are supporting them—or how they can support them—during this time, although Kohlburn (2023) did find librarians mentioning their boards, in both positive and negative instances. Clark-Hunt et al. (2024) described the need for a support system and transparency to the community; having the community on the side of the library when these incidents happen could not only benefit the library’s mission but also the librarians themselves.

When facing book challenges, librarians who have already dealt with burnout, stress, and potentially trauma may now be dealing with another fraught issue. LIS literature shows that library leaders can sometimes be viewed negatively by their staff, including participating in microaggressions. The ALA does not supervise librarians specifically; however, they are the

national library organization, and while they have been supportive in some censorship cases, in other instances they have been viewed as unhelpful or adding to the problem.

### **Conclusion**

The literature contains a wealth of information on censorship in libraries throughout history, including some information on the present-day, more politicized challenges. It is expected more will be added to this field taking the new types of challenges into context. Examining censorship in the current political climate of intense White backlash to progressive change, representation and inclusivity in library materials, social justice in libraries, and the current state of librarian well-being provides a full picture and context for what is occurring.

While much has been written on censorship and intellectual freedom, librarians' experiences of book bans, including the stress and impact on their well-being, have not been well accounted for. As noted earlier, there is a gap in the literature on how these bans and challenges affect librarians, and especially on what support library leaders are providing to their subordinates. There is also a need to critically look at librarians' identities; most of the books being challenged are diverse books, and librarians from minoritized populations who handle book challenges that speak to their own identities may need more support. As established, the library profession falls short on social justice and protecting minoritized workers.

This study addressed these gaps by analyzing librarians' experiences of challenges and the support they needed from library leadership. The study also closely examined how identity tied into their overall experiences of dealing with book challenges.

## CHAPTER 3

## METHODS

Librarians today are experiencing a new kind of challenge to the materials in their libraries. Book challenges, where materials are requested to be removed from a library collection, increased exponentially in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 (ALA, 2025). The uptick in book challenges coincided with increased mentions of CRT (Bell, 1995), weaponized from its initial meaning and used as an umbrella term to describe anything considered progressive by conservative media and politicians (Jaeger et al., 2022). Prior to 2020, book challenges usually originated from the occasional community user; however, they have now expanded to contentious board meetings, social media campaigns, and local as well as statewide legislation. Most of the books challenged have LGBTQIA+ or antiracist content (ALA, 2023).

With challenges being politicized and publicized by conservative groups such as Moms for Liberty, librarians defending the books in their collections have become targets for vitriol in addition to the challenged books. Some librarians have encountered threats and harassment (PEN America, 2022). New Jersey school librarian Martha Hickson described meetings where attendees “called me by name a pedophile, pornographer, and groomer of children” (Livio, 2024, para. 17). Ms. Hickson’s story is not an isolated incident: librarians are not only defending the books and supporting the freedom to read, but many also receive comments like these.

The impact these challenges have on the librarians themselves has not been well researched yet, although scholarship is beginning to emerge about the new politicized challenges (Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2023; Clark-Hunt et al., 2024; Kohlburn, 2023). This study explored the impact of challenges on 14 northeastern U.S. librarians, focusing on their feelings about their leadership and overall morale. The effect on the librarians’ identity itself also was explored, as it



is possible that due to already existing biases and microaggressions, the experience of a straight, White librarian handling a book challenge would be different than the experience of librarians from the LGBTQIA+ community.

Book challenges affect school and public librarians all across the country. While Florida and Texas are the best-known examples, challenges also occur in traditional blue states. Librarians in these states may not be experiencing the legislative push that other states are, but they still encounter challenges: for instance, Martha Hickson is a librarian in New Jersey. With a lot of attention on the headline-grabbing states, blue states may be overlooked in the research and media. Thus, this study examined librarians in northeastern blue states.

### **Research Design Overview**

The dramatic increase in book challenges and book bans has been a seismic phenomenon in libraries. While immediate impacts are felt by the community, it is impossible to know how this affects the librarians without researching their experiences. To best understand the phenomenon of book challenges and the lived experience of these librarians, this study used a qualitative and phenomenological approach. Creswell (2007) noted that phenomenology in qualitative methodologies “focuses on the meaning of people’s experience of a phenomenon” (p. 95). Moustakas (1994) described a component of phenomenology by writing that “scientific investigation is valid when knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible and understanding of the meanings and essences of experience” (p. 84).

Fully understanding the librarians’ experience demanded an approach that allowed the librarians to tell their stories and me to share my findings. I hope that library administrations, both internal and external to the library, will utilize the findings from this research to better

support their librarians, and that the findings create awareness outside the library ecosystem of how this political movement is affecting librarians.

For the purpose of this study, the phrase *book challenge* referred to not only requests for removal of books from the collection, but also requests to add labels to books (similar to parental advisory stickers) or move books to a different area of the library. The librarians studied had taken an active role in responding to a book challenge, such as responding directly to the community member or patron who complained or speaking in defense of keeping the challenged book at a board meeting.

This phenomenological study attempted to answer the following overarching research question: “What is the experience of northeastern public and northeastern school librarians who have had to respond to a book challenge?”

The subquestions derived from that question were as follows:

RQ1: What is the impact of book challenges on northeastern librarians’ morale?

RQ2: How supported do librarians feel from library leadership during and after a book challenge?

RQ3: How do the challenges or threat of challenges affect LGBTQIA+ librarian morale?

The sample for this study consisted of public librarians and school librarians from the northeastern region of the United States, which was the overall unit of analysis for RQ1 and RQ2. RQ3 only analyzed LGBTQIA+ librarians.

The northeastern region was chosen because while book challenges have been widely reported on and talked about in states such as Texas and Florida, it is an issue that does not only apply to traditionally red and swing states. Connecticut, a reliable blue state, saw more than 100 book challenges in 2023 alone (Steddick, 2023).

Recent literature has shown that librarians are struggling with emotional well-being. Kendrick's (2017) work on low morale in libraries and a more recent study on low morale in librarians of color (Kendrick & Damasco, 2019) used an approach similar to this research, focusing on qualitative methods to ascertain the experience of librarians. While intellectual freedom and censorship are common themes in library literature, the firsthand experiences of librarians with book challenges have not been studied extensively. However, current scholarship is starting to emerge: both Clark-Hunt and Creel (2023) and Kohlburn (2023) employed qualitative methodology in studies of librarians experiencing censorship and book challenges. Those two studies focused on geographic areas outside of the northeastern region and on overall experiences, while this study also explored the leadership response, overall morale, and questions around identity.

### **Positionality**

An understanding and examination of the researcher's positionality is vital in social justice research. Terrell et. al (2018) noted the need for cultural proficiency and cultural competence in educational leaders and the idea that it is an "inside-out process" (p. 27); one needs to examine their own cultural autobiography and journey to examine what their own assumptions are. To take a culturally proficient approach in research, it is essential for researchers to disclose their positionality and understand that respondents are coming from different backgrounds with different experiences.

I am a straight, cisgender, White woman who has worked as an academic librarian at a higher education institution in New Jersey for 14 years and briefly served as a part-time public librarian earlier in my career. I have not experienced a book challenge or book ban directly, as they typically occur in public and school libraries. I believe in libraries as a public good and that

diverse materials should be available to all readers. I also believe that for libraries to maintain the cultural institutions that they are, they need to be staffed by librarians; earlier publications of mine focused on librarian wellness (Berg et al., 2022; Salvesen & Berg, 2021).

In phenomenological research, a component that is similar to the idea of cultural proficiency is the epoché, or bracketing step (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to the study, I wrote down my thoughts and feelings about the topic as a way to distance from them and be as objective as possible. In addition to writing about my feelings on librarians, libraries, and book banning, I wrote my own cultural autobiography in order to approach the research in a more culturally responsive manner. I disclosed my positionality to the participants prior to beginning the interviews.

### **Sample**

The study sample was composed of northeastern public librarians and school librarians/library media specialists who had experienced a book challenge since July 2020. This was the approximate date, as demonstrated in the literature, when conservative media began its intense coverage of “CRT” (Benson, 2022; Wright et al., 2023). As such, book challenges showed their first exponential increase the following year (ALA, 2024).

The region chosen was made up of traditional “blue” states: New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts all voted for the Democratic presidential candidate in the three previous presidential elections (American Presidency Project, n.d.). Maine and Pennsylvania, both considered northeastern states, were eliminated from the study due to Maine splitting its electoral vote in 2020 and 2016 and Pennsylvania’s electoral vote for Donald Trump in 2016, electoral vote for Joe Biden in 2020, and status as a 2024 swing state (Montanaro, 2024). New Jersey, while considered a blue state in the northeast, was eliminated

due to my active role in New Jersey state library associations. I sought out participants who would be comfortable sharing their experience and did not want to have participants feel like they could not be open or fully truthful in reporting their experience.

While librarians exist outside of school and public libraries, including academic librarians (those who work in a college or university), book challenges mostly affect public and school libraries. Recent ALA data showed that only 2% of challenges occurred in higher education libraries (ALA, 2025). Therefore, the sample included only school and public librarians.

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience/availability sampling and snowball sampling, using the convenience approach to reach a large number of potential participants and the snowball approach for more targeted recruitment (Connaway & Radford, 2021). Convenience sampling was applied first by contacting potential participants via ALA Connect, a listserv for ALA members across the country. Following this posting, I applied snowball sampling (Connaway & Radford, 2021) by contacting library leaders who might refer me to librarians who had experienced a book challenge.

The recruitment materials included a brief form for respondents. Most of the interested participants filled out the form; some opted to email me directly. Respondents provided their email address, the best way to contact them, and a preferred meeting date/time, and answered the following inclusion questions:

1. Did you experience a book challenge at your library and have a direct role (e.g. responding to the complaint from the community member, speaking to the board about the challenged book) in handling it?
2. Were you employed as public librarian and/or a school library/media specialist when the challenge happened?

3. During the event, was your place of employment in one of the following states: New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire?

I eliminated two potential participants who filled out the inclusion form but answered “no” to one of the inclusion questions. Respondents who answered yes to all three questions were invited to take part in the study. I sent an additional form to collect demographic data and consent and then scheduled an interview. Participants were given the list of interview questions prior to the interview to help them fully think about their experiences before sharing them with me.

I was prepared to have potentially interacted with participants in the past due to my work in local library organizations and service on a national committee through the Association of College and Research Libraries. I planned to disclose any previous knowledge of respondents. However, I had never interacted with any of the final participants prior to the study.

### **Data Collection**

This research project was approved by William Paterson University’s Institutional Review Board before interviews were conducted. Interviews took place in September and October 2024, and were semistructured, with time for probing, follow-up and clarifying questions. The participants each received the list of interview questions prior to the interview so they could review and prepare. The interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom and lasted 30-60 minutes each.

I took steps to ensure a comfortable interview environment and answer questions the respondents had about their participation while explaining the purpose of the study (Connaway & Radford, 2021). Connaway and Radford (2021) noted that the interviewer needs to be cautious to only capture the participants’ answers and, can ask for elaboration on certain points but not

“put words into the respondents’ mouth” (p. 351). During each interview, I reassured participants that they could stop the interview at any time and did not need to continue.

The protocol questions included the following, with additional probing questions as the interview progressed. The first question was a demographic question used to begin the interview before reaching the more phenomena-based questions.

- Can you tell me about your library—approximate size, leadership structure?
- Can you tell me about the circumstance of the challenge—what was challenged, how did you respond, and what was the end result?
- During the challenge, can you tell me about your morale within your workplace?
  - During this period, do you recall experiencing harassment, discrimination, or personal attacks from the community or your colleagues?
- How supported did you feel from the library leadership during the challenge?

Interviews ceased once data saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Guest, 2020) was reached and I saw the experiences being similar with no discernable difference in the themes emerging.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the phenomenological data analysis process, as described by Creswell (2007), Creswell and Miller (2000), Creswell and Creswell (2023), and Moustakas (1994). Prior to beginning the interviews, I engaged in the epoché (Moustakas, 1994) and “bracketed” my feelings and experiences by detailing my own personal experience to best isolate my feelings on the topic. Culturally competent work requires self-reflection (Terrell et al., 2018). Moustakas (1994) described the epoché process as a “meditative procedure” (p. 89), and it

allowed me to truly engage in self-reflection on the topic and surrounding biases as well as my positionality.

After each interview, I utilized the concept of horizontalization by combing for quotations detailing the phenomenon, targeting “specific statements” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). After horizontalization, I looked at the quotes to determine clusters of meaning relating to themes.

I then wrote a narrative of each respondent’s story to create a textural-structural description (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). At that point, I sent my description to the participant for a member check, allowing the participants to ensure that I was capturing the essence of their experience. Following the respondents’ guidance, I edited my textural-structural descriptions. While most of the data were collected in the initial interview, I performed this member check as part of the overall analysis strategy and to check for rigor. I wrote a summary for each participant to capture the essence of what they were saying. The respondents were then sent a textural-structural description back. I asked them to review and provide edits or comments (or speak with me further if needed). All participants responded to the summaries and many provided clarifications to the summaries, which I incorporated. When clarifications and edits were made, I let the participants know and thanked them for their participation in the study.

When all data were gathered and member checks completed, the data were analyzed collectively to look for common themes and describe the overall essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). As part of the overall analysis, I looked specifically at the experiences of people with different identities; the demographic data were necessary for this step. I utilized hand coding to best engage with the data and truly understand the essence of the phenomenon.



### **Rigor**

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, I employed a number of measures. Prior to conducting any interviews, I engaged in the epoché process, bracketing my own experience and overall feelings about the phenomenon. As I am a practicing librarian, it was essential that I complete this step to disengage and isolate from my preexisting feelings on the topic (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Creswell (2023) described reporting bias as an essential component of rigor and validity, the epoché was a way to understand and engage with my own bias prior to the interview. Before and during the interviews and during the analysis process, I kept a research log, detailing my own experience with the data. This log was included in a larger audit trail (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

After writing the textural analysis, I performed member checking for validation. Member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Moustakas, 1994) is a tool for validity; Creswell and Miller (2000) noted that “the procedure shifts from the researchers to the participants” (p. 127). Participants received my interpretation and analysis of their individual stories. This allowed them to determine if I had accurately captured the essence of their experience and gave them the opportunity to add information or make corrections.

Creswell and Miller (2000) recommended that an audit trail include artifacts throughout the process. I kept a detailed research log during the collection and analysis phase. In addition to the research log, as part of the audit trail, I kept a spreadsheet detailing the common themes and how they evolved within the research after analysis; this demonstrated how I arrived at my conclusions describing the themes and overall experience. As a step for validity, the research log, summaries, and coding process and analysis were sent to an external auditor. The external auditor determined that the study had validity (Appendix A).

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the study. In total, 14 participants shared their experiences from a combination of school and public libraries. After an overview of the participants and the overarching themes, the data are presented in sections mapping to the corresponding research questions.

#### **Introduction to Data Analysis**

In total, 14 participants were interviewed for this study, and interviews took place over the course of 6 weeks. Nine participants were school librarians in elementary, middle, or high schools. Five participants were public librarians in roles including reference services, youth/teen services, and library director. After each interview, I reviewed the recordings and transcripts generated through Zoom to develop a summary of the participant's experiences. Each participant reviewed the summary; the themes reported were derived from the summaries approved by the participants.

Data were analyzed utilizing a coding method recommended by Creswell (2007). Each summary (the textural-structural analysis) was read individually, and themes were identified from the summaries and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was analyzed for common themes/patterns. A codebook was written grouping the common themes together and noting which participants reported each facet of the experience. In addition, phrases that described the experience were pulled into an additional spreadsheet.

For the purpose of this study, I reviewed each interview to determine the overall morale of the participant. I utilized definitions of morale from S. P. Kennedy and Garewal (2020), who measured it via two quantitative instruments on job satisfaction and how employees felt about

their organization. I looked through the transcripts for mentions of job satisfaction and feelings to make this determination. I also employed the method of self-selection in describing their morale, a practice similar to that utilized by Kendrick (2017, 2020), who actively sought out librarians who felt that they were experiencing low morale. While I did not actively seek them out, I did ask them to confirm their level of morale as part of the research summaries they approved.

As noted earlier, there are levels of leadership within libraries and the communities they serve. For the purpose of this study in the thematic analysis, *administration* or *administrators* meant anyone involved in the operations of the library, including librarians as well as principals, department heads, and board members.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

#### **Overarching Research Question**

The librarians interviewed worked in public and school libraries in New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. Nine of the participants were school librarians; five were public librarians. The public librarians had a variety of different roles including director, teen librarian, reference librarian, and youth services librarian. The school librarians were from mostly public schools (one was from a private school) and served a combination of different grade levels. While I did not ask about supervisory capacity during the interview, the participants volunteered that information on their own; three of the public librarians were in a supervisory capacity. Three of the participants identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community; all were public librarians.

Many of the challenges they described followed a similar pattern: a patron found the content of a book objectionable and they filed a complaint. Some of the challenges the participants experienced were benign—one came for a book that the librarian agreed needed to

be removed due to outdated and potentially harmful content. Several other books mentioned by participants appeared in the ALA Top Ten, including *This Book Is Gay*, *Flamer*, and *Gender Queer*. After the complaint was filed, librarians often found themselves defending the rationale for selecting the book, often as a part of the committee that reviewed the request. One school librarian noted, in a challenge where the committee members all read the book to make the decision, “Every book in the library is not for every student, but every student should be able to come find a book in the library.”

Not all of the challenges got to the public meeting stage: some were resolved relatively quietly. Most were book-related, but some were challenges to displays or programs. There were challenges that followed the pre-2020 pattern of a book being challenged, the librarian explaining the decision, and the challenge ending. One such challenge happened to one of the public librarian participants, who, in addition to talking about a more stressful challenge, described a situation where a book was challenged with the understanding it would be removed because that was what their predecessor did. The librarian was able to speak to the patron face-to-face to correct the assumption.

The ones that did get to the public meeting stage often had an element of vitriol from certain community members, which manifested in social media posts, angry phone calls, and/or contentious board meetings. Librarians did not only encounter formal book challenges: at times they described people challenging programs, taking pictures of books they found objectionable, and loudly complaining about displays that they disagreed with. One librarian reported that challengers came back to board meetings to complain about the outcome well after the decision was made; this lasted for years.

The outcomes of the challenges varied. In some cases, the books were reinstated on the shelves after a committee deliberation. A school librarian noted that one of the books was relocated to an elementary school library in the district serving older students. When explaining the challenge's outcome, one librarian simply said that after months of fighting for the book, "we lost."

The librarians described several common experiences. The most common were threats, name-calling, and/or harassment during the challenge; seven of them experienced this. This manifested in multiple ways: some librarians were called names in public meetings (including "pedophile" and "groomer"). Others experienced threats in additional settings, including social media; a participant was shouted at while walking out to their car. One librarian had to sit for multiple hours in a public meeting listening to people insult them personally without being able to respond. They described it as "the worst two hours of my whole career, because no one focused on the books—it was like 'fire the librarian, [they're] a pedophile.'" They sat through the challenge unable to defend themselves and described tears streaming down their face during the ordeal. Another librarian expressed some relief at being harassed without their name being used: "The people who spoke it during public comment would frequently refer to the librarians. Rarely would they name any of us, but they would refer to the librarians, and they would use the language that ... you hear kind of nationally—groomers."

This tied into another common experience for librarians: five reported seeing influence/participation from outside groups during the challenge. A participant described their challenge as starting with a "local group of parents that is affiliated or was affiliated with Moms for Liberty in some way." One participant described attending board meetings and described the challengers: "They've coordinated with statewide and even like national organizations. So they

sort of had a playbook and they had people coming in from different parts of the state ... the school committee bounced back and forth on whether or not they were going to allow [them to speak].” Several participants mentioned the practice of “read-alouds” where the challengers would take passages out of context and read them aloud as a way to shock the community; this was the playbook alluded to in the previous quote.

As a counterpoint, the second most common experience reported was gratitude. This gratitude encompassed the community members, students, or patrons who supported them during the challenge, with six librarians experiencing this. Librarians effusively praised the ones who helped them get through it, from administrators to colleagues to library organizations and finally, to patrons and community members. Four librarians specifically mentioned their colleagues, and four mentioned outside library leadership organizations (such as ALA or a statewide library association). Many utilized statewide and national leadership organizations as resources when the challenge started; not sure of next steps, they reached out for help. One described contacting their state organization’s message board as “the most empowering thing I did because ... people writing back like ‘I got your back, call me’ ... [members of the organization’s leadership] started zooming with me and calling me every week, making sure I was being taken care of ... that gave me a little bit of a backbone.”

Additional common experiences shared by both school and public librarians included stating that they cultivated an inclusive collection, considering resignation or actually resigning, and policies not being a guarantee or the administration ignoring the set policy. A less common experience, but one still shared by multiple librarians, was having policies change since the challenge.

While this was not a study comparing the two groups of librarians, it was useful to view the data from the public librarian and school librarian groups separately. The public librarians' most common experiences were threats and name calling, feeling that their expertise was valued, and gratitude for community support. For the school librarians, common themes were policy-related (administrators ignored policy and/or librarian stated policy was not a guarantee), considering resignation or actually resigning, and feeling that their expertise was either valued or questioned by members of their administration. Overall, the school librarians had more negative experiences and lower morale, as well as perceiving less support from leaders.

### **RQ1: What Is the Impact of Book Challenges on Northeastern Librarians' Morale?**

Responses were mixed on morale: eight of the responses described low morale and six described high morale. As the participants reviewed my descriptions of their morale levels, this is an accurate portrayal of how they felt and not speculative. Within the two categories of librarians, the public librarians were mostly split (three with high morale, two with low morale) while the school librarians saw more low morale (six with low morale, three with high morale). In some instances, the librarian participant would specifically say that they had high or low morale; in other instances, I determined their morale based on their descriptions of their workplace and overall emotions toward it.

One librarian, in describing work after their library was targeted, stated, "There was a lot of mistrust of patrons, which resulted in constant vigilance and caused mental exhaustion. There was a lot of sadness, anger, confusion." Librarians described the challenges as taxing and time-consuming, with phrases like *emotional energy expended*, *thought about it often*, *exhausted*. The time spent thinking about challenges extended outside of work, with one participant stating, "I would fall asleep thinking about and would wake up thinking about it. And then at work I was

thinking about it all the time and I think I just had this sense of dread like at all times.” Anxiety and fear were also reported: *scared about losing job, scary, scared about personal safety, caused fear, caused concern*. One participant noted about the initial time around the challenge, “When I really think back to those first couple weeks, it was really scary ... ‘I have worked in this district for [multiple] years and I’m gonna get fired.’” Another librarian described a situation where they heard one of the people who had called them names at a public meeting and burst into tears, describing it as a “PTSD moment.”

While the librarians used these negative words to describe the challenges, there were also positive notes from the data. Support and gratitude were common themes among all of the participants. In detailing their experiences, participants often reflected on the support they had from colleagues, administrators, and their community in general. One librarian said about their colleagues, “I had a lot of lovely care from my coworkers who were like, take the time that you need and where do you need the help? And so that was really nice.”

Expertise—either valued or ignored—was a common topic brought up by the librarians. Four of the librarians felt that their expertise was valued, while two felt that their expertise was questioned. Of the four librarians who felt their expertise was valued, three of them reported high morale. The two librarians who had their expertise questioned both reported low morale. A librarian who was required to have their administrators review book purchases remarked, “So I will send it to [them]... [they] check and see if there's any titles that are like being talked about. That bothers me, because [that person] doesn't know more than I do, right?”



**RQ2: How Supported Do Northeastern Librarians Feel from Library Leadership During or After a Book Challenge?**

The participants had a wide range of experiences with their administrations and leadership. While it was not an initial goal of this study to explore supervisor experiences, three of the participants interviewed had supervisory responsibilities; two of those were library directors themselves. Those directors often reported to the library's board of trustees and also had dealings with additional town officials.

For the school librarians, most reported to their department head or principal/vice principal. In several cases, there were multiple layers of leadership and administrators who had a hand in working with the challenges. Responses varied on support from administrators: some were grateful for the support and others felt that their leaders could have done a better job. In this study, *administrators/administration* referred to everyone involved in the operation of the library, including assistant directors, vice principals, boards, and other people in a leadership role. Seven participants reported supportive administrations, three reported unsupportive administrations, and four reported mixed support.

Librarians who had "mixed" support experienced positive and negative actions by administrators; typically, they found one or more to be supportive and one or more to be unsupportive. In many cases, some administrators were fully supportive and others were not. Many reported that they had administrators who went against policy or wanted to immediately take the questioned material away. One noted feeling that administrators wanted it to go away as quickly as possible. Having support was appreciated; one such librarian described their workplace as "the dream place for this to happen," noting that they were surrounded by a community and leadership that wanted to help. Librarians who reported mixed support were

careful to describe who was helpful and who wasn't, making a clear distinction. When asked about anything else they wanted to add, one librarian noted:

I feel like the superintendent ... it took us a while to get on the same page. I felt very disrespected by [them]. And I understand [they] had other issues ... but it was really upsetting how [they] weren't trusting, and I didn't feel support for a while.

Another librarian described dealing with a hostile patron and feeling unsupported by library administrators, who gave them a "perfunctory check-in," but nothing beyond that. Three of the librarians who experienced mixed support considered leaving, and one librarian left their position. This librarian did not feel that they had the administration's support and cited the challenge as one of the reasons they left.

Between the two librarian groups, the public librarians mostly reported that their administrations were supportive, with one noting mixed support. The school librarians' responses were evenly split between supportive, unsupportive, and mixed.

There were links between how the librarians felt their administrations supported them and their morale. Out of the six librarians who reported high morale, five perceived their administrations were supportive and one felt mixed support. None of the librarians who reported high morale perceived unsupportive administrations. The librarians who reported low morale saw more of a mix: two felt they had supportive administrations, three felt mixed support, and three felt they had unsupportive administrations.

Very few participants mentioned self-censorship, but several mentioned that their practices had changed during the challenge, either by choice or by new policy. Some had to run their selections by members of the administration. One of the school librarians was told to create

an “opt-out” policy where the parent could “flag” a book that they didn’t want their child to take home. One reflected on pulling back on doing a large display for Banned Books Week:

It just doesn't seem very fun when you've actually been in that situation. And so it's not necessarily that I'm concerned about the risk, it's more of that I'm like, okay, we all lived this. I don't know that we need to make it like a promotional event.

Another described worrying, “What will Moms for Liberty think?” when selecting materials.

I did not actively seek out librarians who had supervisory responsibilities. However, three participants were in a supervisory capacity, and they had similar experiences. All three described needing to support their subordinates and were adamant about ensuring they were okay. One described speaking with the challengers themselves and just letting them talk, often for long 45-minute conversations: “Inside, I’m burning and screaming ... but some of these people are lonely and just want to be heard.”

The supervisors described situations where they tried to make sure their staff members were not handling complaints, and often found the staff themselves to be supportive. One described their policy for situations with difficult patrons: “My policy personally as a supervisor—I say, come, get me immediately. I don't want you guys dealing with it.” Two set up systems for challengers to bypass the staff and talk to them directly. These library supervisors found strength in their staff’s support. One said, reflecting positively on that support, “They showed a level of trust in me that I haven’t gotten from a library staff in a very, very long time. Even when things got rough and were looking really scary ... [they said] ‘We trust you. You got this.’” The participant further referred to their staff as “some of the best people on the planet,” and was grateful for their trust as well as their support.

**RQ3: How Do the Challenges or Threat of Challenges Affect LGBTQIA+ Librarian Morale?**

Three of the participants self-identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community; all were public librarians. Two LGBTQIA+ participants described an added element to dealing with the challenges. One noted, “And then also like being a part of the [LGBTQIA+] community, which I mentioned before, it was a little bit of an extra layer for me.” Another of the participants described being called out specifically by a member of the community after an LGBTQIA+ program was scheduled to be housed at the library.

Workplace morale among the librarians identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community was mixed: two reported low morale and one reported high workplace morale. All three LGBTQIA+ participants felt some support from their administrations, with two feeling supported and one feeling mixed support. All three reported threats, harassment, and/or name calling; while that was the most common experience amongst the full librarian sample, it was not universal. The three LGBTQIA+ librarians encountered challenges beyond the typical book challenge—as with the librarian above, much of the vitriol directed toward them or their libraries had to do with LGBTQIA+ programming. One experienced patrons physically removing Pride items off of their desk.

The LGBTQIA+ librarians, like many other participants, expressed gratitude for the people around them during the challenges. One found support in the community; others described support from their colleagues who checked in and from some administrators.

Many of the participants (including participants who did not identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community) described creating a library space that was inclusive for everyone. There is a misconception that librarians are only selecting materials deemed “liberal” or

“woke”—the librarians who spoke made it clear that they intentionally collected materials and created programming for everyone to enjoy. Those librarians emphasized that inclusion meant everybody, including those of different political backgrounds. Many of the librarians reiterated in their interviews that the content they selected was age-appropriate. Librarians discussed their processes for selecting reading materials and described pulling book reviews to make their decisions.

While I did not explicitly ask the participants who were not LGBTQIA+ about allyship, some examples came up. One librarian mentioned that a close family member was a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and that the challenge felt personal to them—the book challenged was a book they felt their loved one could have read growing up. Another librarian noted that a complaint about a book challenge came against their transgender colleague and described how challenging that process must have been for them.

One of the LGBTQIA+ librarians, when asked if there was anything else they wanted me to know, commented about being in a traditional blue state:

I think that [state] librarians really feel like they are safe from this sort of rhetoric and that we’re doing a good job and that we’ve achieved inclusion ... my experience is that because of this attitude, many librarians are actually less prepared to handle challenges.

This comment highlights that the work to create an inclusive space is not done.

The overarching research question sought information about librarians’ experiences during and after a book challenge. Overall, the librarians reported that the challenges were stressful, frustrating, and sometimes scary. The majority of librarians reported low morale, although some indicated high morale. The librarians had a mix of responses on how they felt about their administrators’ support during the process, although the librarians in supervisory

positions noted the need to ensure their followers were okay. Finally, three of the librarians studied identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community; two of the three described an “extra layer” in dealing with this issue.

## CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION

The participants who shared their stories had unique experiences, yet many of their situations followed a similar pattern: a challenge was issued, the librarian had to respond in some capacity, administration got involved, and the challenge was or was not resolved. Sometimes the challenge ended when the decision was made; sometimes this resulted in more pushback from community members. The aftermath in several instances included changes to how the librarians viewed or did their jobs. Even librarians who generally had high morale used words like *stressful*, *exhausting*, *humiliating*, and *scary* to describe the challenges. As reflected in earlier literature written during the book challenge spike, these challenges deeply affect librarians (Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2023; Kohlburn, 2023). Often librarians reported incidents beyond the typical book challenge, including patrons being furious about displays, website content, or programming. In some cases, the challenges were informal and possibly not reflected in national data, suggesting the problem is more extensive than reported.

The participants described mixed experiences. However, the most common experiences were name calling, harassment, and/or threats from the community. Both public and school librarians experienced these; while their experiences may have been different, the impact was similar. Librarians often wondered about their place in this latest iteration of polarization and the culture wars, with one saying, “Do I want to be on the front lines defending democracy?”

**Interpretation of Results****Librarian Morale**

Librarians who reported low morale often reported unsupportive administrations. Administrators’ actions affected how librarians felt in the workplace. This echoes previous work

on librarian morale that focused on administration, notably Fyn et al. (2019), S. P. Kennedy and Garewal (2020), and Berg et al. (2022). Morale levels were split overall, with eight librarians describing low morale and six describing high morale. Reporting high morale did not indicate that librarians had no issue with the book challenge or that it had no traumatic element—rather, it indicated that they were currently experiencing high morale in their positions, even if they admitted difficulty during the challenge itself.

Morale is vital. In a study on academic library turnover, morale was mentioned as the top factor in the work environment category for why people left (Heady et al., 2020). Only one participant in this study left their position; that participant reported low morale. However, three other participants reported that they considered leaving, and two of them reported low morale.

In their study on trauma in urban libraries, Dudak et al. (2022) modeled a library trauma cycle with three components: an inciting incident, the response from the librarian's community (colleagues, supervisors, patrons), and then internalization if the response was negative. The authors noted, "If the cycle is disrupted at any point—if a coworker responds well and the stressor is never allowed to occur—the worker may break out of this cycle" (Dudak et al., 2022, p. 655). Any of these challenges could be an inciting incident. It is to be noted that morale was generally lower for the librarians who reported mixed or unsupportive administrations, supporting the cycle.

Librarians valued gratitude and often mentioned help they received from colleagues, the community, and outside library organizations, which could help break the trauma cycle. This was reflected in the Dudak (2022) study as well: one of their recommendations to support librarians was developing statewide and national groups. Kendrick's (2017, 2020) work about morale in



both academic and public libraries also supports this finding. Gratitude for the support of the community was also reported by Clark-Hunt et al. (2024).

Another finding was that the librarians insisted—and made a point to bring up, without being asked—that they were collecting materials and building a collection for everybody. When they said “inclusive,” they were not referring to uplifting minoritized populations, but including everyone, both left-wing and right-wing. This contrasts with the conservative media’s framing of libraries as taken over by the far left of the spectrum and aligns with Oltmann’s (2016) findings on libraries building collections accessible to everyone.

While self-censorship was not a universal experience for the respondents, it still occurred, often in relation to new policies enacted by the administrators. Only one librarian reported changing the materials they ordered; however, the challenges loomed large in many of their minds. Kidd (2009) described the “prizing” and “fun” aspect of Banned Books Week and how it could be problematic; this was reflected in one participant’s statement that they were not going to do a big Banned Book Week display after the challenge: “I went through this already, it’s not fun anymore.” This was not self-censorship or soft censorship as defined in the literature, but it was still a change in practice. Many librarians had to change their practices after a challenge due to administrative mandates, such as needing to send reviews to administration when purchasing a book.

### **Leadership in Libraries**

Servant leadership is the idea of empowering and lifting up your followers. In a library, followers include not just the people one supervises, but the people one helps. All librarians are leaders in some way, even if they are not traditional supervisors. While servant leadership is a

widely recognized type of leadership, it is discussed infrequently in the LIS literature, although one article centered around it appeared in a faith-based publication (Olson, 2010).

Greenleaf (1977) pioneered servant leadership, and much has been written about it in a workplace context since then. Northouse's (2021) text on leadership brought many of those voices together, noting that several models contained the notions of empowering followers, "growing" followers, and helping them succeed. One of the librarian leaders in this study noted the idea of logging positive interactions with the community as a way to help staff morale, allowing them to see outside of the vitriol and the challenge.

All three of the respondents who were in a supervisory capacity over library staff talked about needing to ensure their subordinates/followers were okay. Two respondents instructed their subordinates to direct any calls on book challenges directly to them. One librarian supervisor recalled rushing into the library to handle a patron who was angry over an LGBTQIA+ display when they were supposed to be off that day. After the incident, this librarian worked with their board to set up de-escalation trainings with the staff. These behaviors demonstrate a main tenet of servant leadership—the idea of empowering followers to succeed. Servant leadership also involves the leader gaining something from their followers. One of the librarian supervisors mentioned gratitude for the trust of their staff. This extended to the librarians who were not supervisors; many of them felt that they needed to protect their students or patrons during these challenges.

The concept of expertise was mentioned by six participants: four recalled that their expertise was valued by members of their community and/or administration, and two felt that their expertise was questioned or ignored. One librarian's administration brought in an outside librarian to talk about a book; they wondered what qualifications the other librarian had that they

lacked, noting that they “didn’t love it” and “felt insulted.” No specific question was asked related to expertise, but the participants mentioned it of their own accord. Clearly, feeling their expertise was respected or not respected made an impact. This echoes a finding by Kohlburn (2023) that librarians thought an ideal quality for board members was “trust librarians to do their jobs without undue intervention or interference” (p. 98).

An alarming finding was that five librarians’ administrations attempted to contradict, bypass, or ignore already existing policy. Much of the literature (Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2023; Clark-Hunt et al., 2024; Nelson, 2023; Watson, 2020) advocated for strong policies as one of the best ways to protect intellectual freedom, but multiple librarians in this study reported that policies were not always followed. Some librarians used challenges as an opportunity to enhance existing policies; however, as one participant said, “policy can spare you some pain [but] it’s not a silver bullet.” Some librarians tried to intervene when administrators circumvented policies; one told their administrator they could not just take a book off the shelves because there was a process. One respondent created their own policy that simply did not allow for book challenges, noting that their administration left it up to their discretion as the expert.

Socially just leadership calls for radical servant leadership, in which “leaders must make not only the welfare of followers but the justice of followers the number one priority” (Letizia, 2014, p. 175). The diverse communities that rely on libraries deserve justice. The librarian participants attempted to provide justice to their communities by building diverse collections. Many of them stood firm behind their decisions and collections, even in the face of an angry public.

### **Effects of the Challenges on LGBTQIA+ Librarians**

Queer theory notes that sexuality is a spectrum, and while society views heterosexual relationships as the norm, those relationships are just one part of a larger ecosystem. Many book challenges are pushback against relationships that deviate from heteronormativity. Examining the LGBTQIA+ librarians' experiences and the books being challenged in the light of queer theory, it is clear that heteronormative power structures are still very much in place. The very fact that books are challenged for LGBTQIA+ content verifies that; the experiences of the librarians further support it.

Three of the participants self-identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Two of the three noted the “extra layer” of being a member of this community while materials and programs were attacked at their places of work. One of the librarians was a victim of people moving LGBTQIA+ books and hiding them, as well as taking Pride-related materials (stickers) off of their desk. Others noted hateful social media posts from community members about their libraries. Some librarian participants who were not members of the LGBTQIA+ community noted that their LGBTQIA+ colleagues were targeted or harassed by the public. One respondent felt that a challenge was personal to them because a close family member was part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Following national trends in books targeted for censorship, most of the challenged books mentioned by participants were LGBTQIA+ themed. The librarians mentioned *This Book Is Gay* and *Flamer*, among other titles. The pushback did not just apply to books: librarians in this study mentioned programmatic challenges and protests to LGBTQIA+ events, physically removing and hiding LGBTQIA+ materials, public harassment of LGBTQIA+ librarians, and a bomb threat called in on an LGBTQIA+ program. Recent ALA (n.d.) data show that of the top 10

challenged books of 2023, seven were challenged for LGBTQIA+ content. Five of these books appeared in the participants' challenges. Sometimes the challenges targeted LGBTQIA+ books that the libraries did not own.

There is some literature on marginalization of LGBTQIA+ librarians, but much of the research on LGBTQIA+ issues in libraries concerns resources and catalogs, including Drabinski (2013) and more recently Stahl (2024), who both looked at queer theory in approaches to the library catalog and subject headings. The lack of literature was also recognized in Kuecker's (2017) article on retention and recruitment of LGBTQIA+ librarians.

There is a large amount of research demonstrating that BIPOC librarians are marginalized within a field that proclaims to be progressive (Cunningham et al., 2023; Dalton et al., 2018; Garnar, 2023; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019). BIPOC voices were not identified in this study, but need to be thoroughly examined. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) was also not addressed through these responses; future research should examine it in the context of the LIS field and against the backdrop of book challenges.

### **Implications**

A common theme raised by the participants was the notion of gratitude. Librarians expressed sincere gratitude for the people who supported them through book challenges, including administrators, students, patrons, and colleagues. Some respondents found strength in this; one described students inspiring them to speak out at a public meeting, saying, "If [the student] can do it, I can." Therefore, libraries experiencing book challenges may benefit from community outreach and support. Librarian colleagues who checked in and supported their coworkers may have been a silver lining to a bad experience. Many participants spoke highly of the support they received from outside library organizations (e.g., statewide and national

organizations), demonstrating the good that those organizations can do as a support for librarians. While statewide and national organizations devote much time and energy to supporting intellectual freedom—the ALA has an Office of Intellectual Freedom, for instance—they may want to consider promoting themselves as supportive resources for those going through book challenges.

Librarians who have experienced book challenges may want to leave their positions. While nearly all the participants stayed, one did leave and cited the challenge as one of the reasons that they did. This particular librarian reported not having a supportive administration and cited additional reasons beyond the challenge, many administration-related. However, the research did not focus on librarians who left, and participants were recruited from listservs and communities for current librarians. It is possible that many former librarians have left due to similar experiences; this will need to be explored further.

Trauma in library workers was recently analyzed by Dudak et al. (2022), but they noted that this area has yet to be fully explored. The events participants described surrounding the book challenges, such as harassment, name calling, and worse, line up with instances of trauma. It is unclear why librarians stayed after these traumatic events; of the 14 librarians interviewed, many still showed high morale and appreciated the work they did. Going through a challenge may not mean a librarian needs to leave to find professional fulfillment in another job. However, it does mean that they need support. The trauma study by Dudak et al. provided recommendations for librarians and library leadership, including acknowledgement of the incident, larger support networks, and having conversations about traumatic incidents happening in the library.

An additional implication concerns expertise, which librarians mentioned in the context of feeling their expertise was valued and feeling that it was questioned. Library administrators and leadership should be aware of their librarians' professional identity and their pride in it.

This study was not intended to compare different groups of librarians, but there were differences between the experiences of school librarians and public librarians, including a noticeable difference in levels of reported morale. The interview protocol was designed to apply to both public and school librarians, and while the follow-up questions were a bit more specific, the protocol questions were generalized. To explore this issue further, future research could interview just public librarians or just school librarians and ask questions specific to their experience.

Book challenges are a part of library history, and LIS programs may talk about intellectual freedom and challenges in courses on collection development. However, they may not cover today's challenges. LIS instructors who are teaching the newest librarians may need to discuss how to best respond to these situations and what librarians can or should do as leaders. In addition, book challenges threaten diverse collections and are a social justice issue. As LIS programs respond to the call for increased focus on social justice (N. A. Cooke et al., 2016), challenges and collection diversity should be addressed so the newest librarians know what to do, how to respond, and where to get help.

### **Future Research**

Future research needs to further examine librarians who have experienced book challenges and similar events in libraries. While this study focused on one specific region, other regional studies have been published (Clark-Hunt & Creel, 2023; Kohlburn, 2023). As this conflict continues, librarians' experiences will continue to need examination. This study used

qualitative methodology to capture these experiences, but future researchers may want to utilize quantitative methods to look at factors beyond the experience.

Work has been done in the past on book challenge complaints themselves, looking for information in the text about the challengers' objections to the books (Knox, 2014, 2015). However, this research happened prior to the recent ALA-reported spike in challenges. Future research could examine the language of complaints as well as public comments from school board or library board meetings. In addition, as social media was utilized to coordinate challenges in different locations, social media posts by challengers should be studied. Multiple librarians in this study reported seeing outside influence and similar tactics at public meetings. Without social media amplification, these tactics may not have spread as much as they did; a case study analysis of the language of social media posts on town, school, or library pages could help understand challengers' motivations and the impact of social media. The methodology used by Knox (2014, 2015) could be applied in this research.

The current study was designed to explore librarians' experiences, but was not designed to offer solutions to successfully endure book challenges. Recent literature from Clark-Hunt et al. (2024) and Oltmann (2024) looked to provide those answers. I did not ask the librarians what they thought could be done to stop challenges, but the participants did in some cases discuss what they felt would be the best option. A larger study should be undertaken focusing on successful measures that protect collections and programs. Research on how to grow and secure inclusive collections should also be done and disseminated in such a way that practicing public and school librarians have access to it.

Some librarians reported their administrations were not following policy, which could have an impact on book challenges. A closer study on policies in both public and school



libraries—what they say, when they were updated, and how they are followed—should be implemented. As states begin to enact laws that protect librarians and books from censorship, research should examine the challenges after those policies take effect.

The data for this study were collected in the last weeks prior to the 2024 presidential election. 2025 saw the beginning of a new presidential administration closely aligned with the conservative media platforms and ideas discussed earlier. The second Trump administration has already issued multiple anti-trans executive orders and orders targeting DEI initiatives (The White House, 2025), which could have devastating consequences for librarians and the inclusive collections they try to build. It is possible that challenges from the community will continue or that legislation will demand the removal of books. Proposed cuts to federal funding could also very well impact librarians doing this work. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education (2025) released a statement called “U.S. Department of Education Ends Biden’s Book Ban Hoax,” which reversed earlier work by the previous presidential administration in fighting book challenges. In the aftermath of these executive orders, research needs to be conducted on how they are affecting librarians and whether the book ban spike continues. Cheshire and Stout’s (2020) research on what librarians were supposed to do after Donald Trump’s first presidency ended—and on librarian neutrality as a myth and the need to take a critical approach to the work—is perhaps more applicable today during a second Trump presidency.

Finally, while literature exists supporting LGBTQIA+ library users and programming, there is little on LGBTQIA+ librarians’ experiences within the field of librarianship. Research that focuses on members of this group in libraries, especially in the time of book challenges, needs to be done to better understand their experience.

### Limitations

A limitation of this research was the absence of BIPOC voices. Further studies need to be done to hear their experiences, perhaps on a more national scale. I acknowledge my positionality in this; it is possible that future research done in this way should have a librarian of color serving as the primary investigator. In addition, the term *BIPOC*, while encompassing, may have the undesired effect of lumping different groups' experiences together and presenting them as a shared experience, as opposed to those of separate groups with their own histories.

New Jersey, considered a northeastern blue state, was excluded from this study due to my longstanding active role in New Jersey libraries. New Jersey has had several nationally reported book challenges and recently saw a bill passed (Livio, 2024) that would not have passed without librarians advocating for themselves and sharing their experiences. As this was a northeastern blue state regional analysis, the lack of representation from New Jersey was a limitation. In addition, this study did not examine the political leanings of the respondents' towns/communities/schools. It is possible that some trends in responses may have been missed due to not asking these questions.

As any study needs to have a set population, this study did focus on the northeastern region. While other studies have been published focusing on different regions, it would still be beneficial to have a wider analysis from other areas of the country.

This research was conducted after the book challenges had been experienced. In some instances, the incidents were months to over a year away, and emotions felt or details may have been missing from participants' recollections. While this study focused on the impact of the challenges afterward, additional research—perhaps an ethnographic study—should examine librarians' reactions as a challenge is occurring.

Finally, as with any study employing a qualitative methodology, this research was limited by lack of generalizability and potential bias. I did my best to limit bias by using an outside auditor for the data and engaging in reflective practices during the research process.

### **Conclusion**

Progressive gains in the 2000s included the election of the first Black president, the legalization of marriage equality, and a more mainstream approach to social justice. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 resulted in a temporary reckoning with the United States' racist past. In 2021, a rise in book challenges started as a backlash to this progressive change, perpetuated through right-wing media amplification, intense political polarization, and social media tactics designed to shock and anger people.

ALA data show that the number of book challenges is increasing exponentially every year. Behind the numerical data are the librarians who handle these challenges and the associated vitriol and anger from their communities; their experiences need to be examined in more detail. While much has been written on censorship in libraries, research needs to continue on librarians who experience book challenges in this new, politicized atmosphere.

The librarians who responded to this phenomenological inquiry described mixed experiences; many reported low morale. The ones who self-reported high morale often self-reported supportive or partly supportive administrations. Librarians mentioned gratitude for the support they received from their communities and colleagues, which gave them strength to push through the challenges.

While we cannot know if the number of book challenges will ever go back to pre-2021 levels, it is imperative that educators and community members understand what these librarians have experienced. We cannot have diverse collections without the librarians who build them.



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## APPENDICES

**Appendix A: Letter from Auditor**

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22 January 2025

Cara Berg  
David & Lorraine Library  
William Paterson Library

Dear Ms Berg:

I have completed my audit and review of the files you sent me related to your dissertation research. I will state for the record that there is no conflict of interest concerning this review; we have never collaborated and have never had a teacher-student relationship. What follows will be the details of my review.

The first thing to note is that all dates related to the research calendar were reasonable and were followed. Also, in general the research log is complete and demonstrates clearly the path that the inquiry has taken. I have reviewed the log and find it to be well fitted to the research questions and to the overall thrust of the research. It was extremely useful to see the details of the interview results. All fourteen interviews are described in full and according to best practices of reporting. In the process of fulfilling this audit, I read each summary carefully, taking notes for further

examination and comparison. The completeness of the summaries made this a rather simple task. It should be noted that handling something like a book (or “work”) challenge can be quite variable, and the experiences of those dealing with the challenges are informative of what can possibly occur in these circumstances. It is noted here that the interviewees occupy different positions in their organizations; some are administrators, and some are staff librarians/sole librarians. The summaries of the interviews do portray the experiences of the participants as persons. A phenomenological analysis would have to depend on this kind of reporting. The body of the dissertation may well include direct quotations from the participants, providing further evidence of the phenomenological nature of the study as a whole. N.B.: Further examination will be reported upon when the coding log is analyzed. It is noteworthy that the recording of the summaries is in complete keeping with the advice in textbooks, such as those written by John Creswell (who is a decided authority in this field). He has written about the conduct and reporting of phenomenological research, and your reporting and recording definitely follow his strictures. This is a credit to the conduct of the inquiry.

The file including the coding of the responses and the experiences of the participants is extremely useful and offers further material for the overall analysis. The results themselves indicate the personal structure of the interview findings and also provide indicators for the examination to be covered in the text of the dissertation. For example, most of the interviewees express gratitude for the support of some others; some indicate local support, and others point to support from administrators, colleagues, and associations. A total of five indicate that, as a result of their experiences with book challenges and challengers, they managed a restructuring of the space for which they are responsible so as to be even more openly inclusive. On the negative



side, five report that they found policies to be of little or no help in resolving challenges. Seven go so far as to say that they were harassed because of their role in the challenges, and some were even threatened. Three report that aspects of their jobs changed or were altered in the aftermath of the challenges. Three state that they considered leaving their jobs after the experience; one interviewee reported leaving their position. These are only some of the coding results. They suggest that there is much to be examined as part of the complete dissertation. Once again, the coding evidences validity of analysis of the interviewees' experiences; the coding follows directly from the summaries of the interviews themselves. The reporting is complete and is in keeping with standards of inquiry; it demonstrates a fidelity to the reports by the subjects and shows clear categorizations of experiences.

You provide a thematic analysis relative to the stated research questions. This further demonstrates valid and complete grounds for the analyses of the completed work. For example, the respondents' own words are used to depict how they feel about the total experience ("awful," "humiliating," etc.). The effects on morale were stated as mixed in the summaries; this is a direct connection to the first research question. In keeping with the coding, mentions of support are related to the matter of morale. The analysis exhibits consistency with the intentional actions and ideations of the interviewees. It also illustrates intentional actions on the parts of the complainers/challengers. Perhaps just a bit more of this last phenomenon could be included. The second research question asks about the support the individuals experienced from the leaders of the libraries. There are successes and failures of leaders noted, and sometimes an individual experienced both support and a failure of support. The personal is clearly evident in the analysis. Of particular importance with respect to the nature of the study is that several individuals found

that administrators failed to uphold written policies. It is stated in the summaries that many of the policies were approved by committees or boards. Four of the interviewees are administrators, and they all report that they supported staff members and saw to it that staff were protected. In sum, most of the respondents said that they felt as though they were the “other” in the predicament. Expertise and professional position were sometimes denigrated. This is a clear phenomenologically related finding that demands attention in the text of the dissertation. The third research question has to do with the experiences of BIPOC/LGBTQQ+ respondents. There were no BIPOC individuals within this group, which is acknowledged as something of a limitation of the study. There were three respondents who identified themselves as LGBTQ+. This, in many ways, personalized the challenges for the librarians. Morale is reported as mixed, but there are indications that there was additional stress on certain individuals. This also further the sense of librarian as “other.” That point could be emphasized in the text of the dissertation.

On the whole there is validity to this study, as represented by the contents of the files I had a chance to review. The summaries and analyses are sound and appear to reflect the lived experiences of the research subjects. Apart from the very minor suggestions I include above, this is well-conducted research and is fully in keeping with the strictures and demands of phenomenological social science inquiry. You are to be commended for the conduct and the reporting evident in the files. Thank you for the opportunity to review your work.

Sincerely,

John M. Budd

Professor Emeritus

**Appendix B: Protocol Questions**

- Can you tell me about your library – approximate size, leadership structure?
- Can you tell me about the circumstance of the challenge – what was challenged, how did you respond, and what was the end result?
- During the challenge, can you tell me about your morale within your workplace?
  - During this period, do you recall experiencing harassment, discrimination, or personal attacks from the community or your colleagues?
- How supported did you feel from the library leadership during the challenge?

VITA

Cara Elizabeth Berg

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Master of Business Administration, Felician College, 2014

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