

## **Prepared to defend? Results of a gap analysis to measure school librarian students' prior knowledge and learning of intellectual freedom concepts**

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### **Abstract:**

This study was conducted to examine the preparation of school librarians around intellectual freedom issues. The pilot study was conducted with school librarian students at three universities. A gap analysis was used by the researchers to measure the gap between prior knowledge about intellectual freedom that students believed they possessed upon entering a school library preparation program and the knowledge they believed they possessed when leaving the school library preparation program. A survey was administered that was divided into the three aspects of self-awareness, education, and willingness to take action. The educational gaps are focused on in this article with recommendations to continue to analyze the data in further publications. Additionally, the researchers provide suggestions for improving school librarians' preparation in the area of intellectual freedom.

**Keywords:** access | gap analysis | intellectual freedom | policies | privacy | school librarian preparation

### **Article:**

This study was conducted to examine the preparation of school librarians around intellectual freedom issues. The pilot study was conducted with school librarian students at three universities. A gap analysis was used by the researchers to measure the gap between prior knowledge about intellectual freedom that students believed they possessed upon entering a school library preparation program and the knowledge they believed they possessed when leaving the school library preparation program. A survey was administered that was divided into the three aspects of self-awareness, education, and willingness to take action. The educational gaps are focused on in this article with recommendations to continue to analyze the data in further publications. Additionally, the researchers provide suggestions for improving school librarians' preparation in the area of intellectual freedom.

For twenty-first-century librarians, it is not enough to love books and reading. They also need to be prepared to be proactive and competent in what intellectual freedom means. The term is used so often in the preparation of future school librarians and in the job itself that what it actually encompasses becomes somewhat vague and ambiguous. Intellectual freedom consists of three components: access, diversity, and privacy. These three components guide our work in the profession and act as a guideline for creating and enforcing library policies and practices.

This study is a report on a survey undertaken to measure the gap between the prior knowledge concerning intellectual freedom when entering a school librarian preparation program and the knowledge gained from the coursework upon finishing the program. The research questions this study seeks to address are the following:

- How well do school librarian preparation programs prepare students to understand the full range of aspects involved in intellectual freedom?
- How well prepared do they feel to become active advocates of that freedom?

The related sub-questions are as follows:

- What, if any, differences or gaps exist between how students describe or rate
  - a. Their prior knowledge and their level of knowledge or experience gained for a particular aspect of intellectual freedom (IF)?
  - b. The importance of learning about a particular aspect of intellectual freedom?

Through this study, we hope to provide baseline data that library and information science faculty can use to begin to assess their curricula and teaching in terms of preparing school librarians to both understand and defend intellectual freedom.

## **Literature Review**

Since intellectual freedom is a core value of the school librarian profession, it is important to note what preparations are being taken by programs that participate in the initial preparation of school librarians to explain this concept both theoretically and practically. Mere exposure to the growing number of issues about intellectual freedom does not always help pre-service school librarians to understand the intricacies of the matter. Intellectual freedom is more than possessing the knowledge of its existence; it is also the willingness to be an advocate for its practice within the school library program. The principles of intellectual freedom have most often been explained in courses and practices about the classification and cataloging of materials, the execution of an ethical and efficient reference search, the determination of bias and reliability of websites, the development of policies and procedures needed in children's and young adult services, and the creation of a collection that reflects the diversity of one's school, state, and nation. Intellectual freedom is often explored in terms of censorship challenges, universal access, opposing viewpoints, and selection issues (Seroff, 2015). Yet even with the teaching of intellectual freedom as a recurring theme, many new librarians still support intellectual freedom in theory rather than practice (McNicol, 2016). Library science programs are typically structured to offer a combination of required and elective courses in library science and information science. The required courses focus on core library skills such as selecting and weeding the collection, cataloging the collection,

and developing ethical reference skills. In the late twentieth century, new classes with an emphasis on virtual and electronic information and access were created:

Recent courses in information retrieval, digital libraries, information policy, globalization of information, theories and practices of reading, and social activism and advocacy highlight intellectual freedom in other ways. These include licensing policies, ideological use of Internet filtering systems, the digital divide, intellectual property, pressure groups, library fees, services to marginalized groups, information monopoly, multiculturalism, and minority recruitment. (Samek, 2001, p. 40)

Social activism and intellectual freedom practices have been at odds over the last few years within the school library profession (Knox, 2020). School librarians are having to redefine their roles in society and transform the landscape of the twenty-first-century library, which argues for free speech, free and unrestricted access to information of all viewpoints, and the free and open dissemination of information. As school librarians, we need to reach out to the myriad of patrons who are looking for information and understanding of these complex issues and become the advocates for intellectual freedom that the American Library Association (ALA) Library Bill of Rights asserts that we need to be.

### **ALA History of Intellectual Freedom**

With the introduction of the Library Bill of Rights in 1939, the library profession became "more liberal in its views of censorship and protection of intellectual freedom" (Lukenbill & Lukenbill, 2007, p. 1). With intellectual freedom being defined as a core value that promotes "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction ... and provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause, or movement may be explored" (ALA, 2007), the school librarians became advocates for freedom of speech and for ensuring free access to resources and materials available in print and, today, also electronically. The history of the ALA policy has been updated and redefined, but the original Library Bill of Rights is the foundation for all the policies and events included below:

- the Library Bill of Rights (1939);
- protecting the freedom to read (1954);
- ALA's Code of Ethics (1939, 1981, 1995, 2008);
- the establishment of the Office of Intellectual Freedom (1967);
- how to respond to challenges and concerns about library resources (1939; now includes a toolkit for advocacy and the creation of policies and procedures);
- minors and Internet activity (2009, 2014, 2019);
- meeting rooms, bulletin boards, and exhibits (2018);
- copyright (most recent update 2019);
- privacy, including the retention of library usage records (1939, 2002, 2004, 2014, 2017);
- Internet access (2020, 2021). (Garnar & Magi, 2021)

## **Why teach Intellectual Freedom?**

When one looks at the many issues encompassed by the term intellectual freedom, it is very important to introduce intellectual freedom and expand the knowledge base and practical usage of policies and procedures, both locally and nationally, that affect the practice of this value as an emphasis in library science courses. Censorship and intellectual freedom have become a platform for public policy debate (Simmons & Dresang, 2001). With the rise of terrorism in the world, directives from the federal government such as the 2006 USA Patriot Act, and surveillance of private communication, new discussions regarding the right to privacy, freedom of speech, and electronic access for all must continue. The best place for these conversations and the examination of these issues should be in the initial preparation courses for school library practitioners, where they can expand their awareness of the complexity of this issue. One of the major goals of school librarian preparation schools is to prepare them to enter the professional world of a school librarian, which includes upholding the ethics of the library profession. Intellectual freedom instruction should enable school librarians to be armed with knowledge about intellectual freedom, to have access to toolkits and advocacy groups that will help them navigate the writing and enforcement of policies and procedures, and to act upon the ideals of intellectual freedom when encountered in practice (Adams & Magi, 2015; ALA, 2013; Harris, 2015; Meyer & Bradley, 2013; Preddy, 2015; Stripling, 2015).

## **Intellectual Freedom and Social Advocacy**

Being committed to the understanding of intellectual freedom is a call for some librarians to become advocates for social activism within their programs and their profession (Knox, 2020; LaRue, 2016; Samek, 2000). Many journals that address issues in the field of library science, such as *Library Journal*, *The Progressive Librarian*, *Library Trends*, and *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, present diverse perspectives and challenge the idea that all libraries are neutral institutions or should be so. Instead, these journals advocate for librarians to embrace social justice as a library and information science value that is associated with intellectual freedom and access (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016; Pawley 2006; Schroeder & Hollister, 2014). By incorporating an intellectual freedom course into the essential coursework of pre-service librarians, many library educators believe that the revised curriculum will help new librarians understand the ethical implications of their decisions and practices (ALA, 2013; Bendix, 1969; Meyer & Bradley, 2013). This revised curriculum requires that faculty intentionally help students develop the theoretical, practical, and ethical foundations they will need to engage with marginalized and silenced communities in ways that prioritize their needs and uphold the values of the profession. The results of this preparation on practicing librarians will be the empowering of the learning community to find and tell their stories by utilizing the library as a place that is inclusive for all.

Past research reveals that library courses have not always concentrated on how to make the theoretical aspects of library science practical. Beheshti (1999) determined that the four most-taught concepts were how to utilize appropriate technology ethically; the principles of program management; developing, organizing, and curating information; and developing research skills. Markey (2004) showed that the trends in library curriculum included organizational methods, reference skills, foundations of librarianship and management techniques, and ethical use of information technology. Hall (2009) determined after exploring 55 ALA-accredited library and information science programs that the courses included foundations of the library profession and

managing a program, organization and management of the collection, developing reference skills, utilizing ethical research methods, and evaluating information technology. None of the courses was aimed specifically at intellectual freedom but rather at the knowledge base and logistics of being a school librarian, with intellectual freedom being tangentially discussed.

Library and information science programs offered at the university level should define a course with a syllabus that aims to

- develop consciousness of the need for freedom of access to information;
- develop social responsibility;
- include libraries and librarians in the struggle for attaining intellectual freedom in society;
- facilitate an understanding of ethical and legal issues in the process of information distribution;
- facilitate an understanding of the role of personal ethics and ethical fundamentals from the perspective of the library;
- facilitate an understanding of the interrelatedness between personal and professional ethics and knowledge about the purpose of users' research in the library;
- define the library and its role with regard to the definition of individual and collective freedom; and
- provide a discussion of free access to information as the basic characteristic of the modern library and postulates of personal and social freedom. (Vranes, 2007, pp. 140-141)

Vranes (2007) continues to explain that four modules should be incorporated into an intellectual freedom course:

- Legal Regulation as Fundamental to the Information Society
- The Ethics of the Information Society;
- Intellectual Freedom and Censorship; and
- Intellectual Property (pp145-151)

With these four modules as the underpinning of intellectual freedom, a relationship is developed between intellectual freedom and the many aspects of becoming a practicing librarian, which include utilizing inquiry-based instruction in order to foster intellectual freedom, forming a knowledge of base of how all aspects of the profession are interrelated, developing the ability to anticipate and manage change, and promoting reflection about practice. Intellectual freedom is more than just knowledge of the term and the fact that it is a core value; it has to become an interrelated aspect of all that is decided and incorporated into a school library program.

Michael Gorman (2000) states that eight values offer the fundamental foundations to support library activity and education. These eight values promote the belief that understanding a concept as an authentic part of ones professionalism encourages the use of that concept in daily practices within the profession. The eight values are:

- stewardship;
- service;
- intellectual freedom;
- rationalism;

- literacy and learning;
- equity of access;
- privacy; and
- democracy.

With the use of these eight values, the emphasis on intellectual freedom can be reinforced and more attention can be given to the need to protect the rights of youth and their right to read, to better understand constitutional law as it pertains to challenges and access, and to view the school library in the context of its role as an open forum for debate in American society.

Although little formal research has been conducted concerning the actual intellectual freedom content offered in courses taught in school librarian preparation programs, general information is available by looking at the course offerings and descriptions available online and in catalogs. This study was designed to examine the specific intellectual freedom knowledge garnered from the courses currently being taught.

## **Methodology**

### **Instrumentation**

The researchers designed a web-based survey instrument intended to collect information from students in school librarian preparation programs. The instrument is intended to determine the extent to which these students felt their programs have prepared them to support the intellectual freedom rights of their future K-12 students. Prior to distributing the survey, the researchers pre-tested the survey instrument with students and colleagues at their respective universities. The questionnaire was approved by the institutional review boards at both universities and included informed consent and explanations that would allow the participants to leave the survey at any time.

The survey instrument was patterned after the cultural competency survey instrument designed by Kumasi and Hill (2011). They designed their survey to be an adaptation of the LibQUAL+ library service instrument. Kumasi and Hill intentionally chose this design as it could utilize the gap analysis technique as a method of interpretation. Gap analysis uses surveys to explore differences or gaps between expectations and the ability to deliver on expectations. This technique was first used in the private sector as the SERVQUAL instrument and was later adapted and evolved into the LibQUAL, which is used by the Association of Research Libraries (Eldredge 2004).

Prior to Kumasi and Hill (2011), the use of gap analysis to study education and preparation of professionals was not common. One study by Fuchs, Wilcock, and Aung (2004) adapted the ServQUAL survey to examine differences in perceptions between industry professionals, graduates, students, and faculty about the importance of a skill or piece of knowledge and possession of it. In library science, gap analysis has been used primarily in two ways: analysis of gaps within collections and analysis of gaps in service provided versus service expected (Arthur & Daughterty, 2017; Azmi, Noorhidawati, & Aspura, 2017; Bronicki, Ke, Turner, & Vaillancourt, 2015; Ernegg-Marra, 2006; Labeause, 2004; Neshat & Dehghani, 2012). In 2011, Hill and Kumasi expanded the use of gap analysis into library and information science (LIS) education through an examination of what LIS students considered important aspects of cultural competence and what aspects are actually being taught. Hill and Kumasi argued that a "gap measurement model [was]

intuitively appealing because the scores on a given item are interpreted using different ratings of the same item" (p. 255). So, in their instrument, students were asked to rate their prior knowledge of a particular aspect of the content the researchers wished to examine, their importance of learning a particular aspect of that content, and their level of knowledge or experience gained through their LIS courses.

Similarly, the researchers in this study designed a survey instrument to examine the same aspects: prior knowledge, importance, and knowledge/experience gained. The instrument developed for this study included 25 items grouped across three areas: self-awareness, education, and willingness to take action. Data were generated through the use of a side-by-side matrix design that allowed respondents to rate the following:

- their level of prior knowledge about a particular aspect of intellectual freedom;
- their determination of the importance of learning about a particular aspect of intellectual freedom through their school librarian preparation courses; and
- their level of knowledge or experience gained about a particular aspect of intellectual freedom through their school librarian preparation courses.

## **Data Analysis**

To determine the knowledge gaps, the researchers followed the model set forth for analysis in Kumasi and Hills (2011) study on cultural competence. Kumasi and Hill define knowledge gaps as "an indicator of the extent to which students perceive their coursework to have prepared them in such a way that they come away with more knowledge than they already had about a given aspect of cultural competence" (p. 256). For our purposes, we will be studying aspects of intellectual freedom.

## **Participants**

In early 2021, a decision was made to send our survey out to three universities that taught school librarian preparation classes. The universities chosen were a mid-Atlantic comprehensive university with approximately 118 students in the school library program, a southeastern comprehensive university with approximately 200 students in their school library media program, and a Texas comprehensive university with approximately 70 students in their program. The surveys were distributed only to students (n = 57) taking their final class in their prescribed programs, which for all was some form of a practicum. Both the mid-Atlantic university and the southeastern university offer graduate degrees and add-on certifications. The mid-Atlantic university offers an ALA-accredited program aligned with the ALA/AASL/ CAEP School Librarian Preparation Standards, while the southeastern university is aligned to the ALA/AASL/CAEP School Librarian Preparation Standards (2019) and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Library Media Standards. The third university is accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). All three universities deliver their courses 100% online. All the university programs stress the use of real-world or authentic experiences to facilitate the learning of the material and the strength of inclusiveness and diversity training for the different learning communities that may be served in each school context where the students may find professional careers.

Fifty-seven students were contacted to complete the survey. All of those students were completing their final practicum semester. From that sample, 12 students from the mid-Atlantic university (50%), nine students from the Southeastern university (41.67%), and two from the Texas university (8.33%) responded. The students who responded were currently living in North Carolina, Georgia, Texas, Nevada, South Carolina, and Virginia, and one simply listed as a residence the United States. The majority were female (91.67%), and their age ranges were 20-29 (8.33%), 30-39 (41.67%), 40-49 (41.67%), and 50-59 (8.33%). Their ethnicity was 91.67% identifying as white, 4.17% identifying as black or African American, and 4.17% identifying as other. From the group, there was an almost equal division between those currently employed as school librarians (51.17%) and those currently not employed in a school library (47.83%).

When asked to identify if their school or district had a policy and/or procedure that guided the selection of and response to challenges of materials found in the media center, 50% knew they had such a policy, 25% knew they did not have such a policy, and 25% did not know if they did or did not. As to membership in professional organizations, 24.39% belonged to the American Library Association (ALA), 17.07% belonged to the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), 19.51% belonged to state-level organizations, 9.76% belonged to other library associations, and 9.76% belonged to no professional organizations.

Students were asked to identify courses that had included intellectual freedom as part of the course work. This provided a varied response, ranging from "every course I took," to "I think it was mentioned in some of my courses," to "I can't remember if we talked about it or not in any of my courses." The courses most often mentioned at the mid-Atlantic university were LIS 600: Foundations of Library and Information Science; LIS 617: Materials for Children; LIS 618: Materials for Adolescents; & LIS 620: Information Sources and Services. The courses most often mentioned at the southeastern university were MEDT 7451: Administration and Management of School Library Program; MEDT 7454: Promotion of Children's and YA Literature in a School Library & MEDT 7455: Selection, Organization, and Curation of Materials in a School Library Program. One course was mentioned from the Texas university, namely SLIS 6134: School Library Collection Development Management.

## **Summary of responses**

The questionnaire was designed to allow students to reflect on their self-awareness, education (or knowledge), and willingness to take action before entering and at the conclusion of a Master's program preparing them for school librarianship. Specifically, the respondents were asked to respond to items about their level of understanding of terms and concepts related to intellectual freedom prior to entering their program of study, the importance that they placed on learning about aspects of intellectual freedom during their courses, and the knowledge that they had gained during their course work that would allow them to be advocates for intellectual freedom.

The education section of the questionnaire contained ten items that presented students with a variety of concepts related to intellectual freedom issues in school libraries to which they might have been exposed during their preparation programs. We focus our analysis on this section of the questionnaire because this content is most informative for LIS course instructors in improving or modifying their curricula.



## Knowledge gaps

A knowledge gap is a measure of how students compare what they previously knew about specific intellectual freedom concepts prior to entering their LIS program with the knowledge they gained by the time they took the survey in their final practicum semester of their program. To determine knowledge gaps, the researchers first calculated the frequency (or mode) in each question area for knowledge gained and for prior knowledge. The knowledge gap was then calculated by subtracting prior knowledge from knowledge gained. Scores of 0 to 7 indicate that the knowledge level remained the same or increased during their time in their program. Scores of -1 to -7 indicate that a student's prior knowledge or experience had exceeded what they learned through their coursework. Table 1 represents data for the knowledge gaps for the education section of the questionnaire. The education section of the survey comprised ten items, which included statements that students rated according to their prior knowledge, their perceived importance of the concept, and the knowledge they felt they had gained about that concept through their coursework. The knowledge gaps in the area of education were quite similar.

Upon examination of the topics provided for intellectual freedom education, students rated their prior knowledge of these concepts between low (a score of 1) to moderate (a score of 4) on the Tikert scale. Item 2-Knowledge of the constitutional foundations of the Right to Read-had a mode of 3, indicating that more students rated themselves at this moderate level. These low to moderate self-ratings about their prior knowledge of intellectual freedom concepts is understandable as the participants of the survey were all enrolled in programs in which they intended to become better educated about library issues. Table 1 provides the knowledge gaps for education.

Table 1 indicates that students had the greatest knowledge gaps in Items 7 and 9, which deal with the role of policies and procedures in providing access and as a tool to support intellectual freedom. The standard deviations (which shows the amount of variation in responses to the statements) ranged from 1.61 to 2.48. The lower standard deviation scores indicate a small amount of variation in the responses. Therefore, Item 1-Collection development strategies that reflect the needs and wants of patrons from diverse backgrounds- showed the greatest amount of variation in the student responses.

In addition to examining the overall responses from every participant, we chose to look at the responses by grouping them by the program in which the students were studying. Because we had only two responses from the Texas university, we have chosen not to include those in the comparison. Because of the small number of responses from that program, it is difficult to determine if the differences have any significance. Table 2 indicates the responses grouped by the two other programs.

Examination of the responses from these two programs showed a high degree of similarity. Respondents from both programs indicated lower levels of knowledge about these topics prior to joining their programs of study. For both groups of respondents, they indicated levels 1 or 2 for prior knowledge about eight of the ten topics. Additionally, both groups indicated similar growth in knowledge about those topics, with the exception of one item, namely Item 5, which is about a specific court case: *Case v. Unified School District*. While the other two items related to court cases had similar growth for both programs, that growth was limited in comparison with all of the other items.

**Table 1: Knowledge gaps: Gap scores for intellectual freedom: Education**

Topic/item no.	Knowledge gained (KG) level chosen most frequently	Prior knowledge (PK) level chosen most frequently	Gap = KG – PK	Average difference	<i>SD</i>	N	t-value
1. Collection development strategies that reflect the needs and wants of patrons from diverse backgrounds	7	4	3	2.42	2.48	24	4.77
2. Knowledge of the constitutional foundations of the Right to Read	7	4	3	2.38	1.61	24	7.23
3. Familiarity with Tinker v. the Des Moines (Iowa) School District (393 U.S. 503) and its application in school libraries	4	1	3	2.63	2.16	24	5.94
4. Familiarity with Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico (457 U.S. 853 and its application in school libraries	4	1	3	2.63	2.10	24	6.12
5. Familiarity with Case v. Unified School District No. 233 (908 F. Supp. 864) and its application in school libraries	4	1	3	2.87	2.18	23	6.31
6. Knowledge of advocacy strategies to support student access to information	6	3	3	2.65	1.80	23	7.07
7. Recognition of the role of selection and reconsideration policies in defending intellectual freedom	6	1	5	3.18	2.02	22	7.41
8. Awareness of the role personal biases play in selecting materials for inclusion in the collection	6	2	4	2.17	1.92	23	5.42
9. Recognition of the policies and procedures of the school library that might restrict access and equity	7	2	5	2.43	1.62	23	7.21
10. Understanding the role that patron privacy plays in the school setting and how CIPA and FERPA impact privacy policies	6	2	4	2.65	1.80	23	7.07

**Table 2.** Comparison of knowledge gaps for mid-Atlantic / Southeastern universities

Topic/item no.	Mid-Atlantic university				Southeastern university			
	Knowledge gained (KG) level chosen most frequently	Prior knowledge (PK) level chosen most frequently	Gap = KG – PK	<i>n</i>	Knowledge gained (KG) level chosen most frequently	Prior knowledge (PK) level chosen most frequently	Gap = KG – PK	<i>n</i>
1	7	2	5	9	7	3	4	12
2	7	4	3	9	7	2	5	12
3	4	1	3	9	4	1	3	12
4	4	1	3	9	4	1	3	12
5	4	1	3	9	7	1	6	12
6	7	2	5	9	6	1	5	11
7	6	1	5	9	6	2	4	11
8	6	2	4	9	6	3	3	11
9	7	4	3	9	6	2	4	11
10	6	2	4	9	6	1	5	11

## Discussion

### Less than moderate knowledge gain

On no items did the respondents rate their prior knowledge as superior to what they were taught. For six of the items, students indicated a slightly less than moderate knowledge gain (a score of 3). The items where the respondents showed less than moderate gains were items 1-6 respectively:

- collection development strategies that reflect the needs and wants of patrons from diverse backgrounds;
- collection development strategies that reflect the needs and wants of patrons from diverse backgrounds;
- familiarity with *Tinker v. the Des Moines (Iowa) School District* (393 U.S. 503) and its application in school libraries;
- familiarity with *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* (457 U.S. 853) and its application in school libraries;
- familiarity with *Case v. Unified School District No. 233* (908 E Supp. 864) and its application in school libraries; and
- knowledge of advocacy strategies to support student access to information.

In Item 1, 13 respondents rated themselves as having a moderate to high level (score of 4 to 7) of prior knowledge. Three rated themselves as 1 (no or low level). In Item 2, half of the respondents ( $n = 12$ ) rated themselves at moderate to high in prior knowledge; however, eight respondents rated themselves at a level 1 or 2. Five of those were at a level 1, with little or no knowledge. In items 3, 4, and 5, two respondents rated themselves at moderate or high level, but 19-20 respondents rated themselves at the lowest level of 1. In item 6, nine respondents rated themselves at moderate to high level, with four indicating a level 1. For Items 1, 2, and 6, more than half ( $n = 21, 15, 18$ , respectively) of the students rated themselves as having a low level of prior knowledge (1 or 2)

and then determined they had moderate or above knowledge after completing their courses. Only one student indicated that their knowledge for Item 2 remained low after completion of their coursework. Items 3, 4, and 5, which deal with the court cases, had much less growth than the other items. In all three items (n = 7, 7, and 8, respectively), less than half of the respondents now indicated a high level of knowledge. Respondents (n = 5, 5, and 4, respectively) indicated that they still had low levels of knowledge about these cases after their courses, with scores of 1 or 2.

### **Knowledge increases**

The highest level of increase in knowledge occurred in two items, both of which had a gap score of 5. These two items asked students to consider their knowledge regarding:

- recognition of the role of selection and reconsideration policies in defending intellectual freedom (Item 7); and
- recognition of the policies and procedures of the school library that might restrict access and equity (Item 9).

For these two items, respondents (n = 14 and 8, respectively) rated their prior knowledge level as low (1 or 2) and the knowledge they gained (n = 16 and 17, respectively) as either a 6 or 7. Additionally, two other items showed a high level of increase in knowledge, with a gap score of 4:

- awareness of the role personal biases play in selecting materials for inclusion in the collection (Item 8); and
- understanding the role that patron privacy plays in the school setting and how CIPA and FERPA impact privacy policies (Item 10).

To help understand the overall picture provided by the scores discussed above, it is important to note that the majority of the survey respondents rated almost all of the items in the education section as important or highly important to learn (a score of 6 or 7). Unsurprisingly, the three items with the lowest scores in prior knowledge and knowledge gained were also the ones upon which the respondents placed the least importance to learn (Items 3, 4, and 5). It is concerning that students did not see the importance of learning about the legal underpinnings of their intellectual freedom rights. Additionally, it is concerning that the knowledge gap scores were moderate (3 to 5) and that in some instances their coursework did not assist them in learning more about these topics.

### **Recommendations for actions to be taken**

Teachers in accredited library school programs must consider how to narrow the gap between stated course objectives of gaining knowledge about a certain topic and the actual objective of understanding that knowledge well enough to incorporate it into our practices and programs. We can no longer assume that students will extrapolate the knowledge about intellectual freedom onto their policies and procedures and become advocates for these core values. We need to be more intentional in our actions and undertake a more concerted effort to emphasize IF in every class that is being taught, because it influences every aspect of school librarianship and the decision-making processes used by school librarians.

In two of the three programs, a wide range of classes were mentioned by students as having informed their knowledge about IF issues. In those two programs, almost all the required classes were cited by students as having touched on IF issues with the collection/ materials classes and foundation classes being recognized as having the most significant IF content. It is interesting to note that some of the greatest areas of growth in knowledge occurred around the court cases that affect intellectual freedom issues. While almost every student had a clear awareness of *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969), the two other important cases related to censorship issues in school libraries (Case [1995] and Pico [1982]), were much less likely to be recognized. In two of the programs, these cases were learned about through their coursework. It is of particular importance that school librarians understand the legal ramifications of censorship and the resulting battles for access so that they can advocate for their students. For all three court cases, students did gain knowledge through their programs; however, that knowledge reached only the moderate level (level 4). Looking at the responses for the three court cases as related to the importance of knowing about these three cases, respondents largely rated it as of no or little importance. While most respondents rated learning about *Tinker* (1969) as moderate or greater importance, for Case (1995) and Pico (1982), the majority of respondents felt these two cases were of little or no importance to learn about. These data indicate that these were the items that rated lowest in importance of learning. This could indicate that programs need to address why it is important to understand the legal foundations of intellectual freedom and how these cases have affected the functioning of school libraries today.

Since it is our belief that a gap does exist between prior knowledge and gained knowledge, as well as a gap between knowing a concept and practicing a concept, LIS programs could conduct an analysis of their curricula using the items from the survey instrument to determine gaps within their coursework. This can help guide instructors to include intellectual freedom issues in a more purposeful way in their courses. LIS programs could also develop postgraduate certification programs and/or professional development opportunities to focus on intellectual freedom issues and help school librarians update their knowledge and learn effective ways to put their knowledge into practice within their programs.

It is interesting to note that only 24% of the respondents indicated that they were currently members of a library- or school-library-related professional organization. This could indicate a need for LIS programs to encourage involvement in professional organizations as those entities continue to support the development of school librarians. Additionally, the support of a professional organization when facing challenges to intellectual freedom issues could affect their advocacy efforts when they know they are not acting alone but with the support of national and state organizations and colleagues behind them.

Knowledge informs advocacy (Item 6). Advocacy showed an overall gain in knowledge of three levels, from a level 3 to a level 6. School librarians need to gain knowledge about available tools for advocacy so that they can support the rights of students to access complete, reliable, and valid information. The researchers feel that increasing overall knowledge about all of the aspects of intellectual freedom will result in school librarians becoming more comfortable advocating for student rights such as access to diverse content and privacy issues.

The highest levels of increase in knowledge occurred around the topics of selection policies and reconsideration procedures. This is understandable, as non-librarians would likely not know the procedural guidelines for selecting, acquiring, and removing content from their collections. It is important to note, though, that the respondents did recognize the role that policies and procedures play in protecting intellectual freedom and the importance of having an easily

accessible manual that clearly outlines these policies and procedures. Additionally, another area of high increase was understanding the role that personal biases might play in selection. For that item (Item 8), fourteen of the respondents indicated low or no knowledge of the role of biases before beginning their program of study. After their course of study, sixteen of the respondents indicated they had a high level of knowledge (level 6 or 7). Although selection and reconsideration policies are important aspects of IF, they are by no means the only aspects that need to be addressed in school library programs. In fact, the data show that they are probably the best-understood parts of the library program. What to do with this knowledge continues to be a recurring issue for librarians and should be better addressed in classwork and authentic situations that put both the librarian and the core value to the test.

### **Recommendations for future research and actions to be taken**

Since this study was conducted as a pilot test, the researchers can:

1. test the validity of the instrument by conducting additional analyses of the data set for integrity of the data;
2. after validation of the instrument, continue to conduct the survey at more institutions to determine if there are variations in intellectual freedom preparation based on types of institutions;
3. analyze and report on survey data about examination of the two other areas measured by the instrument: self-awareness and willingness to take action; and
4. survey school librarians with at least three years of experience using the same instrument to determine if their level of intellectual freedom knowledge was sufficient for their careers thus far.

Programs should consider mapping their curriculum to determine where concepts related to intellectual freedom are being taught and if they are being handled with sufficient emphasis. If it is determined that the brevity of coverage over multiple courses is insufficient, perhaps an additional course emphasizing the legal and ethical concepts and practical applications is needed.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study suggest that knowledge of IF is being obtained from classes completed during the LIS courses. As teachers in the accredited library programs, we must consider how to narrow the gap between the official or professed objectives and the actual objectives. We need to direct our very best efforts in strengthening both our basic philosophical beliefs and our actual practices; we must both understand the reasons behind our belief in intellectual freedom and then live those beliefs as we act upon them in our school library programs. Yet there is a knowledge gap between what is perceived to be important and what they are actually learning. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings is not enough to engage librarians to be advocates for IE. No librarian can assume a neutral role when interacting with IF and the implications of that core value. A stand must be taken to ensure that access is available to all, that the dissemination of opposing viewpoints is valued, and that privacy about reading and research choices is protected. Intellectual freedom issues and the case for the practice of intellectual freedom has to be of the utmost importance to all librarians. We must not just know about the core value but also role-model our advocacy and

adherence to the principles that comprise this important aspect of being a professional school librarian.

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## Sidebar

### KEY POINTS:

- School librarian students are gaining knowledge about some areas of intellectual freedom through their preparation courses.
- School librarian students identified that the greatest areas of their knowledge increases were related to selection and reconsideration policies and other policies that have the potential to restrict access.
- School librarian students placed the least importance on understanding the constitutional underpinnings of the Right to Read and related court cases and indicated that those were also areas about which they had gained the least knowledge through their coursework.

when entering a school librarian preparation program and the knowledge gained from the coursework upon finishing the program. The research questions this study seeks to address are the following:

- How well do school librarian preparation programs prepare students to understand the full range of aspects involved in intellectual freedom?
- How well prepared do they feel to become active advocates of that freedom?

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