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SELF-CENSORSHIP IN MIDDLE SCHOOL LIBRARIES

by
Jennifer M. Gallagher

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by _____
Advisor

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ABSTRACT

Jennifer M. Gallagher
SELF-CENSORSHIP IN MIDDLE SCHOOL LIBRARIES
2008/2009
Dr. Marilyn Shontz
Master of Arts in School and Public Librarianship

Self-censorship and the middle school library was the focus of the research contained in this study. The purpose was to investigate, through OPAC searches, the holdings of fifteen New Jersey public middle school library media centers to determine if thirty titles were included in the collections. The titles selected received positive reviews from at least two sources as being suitable for students in the 7th through 10th grade or ages 12 and up. The titles included in the study contained one or more of the following topics: abuse (drug, sexual, or domestic), homosexuality, interpersonal relations, family problems, religion, self-mutilation, teenage pregnancy or violence. The study found that only two of the fifteen schools held 50% or more of the titles in the study, while two more schools held 30% of the titles. Based on these results, the research concluded that self-censorship is being practiced by media specialists in eleven of the fifteen schools. The study also found that titles containing sexual content were most often excluded from middle school collections and self-censored.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures	v
List of Tables	vi
CHAPTER I	
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
CHAPTER II	
LITERATURE REVIEW	7
CHAPTER III	
METHODOLOGY	19
CHAPTER IV	
ANALYSIS OF DATA	24
CHAPTER V	
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	31
REFERENCES	37
APPENDIX A	
Results of OPAC Searches	39

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
Figure 1	Number of Libraries Holding Each Title	27
Figure 2	Number of Titles in Each Library	28
Figure 3	Percentage of Titles Held by Each Library	29

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		PAGE
Table 1	Titles Included in Study	21

CHAPTER 1
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM
Introduction and Importance

Middle school is perhaps the most awkward of developmental periods in the life of a child. Students enter middle school as children and leave as young adults (Hofmann, 2008). Therefore, selecting contemporary fiction for a middle school library that is age appropriate but also meets the needs and interests of middle school patrons is a challenge for middle school library media specialists (LMS). While some middle school age students are content with fiction that is written for ten to thirteen year olds, many others have matured enough to enjoy and seek out fiction that is written for young adults, ages 12 to 18.

Library media specialists have an obligation to build a collection that is both age and interest appropriate. When age, interest, and maturity vary as widely as they do in a middle school population, the library media center has the potential to be a hot bed for reconsideration requests and controversy. Middle school media specialists may choose to avoid selecting controversial fiction for the collection, in essence, censoring books themselves before they have a chance to reach the shelf. The fear of a challenge can create self-censorship and saccharine collections that have the potential of overlooking the needs and interests of a very large portion of the population. The issue of self-censorship in middle schools is one that is worthy of further study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the holdings of fifteen New Jersey public middle school library media centers to determine if thirty fiction titles were included in the collections. The titles selected received positive reviews from at least two sources as being suitable for students in the 7th through 10th grade or ages 12 and up. The titles were contemporary, published between 1997 and 2008, and include one or more of the following topics: abuse (drug, sexual, or domestic), homosexuality, interpersonal relations, family problems, religion, self-mutilation, teenage pregnancy or violence. The researcher investigated the collections of middle school libraries in New Jersey through on-site visitations or through Online Public Access Catalogs (OPAC) searches.

Research Questions

1. Did middle school library media specialists select fiction titles that were deemed appropriate by reviewers for 7th through 10th graders but which also contained controversial topics?
2. Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the highest number of middle school library media center collections?
3. Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the lowest number of middle school library media center collections?
4. Of the schools in the study, which held the lowest percentage of titles? Which school held the highest percentage of titles?

5. Did middle school library media specialist practice self-selection where controversial topics are concerned?

Definitions

Challenged material- “Material that has received either or both of the following: (1) an oral complaint about the presence or appropriateness, or both, of the item in a library media center or (2) a written complaint which is part of the formal process specified in a library media selection policy, about the item’s presence or appropriateness. Materials are typically challenged because they contain sex, profanity, drugs, witchcraft, the occult, racism, ageism, sexism, lack of respect for authority, depressing scenes, and violence, among others” (McCain & Merrill, 2001).

Censorship - “Prohibition of the production, distribution, circulation, or display of a work by a governing authority on grounds that it contains objectionable or dangerous material” (Reitz, 2004-6).

Controversial topics - “Those viewed as meaningful and significant to some patrons and offensive or objectionable to others” (Niosi, 1998).

Library media center - “An area in a school that contains varied formats of materials and equipment with programs and services provided by a library media specialist and additional staff as needed and as funds are available. This is the more current term for a school library” (McCain & Merrill, 2001).

Library media specialist (LMS) - “A librarian trained to deliver library services to students in a school library media center on a walk-in basis or at the request of the classroom teacher. In addition to managing daily operations, the library media specialist supports the curriculum through collection development, teaches research and library skills appropriate to grade level, assists students with reading selections appropriate to reading level, helps classroom teachers integrate library services and multimedia materials into instructional programs, establishes standards of behavior for the library, and assists students in developing information-seeking skills and habits needed for lifelong learning. Synonymous with school librarian” (Reitz, 2004-6).

Middle school - “A school similar to a junior high school, typically serving grades 6 to 8” (Reitz, 2004-6).

OPAC - “An acronym for online public access catalog, a database composed of bibliographic records describing the books and other materials owned by a library or library system” (Reitz, 2004-6).

Precensorship/ self-censorship - “The restriction of materials from a library collection during the selection process by a collection development librarian or other person authorized to select, based on conscious or unconscious bias” (Reitz, 2004-6).

Reconsideration of materials - “A series of actions used to respond to a library user’s complaint about certain library materials” (McCain & Merrill, 2001).

Selection - “The process of deciding which materials should be added to a library collection” (Reitz, 2004-6).

Well-reviewed - For the purpose of this study, a title is considered well-reviewed if it has received positive reviews from at least two of the following sources: *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, and *Horn Book*.

YA - “an abbreviation of young adult, an adolescent, aged 12-18...”(Reitz, 2004-6).

Young adult literature - “Literature that appeals primarily to individuals between childhood and adulthood who are approximately 13 to 18 years of age” (McCain & Merrill, 2001).

Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) - “An adolescent literacy initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) intended to encourage teenagers to read and make use of library services and collections” (Reitz, 2004-6).

Assumptions and Limitations

Several assumptions and limitations applied to this study. It was assumed that titles were identifiable by the researcher through those libraries with online OPACs. The study was limited to middle school library media centers in New Jersey with a 080 zip code prefix. The study was further limited to library media centers with online catalogs or library media centers that were open to on-site visitations.

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CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW
Selection vs. Censorship

Library media specialists (LMS) have long grappled with some very real issues when selecting materials for inclusion in the school library collection. Space, budget, curriculum considerations, and patrons served are all valid considerations when selecting materials to be included in a library media center collection. When a library media specialist's personal values and opinions begin to influence buying decisions where controversial materials are concerned, however, a question arises as to whether a LMS is selecting or censoring (Van Orden and Bishop, 2001).

Lester Asheim most succinctly addresses the differences between selection and censorship in his article, "Not Censorship but Selection." Asheim addresses the subtleties of language where selecting materials for libraries is concerned. Asheim states,

“Censorship's approach is negative, seeking for vulnerable characteristics wherever they can be found - anywhere within the book, or even outside it. Selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect – not the right – but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading. The selector has faith in the intelligence of the reader; the censor has faith only in his own.” (Asheim, 1953, *Liberty or Control*, ¶ 1)

Several factors further distinguish selectors from censors. Censors look for items to exclude from collections, while selectors apply criteria as they compare materials and decide what to include. Censors look for what they want to remove, while selectors examine materials and choose what best fits the needs of their collection. Censors judge a book based on pieces and passages, while selectors look at the whole. Censors rely on the reviews of other censors, while selectors seek professional reviews. Censors will only build a collection of materials that represent their own point of view, while selectors look for book that represent a variety of points of view (Van Orden and Bishop, 2001). As Asheim stated, “A selector’s approach is positive, while that of the censor is negative.” (Asheim, 1953, Negative or Positive, ¶1). Regardless of whether selection or censorship is taking place, the result is the same: a book is not included in a library media center collection. However, where controversial materials are concerned, a library media specialist’s practice of selection or censorship will dramatically influence the collection. Any flaw whatsoever leads the censor to reject a work. “A selector says, if there is anything good in this book let us try to keep it; the censor says, if there is anything bad in this book, let us reject it” (Asheim, 1953, Negative or Positive, ¶1).

Self-Censorship

Library media specialists, the districts they serve, and the principle of intellectual freedom are all protected by selection policies. Board approved selection policies are legally binding documents that serve to establish and explain selection criteria and how the district would address a censorship challenge of materials in the library media center. In their truest form, selection policies should ensure that materials meeting the needs and interests of all patrons are included in a collection. However, selection policies rely on

individual library media specialists for implementation. In some cases, librarians and media specialists do not feel confident that they will be supported if challenged on controversial materials and, therefore, may not include them in collections (Johnson, 2007).

If a library media specialist chooses not to purchase materials because they are controversial and may be challenged, the library media specialist is practicing self-censorship, also referred to as precensorship. As defined in the *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Sciences*, precensorship is, "The restriction of materials from a library collection during the selection process by a collection development librarian or other person authorized to select, based on conscious or unconscious bias." Librarians who engage in self-censorship are often allowing their fears, attitudes, and perceptions of a potential challenge over controversial materials impact their buying decisions (Reynolds, 1999).

According to Reynolds in his article "Is it Worth Defending?" librarians need to question whether certain materials are not being purchased because of fear that their purchase will be challenged. If so, self-censorship is at work. Further, he ascertains that many librarians practice self-censorship, but also agonize over it. Reynolds feels that if librarians follow some simple rules, self-censorship can be avoided. He advises applying material selection uniformly. "Don't set up special hurdles for so-called controversial materials" (Reynolds, 1999, ¶8). Selectors must balance popularity and quality in selection decisions. Librarians are also warned not to overreact to the most recent materials challenge, organized protest, or comment that is critical of material in your library. The author feels that if a librarian's central question in selecting controversial material is, "Is it worth defending?" they have been put on the defensive by censors and will therefore practice self-censorship (Reynolds, 1999).

In some cases, librarians question whether a book is worth defending. In making selection choices, a librarian may claim to be “very selective” which may be a form of censorship. If controversial materials are judged more harshly than others, a librarian is exercising self-censorship (Rogers, 2002).

Whatever the reason or rational, librarians must guard against the practice of self-censorship. Librarians must not only understand but act on the basic premise that free access to materials is a democratic right for all citizens. Librarians also need to recognize their biases and the many forms of censorship in order to avoid them (Moody, 2004). Students should be given the freedom to, and trusted to, read good books as well as bad in order to forge their own opinions and satisfy curiosities.

Freedom to Read

The American Library Association (ALA) supports each citizen’s right to read in the *Freedom to Read Statement*. The freedom to read is constantly under attack by outside pressures. Librarians need to be mindful of such potential attacks and work to preserve the freedom to read. The ALA recognizes the gray areas of censorship that may constitute self-censorship when it states, “the shadow of fear cast by these pressures leads, we suspect, to an even larger voluntary curtailment of expression by those who seek to avoid controversy or unwelcome scrutiny by government officials” (ALA, 2008a, ¶ 3).

The *Freedom to Read Statement* upholds the First Amendment to the Constitution and affirms the following propositions in regards to selection and censorship.

1. Those selecting materials for a library do not need to agree with every idea in a work. They do, however, need to serve the educational process by making available knowledge and ideas that will increase learning.

No one individual should be deciding what another should or should not be reading.

2. Writers need to write in an authentic manner in order to prepare young readers for the challenges of life. Children need to be prepared to think critically and learn for themselves.
3. Librarians and publishers must offer a wide range of books; giving a choice will allow readers to determine a good book from a bad one (ALA, 2008a, ¶ 9,11, 14).

The Library Bill of Rights further supports a librarian's role in combating censorship and providing equal access to materials when it states, "Librarians should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (ALA, 2008b, ¶ 4). It is important for librarians to support the principle of intellectual freedom, not dissect individual titles. It is the responsibility of a school media specialist to provide answers and options to inquiring and curious students through offering a variety of materials (Waddle, 1998).

Young Adult Literature and the Middle School Dilemma

Young adult literature is written for an audience ranging from preteen to college age students. A young adult (YA), as defined by the *Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science*, is an adolescent aged 12-18 (Reitz, 2008). Young adult literature strives to meet the needs of its intended audience who are growing, changing, and learning who they are. Young adults are "beings who are constantly growing and changing, morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood" (Cart, 2008).

Young adult literature strives to portray an honest account of life however painful or "disagreeable" that may be (Cart, 2008).

Young adulthood is a unique time in life when physical, emotional, and intellectual maturity, develops at different rates for different individuals. When middle school librarians are adding young adult fiction to their collections, they need to meet the needs of the mature eighth grader and the immature sixth or seventh grade reader. Reviews help to guide the selection policy, but chances are that a well-balanced collection will contain young adult fiction that could leave a librarian open for a challenge. When middle school media specialists shy away from books that could invite a challenge they are doing a disservice to their students. Swiderek said,

This (self-censorship) is particularly problematic at the middle level as early adolescents expend tremendous energy defining and redefining themselves and trying on various identities and roles. It is also at the middle level that students find controversial issues immediately compelling, and, given the opportunity, 'think and wonder about their consequences. (as cited in Freedman & Johnson, 2000-01, ¶ 2)

In her article for *School Library Journal*, Mary Hoffman addresses the issues of building a middle school collection in regards to young adult novels. She asks the question, "How can we supply books that challenge the sophisticated while neither horrifying nor jading the naïve?" (Hoffman, 2002, ¶ 3). Hoffman talks of a gray area where great young adult literature lives. Books in the gray area have many positive elements and significant literary merit, but also believable honest characters that middle school readers will respond to. These books often contain elements that may invite a

challenge such as profanity or sex, but they are worth defending and having available to students despite the risk (Hoffman, 2002). Young adults, particularly in middle school, will continue to mature and change and the school media center collection needs to make available a range of young adult literature to support that growth.

Review of Research

Research into the practices of self-censorship by librarians and school media specialists has been conducted through both interviews of librarians and examinations of Online Public Access Catalogs (OPAC).

In 1998, Andrea E. Niosi completed “An Investigation of Censorship and Selection in Southern California Public Libraries; A Qualitative Study.” The study investigated the views of a small group of public librarians in California. Niosi was trying to determine selection practices by the librarians. The study found that while all of the libraries had selection policies, the librarians questioned rarely referred to them when choosing materials (Niosi, 1998). Where controversial materials were concerned, the librarians used different practices than were used for the rest of the collection for selecting and shelving books. Controversial materials were defined as “those viewed as meaningful and significant to some patrons and offensive or objectionable to others” (Niosi, 1998). The librarians in the study were found to take extra time and consideration when it came to selecting these materials. In two libraries, controversial materials for young adults were shelved in the adult section of three of the five libraries. One librarian admitted to keeping books on sexuality in a locked case while another did not even catalog a book, which is the most restrictive one can be with materials (Niosi, 1998).

In his 2002 study, Coley examined the OPACs of one hundred Texas public high schools for twenty YA books that were determined to be controversial. A list of YA novels was created based on positive reviews, awards and content including, among other things, profanity, sexuality, religion/witchcraft, rebellion, and crude behavior (Coley, 2002). The investigator determined that self-censorship would be at work in the libraries in the study if they possessed less than 50% of the controversial titles.

Coley chose to examine the schools' OPACs in order to avoid the subjectivity of questionnaires and interviews (Coley, 2002). The final results reflected that 82% of the high schools investigated did in fact engage in self-censorship based on the 50% ownership rate established for the study. Of the 82% of schools who were determined to be self-censoring materials, 18% of them owned none of the selected titles (Coley, 2002). It was determined by the researcher that the libraries did not apply the collection development policies in place when materials were controversial enough to potentially cause a challenge (Coley, 2002).

Researchers have also attempted to gauge self-censorship through surveys and questionnaires. In 2004, a study was completed on 150 libraries in Queensland, Australia. Kim Moody, the researcher, created a survey that attempted to identify public librarians attitudes and actual behaviors in regards to censorship. It was the researcher's belief that attitudes towards censorship and actions differed. The researcher carefully crafted her survey to avoid the word "censorship" in any form (Moody, 2004). The questions were also constructed to avoid bias. For example, the word "stereotypical" was used in place of "negative" or "racial" (Moody, 2004).

In addition to questions designed to gauge attitudes, respondents were asked to contemplate a list of materials with controversial content and asked how they would treat each item if they were in charge of purchasing for the library. The following is the list of choices: purchase (1 point on censorship scale), purchase and label (2 points on censorship scale), purchase and place on closed access (3 points on censorship scale), not purchase (4 points on censorship scale) (Moody, 2004). The study did reflect a discrepancy between attitudes and actions. All respondents agreed with the following statements:

Public libraries should cater for public interest in contemporary issues without promoting or suppressing particular beliefs and ideas, ... and Public libraries should provide their clients with access to information from a variety of sources and agencies. (Moody, 2004, *The Impact of the Opinions of Librarians*, ¶ 2).

However, only 32% of the respondents received a low censorship rating on the scale based on their responses as to their actions towards the list of titles (Moody, 2004). Respondents stated a variety of reasons for their decisions including accuracy of information in the books, the need to represent a balance of views, confliction with personal values, at odds with community values, and the sociopolitical views within the Australian community at the time of the study (Moody, 2004).

The researcher determined that due to the low response rate of her study (17.4%) further research would need to be completed to validate the study. However, it was felt that the data supported previous research that “anticensorship attitudes are not always indicative of censorship behaviors and that some librarians employ self-censorship of controversial materials to avoid a challenge” (Moody, 2004).

Summary

Studies involving self-censorship by librarians have looked into practices in high school media centers and public librarians. No study thus far has researched the most potentially controversial arena: the middle school media center. This study will look at the collections of New Jersey middle school media centers to determine whether the media specialists are practicing self-censorship.

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CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the holdings of fifteen New Jersey public middle school library media centers to determine if thirty fiction titles selected by the researcher were included in the collections. The titles had all received positive reviews from at least two sources as suitable for students in the 7th through 10th grade. The titles were contemporary, published between 1997 and 2008, and included one or more of the following Sears subject headings: abuse (drug, sexual, or domestic), homosexuality, interpersonal relations, family problems, religion, self-mutilation, teenage pregnancy or violence. The researcher investigated the collections of middle school libraries in New Jersey through on-site visitations or through Online Public Access Catalogs (OPAC) searches.

Middle school library media specialists may be fearful of a book challenge and therefore practice self-censorship where books containing controversial topics are considered. A significant lack of controversial books in a collection may be a sign that self-censorship is being practiced and has limited the library's collection and the students' freedom to read.

Research Questions

1. Did middle school library media specialists select fiction titles that were deemed appropriate by reviewers for 7th through 10th graders but which also contained controversial topics?
2. Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the highest number of middle school library media center collections?
3. Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the lowest number of middle school library media center collections?
4. Of the schools in the study, which held the lowest percentage of titles? Which school held the highest percentage of titles?
5. Did middle school library media specialists practice self-selection where controversial topics are concerned?

Sample and Population

Follett Library Resources's online curriculum development Web site, Titlewave, was the primary source for the titles included in this study. The researcher used the curriculum development feature to determine thirty young adult novels on six topics: sexuality (heterosexuality, homosexuality, or descriptions of sexual activity), suicide/death, pregnancy, abuse (drug/alcohol, sexual, physical, or emotional), self-mutilation, and violence (Table 1). For inclusion in the study, titles had to be reviewed as appropriate for students in grades seven through ten or the equivalent by at least two of the following sources: *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *School Library Journal*. If reviews were unavailable in Titlewave, the researcher consulted *A Core Collection for Young Adults* to locate and read reviews from the same sources noted above.

Titles Included in Study

Table 1

Titles	Authors
<i>7 Days at the Hot Corner</i>	Terry Trueman
<i>Absolutely, Positively Not</i>	David LaRochelle
<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i>	Sherman Alexie
<i>Babylon Boyz</i>	Jess Mowry
<i>Box Out</i>	John Coy
<i>Boy Meets Boy</i>	David Levithan
<i>Can't Get There From Here</i>	Todd Strasser
<i>Confessions of a Not It Girl</i>	Melissa Kantor
<i>Contents Under Pressure</i>	Lara M. Zeises
<i>Crackback</i>	John Coy
<i>Cut</i>	Patricia McCormick
<i>Don't Think Twice</i>	Ruth H. Pennebaker
<i>The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things</i>	Carolyn Mackler
<i>Fat Kid Rules the World</i>	K.L. Going
<i>The First Part Last</i>	Angela Johnson
<i>Forged by Fire</i>	Sharon M. Draper
<i>Freaky Green Eyes</i>	Joyce Carol Oates
<i>Friction: A Novel</i>	E.R. Frank
<i>Geography Club</i>	Brent Hartinger
<i>Getting It</i>	Alex Sanchez
<i>The Girl With a Baby</i>	Sylvia Olsen
<i>Hero</i>	S.L. Rottman
<i>The House You Pass on the Way</i>	Jacqueline Woodson
<i>Keesha's House</i>	Helen Frost
<i>One of those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies</i>	Sonya Sones
<i>Someone Like You</i>	Sarah Dessen
<i>Thwonk</i>	Joan Bauer
<i>Vandal</i>	Michael Simmons
<i>The Year They Burned the Books</i>	Nancy Garden
<i>You Don't Know Me</i>	David Klass

Data Collection Techniques and Procedures

Fifteen middle schools in South Jersey with a student enrollment between 400 and 1,000 students were investigated to see if they held the thirty fiction titles. The middle schools in the study were identified as such by the State of New Jersey's Department of Education Web site (NJ Dept of Ed., 2008). Middle schools in the state were narrowed down to middle schools in South Jersey using NJ zip codes. Only middle schools with a 080 prefix zip code were included in the study. The researcher determined if the selected titles were included in the sample libraries in two different ways. Searches for the selected titles will be completed, when possible, through an online search of the sample school's OPAC. If the OPAC was not accessible online, an on-site visitation was made to determine if the titles are included in library media center collections.

Variables

Variables in this study were enrollment size and grade levels of each middle school. Another variable was the books and their subject headings.

Validity and Reliability

According to the authors of *Basic Research for Librarians*, "empirical validity is based on external, objective criteria" (Powell & Connaway, 2004). Therefore, the data collected in this study was considered valid in an empirical sense. The study was reliable based on a pretest on a school library media center not included in the sample.

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CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Procedures and Methods

The researcher compiled a list of thirty fiction titles using Follett Library Resources' Titlewave, an online database of library materials that includes reviews and Sears subject headings. All titles were checked for availability, positive reviews, and either a 7th-10th grade or ages 12 and up recommendation. Titles were also chosen based on the Sears subject headings of abuse (drug, sexual, domestic), homosexuality, interpersonal relations, family problems, religion, self-mutilation, teenage pregnancy or violence.

Fifteen middle schools in South Jersey, specifically schools with a 080 zip code prefix were included in the study. The researcher completed online catalog searches of nine schools and conducted on-site visits to the remaining six schools. A total of 450 title searches were performed. As the results were obtained, the researcher entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet.

Results

Research Question 1: Did middle school media specialists select fiction titles that were deemed appropriate by reviewers for 7th through 10th graders but which also contained controversial topics?

The research found that some middle school media specialists did select titles that were reviewed for 7th through 10th grade students and some did not. Two schools held 50% or greater of the titles, two schools held 30% or more. The remaining eleven schools in the study held fewer than 30% of the titles (see Figure 3).

Research Question 2: Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the highest number of middle school media center collections?

The First Part Last by Angela Johnson, *Thwonk* by Joan Bauer, and *You Don't Know Me* by David Klass were each found in eight of the fifteen school library media centers in the study (see Figure 1).

Research Question 3: Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the lowest number of middle school library media center collections?

Babylon Boyz by Jess Mowry, *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan, *Don't Think Twice* by Ruth H. Pennebaker, *The Girl with a Baby* by Sylvia Olsen, and *Geography Club* by Brent Hartinger were not found in any of the fifteen library media collections (see Figure 1).

Research Question 4: Of the schools in the study, which held the lowest percentage of titles? Which school held the highest percentage of titles?

Kingsway Regional Middle School in Woolwich held the highest percentage of titles. Kingsway, with a student population of 583 students, held 63% or nineteen out of the thirty titles on the list (see Figures 2 and 3).

Carusi Middle School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey held the lowest percentage of titles, 3.3% or one out of thirty titles. Carusi's student enrollment was 980 students (see Figures 2 and 3).

Research Question 5: Did middle school library media specialists practice self-selection where controversial topics are concerned?

In his 2002 study (as described in Chapter II), Coley determined that if schools held fewer than 50% of the titles, self-censorship was being imposed. According to that standard, 86% of the schools in this study are practicing self-censorship. Only two schools out of fifteen held 50% or greater of the titles included in the study (see Figure 3).

Figure 1
Number of Libraries Holding Each Title

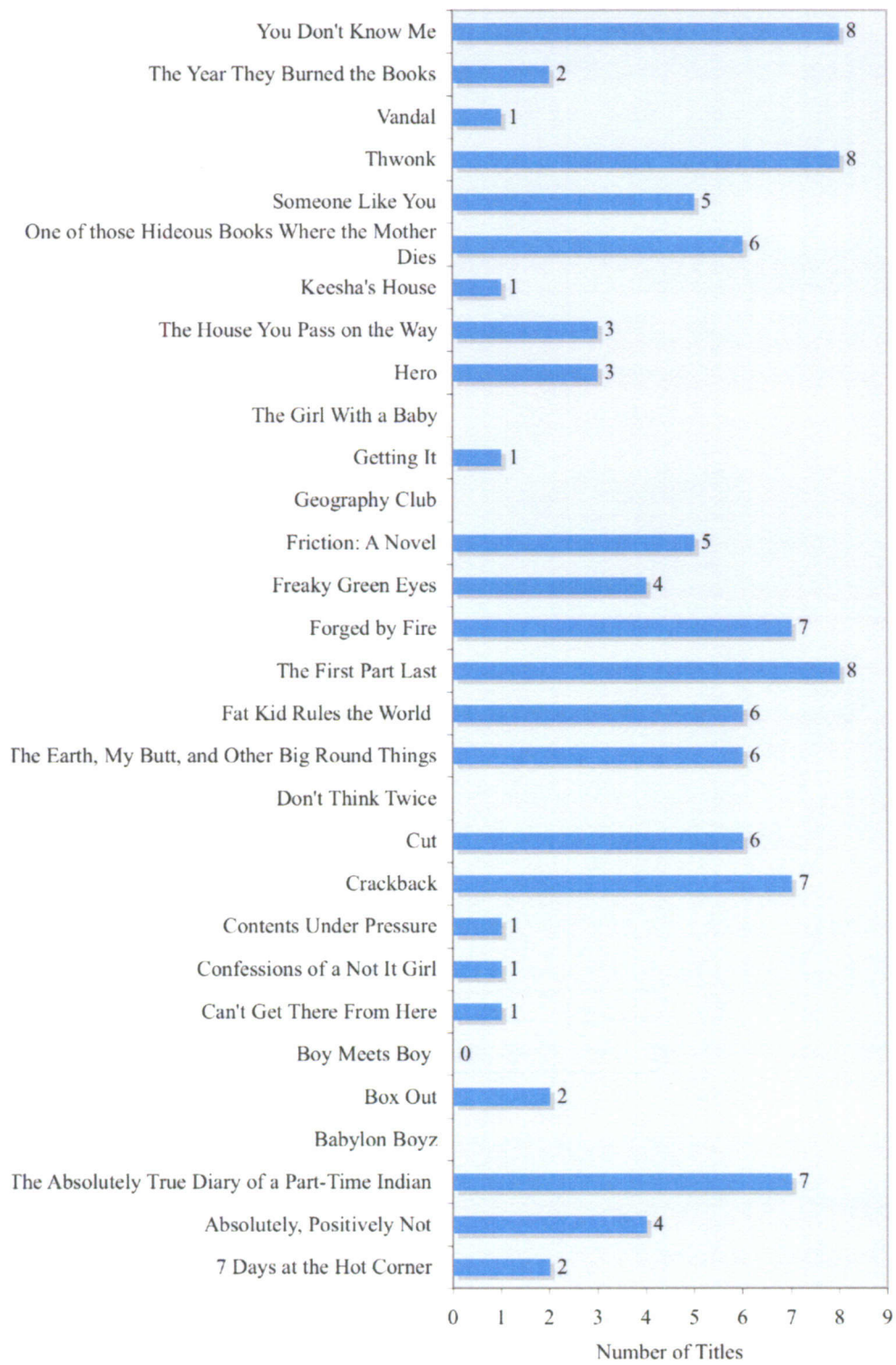


Figure 2
Number of Titles in Each Library

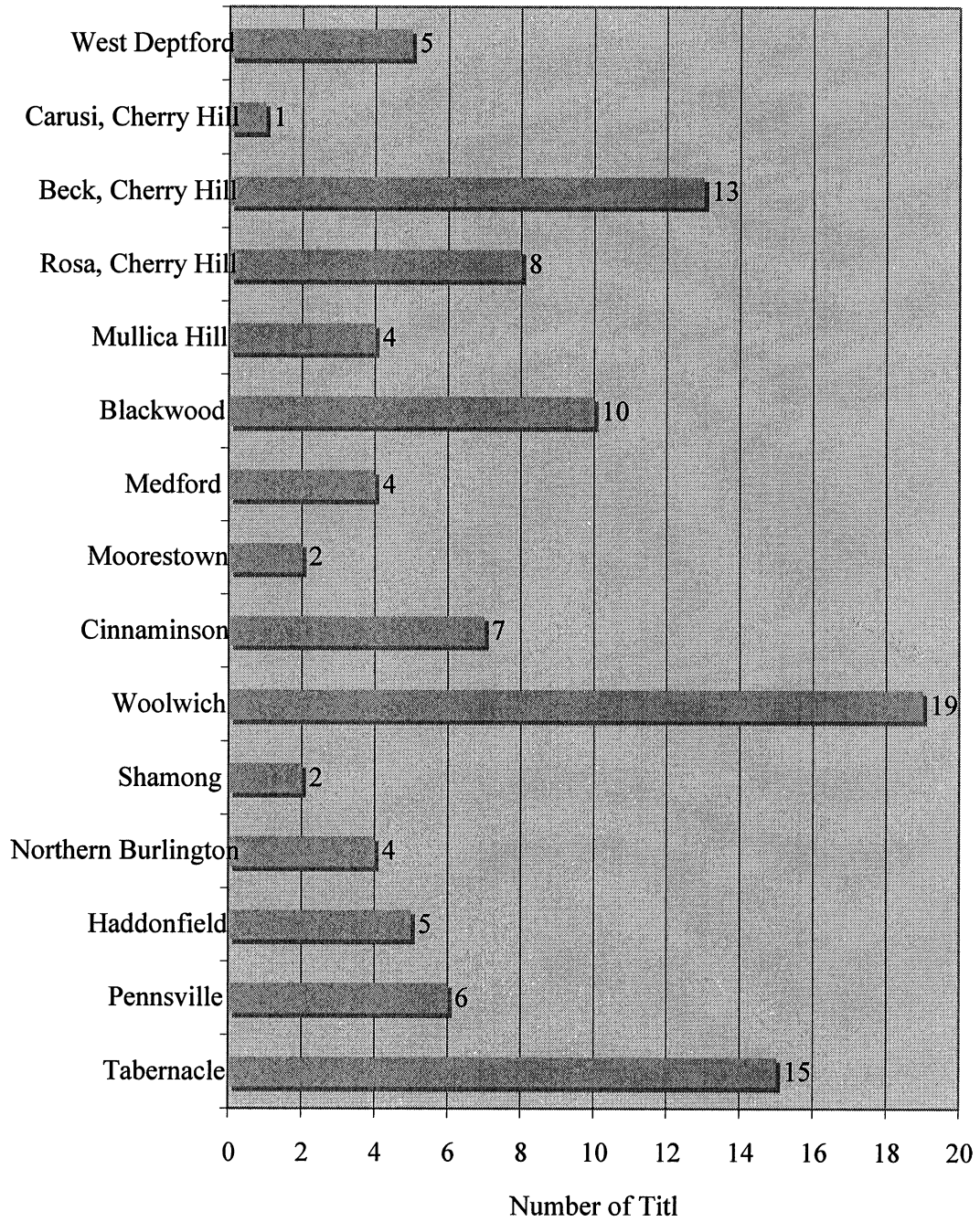
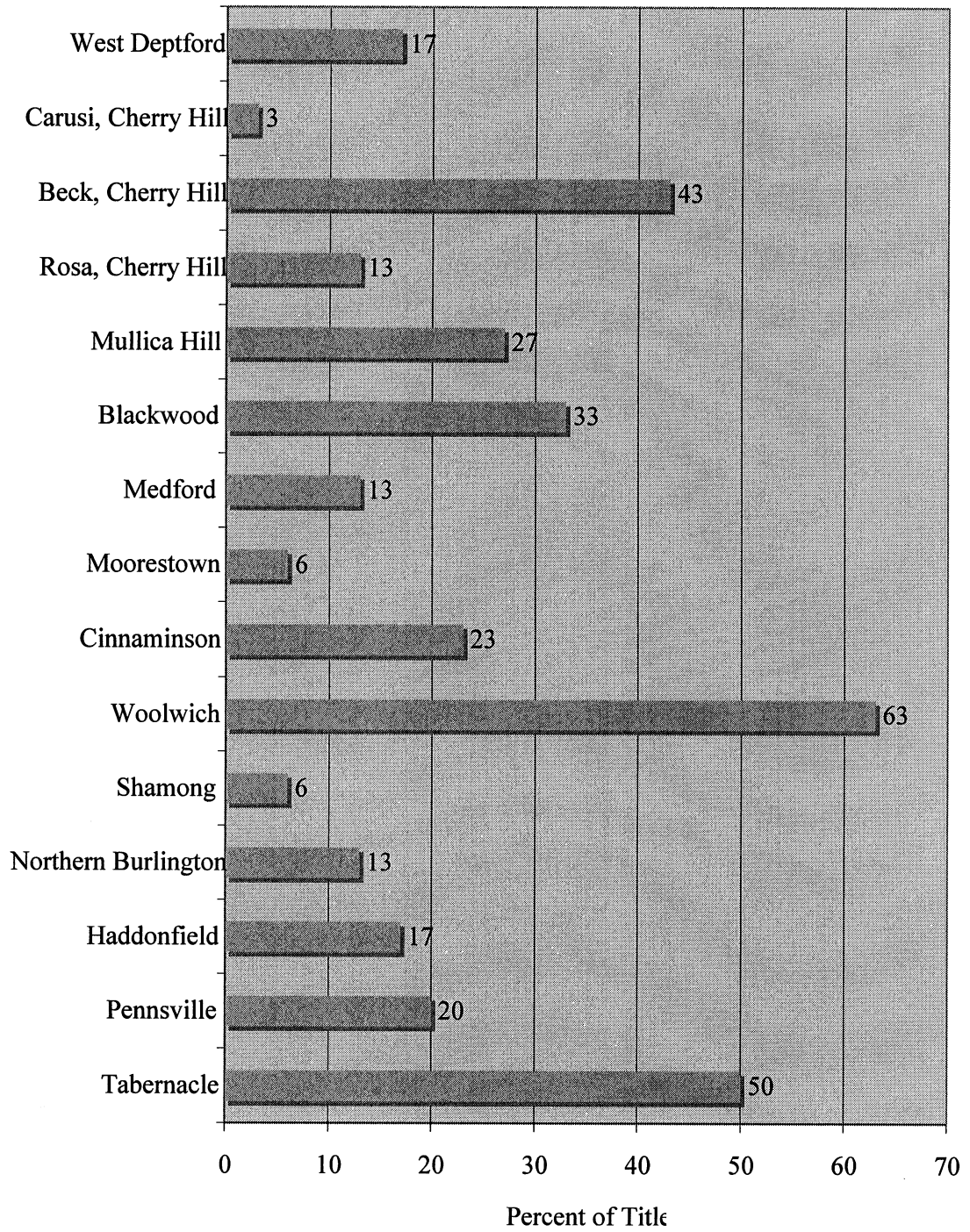


Figure 3
Percentage of Titles Held by Each Library



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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Self-censorship has become such an issue in school media centers that it made the cover article in *School Library Journal* in February of 2009 as this researcher was conducting her study. The article, entitled “A Dirty Little Secret,” describes self-censorship as “rampant and lethal” in school media centers. Media specialists will not admit to bypassing good books because of a potential challenge, but it appears that that is what is happening (Whelan, 27).

The purpose of this study was to determine the existence of thirty fiction titles in middle school libraries that have been deemed appropriate by reviewers for 7th-10th grade students or students ages 12 and up. Titles all contained a subject that may be deemed controversial. A significant lack of titles indicated that self-censorship by school media specialists has taken place.

The researcher conducted on-site or online OPAC searches of fifteen middle schools in South Jersey. A total of 450 searches were completed. The results of the study indicated that self-censorship might have occurred in eleven of the fifteen schools in the study.

Interpretation of the Results

1. Did middle school library media specialists select fiction titles that were deemed appropriate by reviewers for 7th through 10th graders but which also contained controversial topics?

According to the results obtained through OPAC studies, it would appear that more school media specialist practice self-censorship than not. Out of the fifteen schools studied, only two held 50% or more of the titles in the study. Two others held 30% or more of the titles, while the remaining eleven schools held 27% or less of the thirty titles on the list.

In Coley's 2002 study of high school libraries (as described in Chapter II), self-censorship was being imposed if a library held less than 50% of the titles in the study. According to those guidelines, eleven out of the fifteen schools studied are practicing self-censorship.

2. Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the highest number of middle school library media center collections?

Three of the titles included in the study, *You Don't Know Me* by David Klass, *Thwonk* by Joan Bauer, and *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson, were part of the collections of eight of the fifteen schools in the study. The three books are not similar in topic but are all either written by famous, favorite authors of young adult literature (Klass and Bauer) or award winning in the case of *The First Part Last*, which received both the Coretta Scott King Award and Michael L. Printz Award in 2004. These factors may have influenced their inclusion.

3. Which of the titles selected for this study existed in the lowest number of middle school library media center collections?

Five books out of the thirty titles were not found in any of the fifteen media centers included in the study. Two of the four, *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan and *Geography Club* by Brent Hartinger, have homosexual themes and characters. Two others, *Don't Think Twice* by Ruth H. Pennebaker and *The Girl with a Baby* by Sylvia Olsen deal with the topic of teenage pregnancy. Because of the common thread of sexual content, it would seem that the results of this study are in line with others of its kind. In a survey of 655 media specialists conducted by *School Library Journal* in 2009 for its article "A Dirty Little Secret," sexual content ranks as the number one reason media specialists shy away from buying books. A total of 87% of the respondents ranked sexual content as the main reason they choose not to buy a book (Whelan, 2009).

The final book of the five that were not found in any of the school media centers was *Babylon Boyz* by Jess Mowry. This novel deals with hard-core drug use and abuse that may be more likely to be found in urban areas.

4. Of the schools in the study, which held the lowest percentage of titles? Which school held the highest percentage of titles?

John A. Carusi Middle School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey held 3% of the titles in the study. These results are interesting for a number of reasons. John A. Carusi, with 969 students, had among the highest student enrollment of all of the schools in the study. The researcher felt that the larger schools might have larger budgets and, therefore, a larger percentage of titles if self-censorship was not being practiced. Also of interest is the fact that Carusi Middle School is in the same district and of similar size to Henry C. Beck

Middle School that held 43% of the titles and Rosa International Middle School that held 13% of the titles.

Kingsway Regional Middle School in Woolwich Township held 63% of the titles in the study. Kingsway houses only 7th and 8th graders and has a student population of 604. It may be important to note that a key difference is the absence of 6th graders in this school.

5. Did middle school library media specialists practice self-selection where controversial topics are concerned?

According to the standards set by Coley in his 2002 study, thirteen of the schools included in this study were practicing self-censorship to some degree. Only two of the fifteen schools achieved the 50% standard set by Coley in his 2002 study. It could be argued that three additional schools that held at or above 30% of the titles may not be practicing self-censorship, rather choosing titles that are appropriate for their patrons.

Significance of the Results

The results of this study could be of significance to middle school library media specialists. The results would be particularly significant to the middle schools included in the study. Middle school media specialists may be working without the benefit of other media specialists who could take part in the selection and collection building process. It may be beneficial for the library media specialists of the school media centers in this study to see the results in order to gauge where their collection falls in comparison to other middle schools.

Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, it would seem that self-censorship is being practiced in at least eleven of the fifteen schools in this study. School library media specialists appear to be making choices that are not based on standard selection criteria such as positive reviews. What remains to be seen are the reasons behind the exclusion of certain titles and topics from school library media collections.

Recommendations for Further Study

Middle schools are in a unique position when it comes to collection development. School media specialists need to address the reading levels and interests of a variety of maturity levels when building a collection. Several considerations must be taken into account when considering whether a library media specialist is practicing self-censorship or using the selection process to build a collection that is appropriate for the patrons of the school. A future study might include not only an OPAC search, but also, a survey of school media specialists including questions that would determine the climate of the school community; past challenges to the school media center collection; and administrators' attitudes towards the media center.

Another aspect of this study that may have affected the results was the specific novels chosen for inclusion. A future study might only include award-winning books with controversial content. Future studies might also look at themes or topics rather than individual titles.

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APPENDIX A

Results of OPAC Searches

Titles	Authors	Tabernacle	Pennsville	Haddonfield	Northern Burlington	Shamong	Woolwich
<i>7 Days at the Hot Corner</i>	Terry Trueman	1	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Absolutely, Positively Not</i>	David LaRochelle	0	1	1	0	0	1
<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i>	Sherman Alexie	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Babylon Boyz</i>	Jess Mowry	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Box Out</i>	John Coy	1	1	0	0	0	0
<i>Boy Meets Boy</i>	David Levithan	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Can't Get There From Here</i>	Todd Strasser	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Confessions of a Not It Girl</i>	Melissa Kantor	1	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Contents Under Pressure</i>	Lara M. Zeises	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Crackback</i>	John Coy	0	1	0	1	0	0
<i>Cut</i>	Patricia McCormick	1	1	0	1	0	1
<i>Don't Think Twice</i>	Ruth H. Pennebaker	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things</i>	Carolyn Mackler	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Fat Kid Rules the World</i>	K.L. Going	1	0	1	1	0	1
<i>The First Part Last</i>	Angela Johnson	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Forged by Fire</i>	Sharon M. Draper	1	0	1	0	0	1
<i>Freaky Green Eyes</i>	Joyce Carol Oates	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Friction: A Novel</i>	E.R. Frank	1	1	0	0	1	1
<i>Geography Club</i>	Brent Hartinger	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Getting It</i>	Alex Sanchez	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>The Girl With a Baby</i>	Sylvia Olsen	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Hero</i>	S.L. Rottman	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>The House You Pass on the Way</i>	Jacqueline Woodson	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Keesha's House</i>	Helen Frost	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>One of those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies</i>	Sonya Sones	1	1	0	0	1	1
<i>Someone Like You</i>	Sarah Dessen	1	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Thwonk</i>	Joan Bauer	1	0	1	1	0	1
<i>Vandal</i>	Michael Simmons	1	0	0	0	0	0
<i>The Year They Burned the Books</i>	Nancy Garden	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>You Don't Know Me</i>	David Klass	1	0	1	0	0	1
Totals from Each School		15	6	5	4	2	19

Cinnaminson	Moorestown	Medford	Blackwood	Rosa, Cherry Hill	Mullica Hill	Beck, Cherry Hill	Carusi, Cherry Hill	West Deptford
0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
7	2	4	10	8	4	13	1	5

