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## Curricular Freedom in the Contemporary Sociopolitical Context of the United States

**Melanie D. Koss**   
Northern Illinois University, U.S.A.

**Kathleen A. Paciga**   
Columbia College Chicago, U.S.A.

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## Curricular Freedom in the Contemporary Sociopolitical Context of the United States

Melanie D. Koss, Kathleen A. Paciga

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### Abstract

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study uses an Internet survey to investigate the curricular freedom reported by Prekindergarten through Grade 8 teachers in the United States concerning the inclusion of children's literature into their classrooms and curriculum, particularly in the current sociopolitical climate. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, survey responses were analyzed based on the four levels of the ecological model (micro, meso, exo, and macro systems). To account for regional variations existing at the sociopolitical macro level, the study's findings were organized according to the five geographical regions of the United States: Midwest, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, and West. Analysis indicated distinct variation in the patterns of the responses across the geographical regions, aligned with the dominant political ideology of their state. Responses of teachers from the Northeast and West were heavily influenced by events and experiences at the national level, whereas teachers from the Southeast and Southwest focused on matters concerning individual, local, and state issues. Teachers from the Midwest, a politically mixed region, least frequently commented on issues related to censorship, a trend noted in the other four regions.

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### Introduction

Censorship of children's books in the United States has been a recurring issue, and issues of censorship and book banning are increasingly significant in the United States of America reflecting debates over what is considered appropriate or objectionable content for young readers. Censorship refers to the act of restricting or controlling access to materials, including books, with the intent to remove or limit their availability. Curricular materials, including children's books, are being attacked and efforts are being made to remove books from school classroom and library shelves. While some concerns regarding children's books arise from genuine considerations for age-appropriate content, censorship can also stem from ideological, moral, religious, or political motivations. Currently, the U.S. is divided across political lines, with "red states" aligning Republican and conservative, and "blue states" aligning Democratic and liberal. Belief systems held by a political party are influencing legislation being put forward and creating laws, policies, and procedures, including in the educational sphere. This article explores regional differences among teachers' perceptions of curricular freedom regarding the inclusion of children's literature in their curriculum and classrooms in the current sociopolitical climate in the United States.

The United States has a strong tradition of legal protections for free speech and freedom of expression. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution safeguards these rights. However, the interpretation and application of these protections can vary in different contexts, such as public schools or libraries, where educators and administrators may face challenges in balancing diverse viewpoints and community expectations.

The American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA, 2023) keeps a record of book challenges, and reported receiving 1,269 attempted book bans in 2022—the highest number since the organization began tracking challenges and double that of the previous year. PEN America (2023), an organization monitoring book bans in public schools, reported a 28% increase in book challenges during the first half of 2023, as compared to the preceding six months. According to Harris and Alter (2022), parents, activists, school board officials, and lawmakers across the country are currently challenging books at a previously unprecedented pace.

In addition to book challenges, the United States is witnessing an alarming proliferation of policies and procedures at state and school district levels that impose restrictions on books within schools, classrooms, and curricula (Albanese, 2021). PEN America (Friedman & Johnson, 2022) documented a 250% increase in "education gag-order bills" across the U.S. in 2022, bills aimed at limiting teachers' ability to address topics related to race, sexuality, and other perceived "harmful" subjects. In 2022, 36 states introduced 137 such bills and within the first six weeks of 2023 an additional 84 bills were introduced (Stancil, 2023).

Notably, the nature of book bans is evolving. While past challenges were often initiated by individuals such as parents or concerned citizens targeting specific book titles, many current bans arise from legislative measures that restrict entire sets of classroom or library books (PEN America, 2023). This surge in book challenges, accompanied by the establishment of new policies and procedures, significantly impacts teachers' autonomy in selecting books and curricular materials for their classrooms.

## **Media Literacy and Teachers**

Teachers receive policies and procedures regarding curriculum and instruction from the schools, districts, and states where they are employed. The establishment of these policies and procedures involves the active participation and input of various stakeholders, including state boards of education, school boards, administrators, teachers, concerned citizens, and sometimes, students. These parties shape, negotiate, and specify the procedures before the adoption of educational materials takes place.

Teachers' perceptions of these policies and procedures are shaped and informed by the national news media. Many teachers are applying media literacy (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2020) in their practice—taking stock of national and state trends and reflecting on ways these will impact what they can or cannot, will or will not, teach. However, the rise of misinformation and disinformation poses a threat to democracy (Maloy et al., 2022). To counter these trends, digital media literacy plays a vital role. Digital media literacy encompasses the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and engage with media in all its forms. It also involves ethical participation, advocating for equitable representations, and assuming human-driven agency and responsibility

within mediated spaces (Turner et al., in review, p. 2). The recognition of the importance of digital media literacy education has been increasing. Organizations like the National Association for Media Literacy Education (2023), the News Literacy Project, the U.S. State Department (2022), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Price, 2022) have sponsored or supported initiatives aimed at enhancing teachers' capacity, knowledge, and dispositions for teaching media literacy. However, as of 2023, only 18 U.S. states have state-level educational policies that include digital media literacy, and the specifics and implementation of these policies vary significantly (McNeill, 2023).

Furthermore, some states do not provide funding for curriculum development or teacher education, even if they require instruction in digital media literacy. Consequently, there is a significant disparity in teachers' skill sets for navigating the abundance of information circulating about children's literature in the curriculum, both at the local, state, and national levels. Nevertheless, teachers are undoubtedly taking note of these trends and reflecting on how they will impact what they can or cannot teach.

## **Teacher Autonomy**

The autonomy of teachers is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors encompass a teacher's personal beliefs and interpretations of curricular requirements, while external factors involve challenges to books and legislation aimed at limiting teachers' curricular freedom. Teacher autonomy has various definitions, most of which encompass aspects such as self-governance, professional competence, self-reflection, and the freedom to make choices within established rules and principles (e.g., Aoki, 2002). Smith and Erdoğan (2008) identify three key constructs of teacher autonomy: capacity, self-direction, and freedom. However, as noted by Jackson (2018), these constructs operate within the confines of institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors.

### **Capacity**

Capacity refers to the knowledge required to perform a specific action. Within the context of teacher autonomy, it refers to how well-equipped teachers felt selecting appropriate materials for teaching and learning and encompasses a teacher's perceived level of expertise and familiarity with children's literature and curricular materials. Benson (2010) emphasizes that capacity includes a teacher's knowledge of curriculum materials as well as their understanding of their students' needs, interests, and abilities. It includes a teacher's skill in navigating curricular and pedagogical decisions while adhering to mandates, guidelines, and provided materials from the district or state (e.g., Wermke et al., 2019). For this analysis, capacity refers to how well-prepared a teacher feels in their ability to select appropriate curricular materials within their instructional environment.

### **Self-direction**

Self-direction refers to the extent to which teachers perceive they are able to exert personal control over their actions, including taking responsibility for their professional development to acquire the necessary information

for optimal job performance. Within the realm of self-direction, interest plays a crucial role. Self-directed teachers utilize their background knowledge, building upon their capacity, to gather relevant information that informs their choices regarding curriculum and instructional materials, including literature integration. Self-direction can be understood as the autonomy teachers possess as individuals to make pivotal decisions that impact the materials they select (e.g., Mausethagen & Mølsted, 2015). For this analysis, self-direction is defined as a teacher's perceptions of their ability to select appropriate materials for teaching and learning *independent* of outside influences.

## **Freedom**

Freedom, as defined by McGrath (2000), pertains to an individual's control over their actions apart from external sources. Smith and Erdoğan (2008) expand on this definition by incorporating the concept of "freedom to self-direct one's teaching" (p. 84). One area where freedom is relevant is the selection of curricular materials for instruction. Teachers' degree of curricular freedom can either be enhanced or hindered depending on school policies and administrative practices. Advocates of teacher autonomy often perceive education as a means of liberation, empowerment, and societal transformation (Jackson, 2018, p. 2).

A teacher's autonomy over their curriculum and teaching practices enables them to target instruction tailored to individual needs and developmental levels (Sehrawat, 2014). However, factors such as inadequate funding, limited resources, and restrictive curricula can negatively affect their freedom (Feldmann, 2011; Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Xiao & Kwo, 2018). For this analysis, freedom is defined as a teacher's ability to select materials *as impacted by* outside influences, such as administration, curricular constraints, or parent involvement. Note that the construct of freedom differs from the construct of self-direction, as self-direction refers to teachers' internal choices in selecting books and materials, whereas freedom refers to a teachers' ability to select books as impacted by external factors.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (1979, 1992)**

According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, human development, including a teacher's autonomy, is shaped by the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environment. This process can be represented by concentric circles radiating outward from the individual at the center. The immediate ecosystem, referred to as the microsystem, encompasses the individual's immediate surroundings such as home, school, and religious organizations. Additionally, there are outward ecosystems, including the mesosystem (local community and district), exosystem (state level), and macrosystem (larger social and cultural factors such as laws, attitudes, ideologies, and media information dissemination at the national level). Bronfenbrenner's EST suggests that a teacher's development, including their autonomy, is influenced and shaped by both their immediate and broader social contexts. By considering these multiple layers of influence, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of how various factors interact to shape teachers' perceptions of curricular freedom.

## Research Questions

This study is a part of a larger study examining teachers' perceptions about their autonomy, defined as capacity, self-direction, and freedom, in selecting children's literature for their curriculum, instruction, and inclusion in classroom libraries. The focus of this study was one of the survey's open-ended questions:

*Describe any recent events or experiences that impact your view on the topic of teacher choice over children's books included in classrooms and curricula.*

Two research questions guided the analysis for the present study:

1. What topics did PreK-8 teachers mention in relation to curricular freedom over the children's literature they include in their classroom libraries and instructional curricula? In what ways do these vary across regions of the United States?
2. What components of the dimensions of the social-ecological theoretical framework (e.g., individual, local, state, national) are visible in teachers' responses? In what ways do these vary across regions of the United States?

## Method

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the autonomy of PreK-8 teachers in selecting children's literature for classroom instruction and inclusion in their classroom libraries.

### Data Source

An email survey was deployed using Qualtrics software and was built around the three constructs of teacher autonomy. The survey included three Likert scale questions, four multiple-choice questions, one rank order question, and three short-answer questions.

To ensure a diverse representation of teachers from various regions in the United States, a comprehensive database of teacher email contacts was compiled. This involved collecting email addresses from district and school websites across different regions (Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and West), all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as distinct geographical areas (rural, urban, suburban). To maintain a robust sample size, a minimum of 100 email addresses were collected for each state or population category.

The survey was distributed via email to 27,583 PreK-8 teachers across the United States from late February through late April 2022. Recruitment yielded 1,054 responses, resulting in a response rate of 3.82%, with 748 respondents completing all Likert survey items. Of those, 503 completed the question targeted for analysis in this paper. Table 1 provides a breakdown of responses by U.S. regions.

Table 1. Regions and Survey Responses

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Region	Responses
Northeast	83 (17%)
Southeast	124 (27%)
Southwest	76 (15%)
Midwest	109 (22%)
West	101 (20%)

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### **Data Analysis**

Responses were coded collaboratively by both researchers, and consensus was reached through discussion. Researchers began with a closed set of codes aligned to the levels of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model of human development. Starting with the microsystem, responses pertaining to teachers' immediate interactive contexts, such as their classrooms, were coded as individual. Larger interactional contexts at the local-school, local-district, and state levels, representing interactions across teachers' mesosystems and exosystems, were coded accordingly. At the macrosystem level, which relates to broader social, cultural, economic, racial, and political structures within the learning environment, responses were coded based on references to (a) parents, teachers, or children, (b) the national news media, or (c) social, cultural, or political trends (e.g., Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter).

As new codes emerged, previously coded responses were revisited using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once initial codes were established for each level of the socio-ecological model, axial coding was employed to identify connections between codes, and key themes were identified at each level. This resulted in three themes at the individual/micro level, four themes at the local/meso level, two themes at the state/exo level, and five themes at the national/macro level. Selective coding was then used to identify categories within each theme. The coding process considered that codes were not mutually exclusive, and responses were coded by topic unit to capture social and cultural perspectives (Gee, 2004). Hierarchical tree maps were created delineating the themes and categories. Upon completion of the coding process, the number of respondents coded for each level, theme, and category was tallied. Frequency counts were utilized to calculate percentages of teachers in the sample who responded at each level and theme. These percentages were used to describe trends and patterns across the themes and categories. Lastly, the coded results were separated out by U.S. region and examined for regional variations.

### **Results**

As codes were not mutually exclusive, codes do not add up to 100% across the four levels and themes. Additionally, distributions across regions were not equal, so although results were calculated with raw numbers and percentages, the results and corresponding tables and figures use percentages to allow for comparisons across regions. Regional commentary is limited to key findings with representative examples rather than an exhaustive

list of differences across regions. As responses were coded at multiple levels, themes, and categories, bolded text was used to highlight the coded utterance of a teacher's example at the corresponding level.

### Ecological Systems Analysis of Teachers' Responses

#### Overall

After coding across the four levels of the ecological model (micro, meso, exo, national) as well as by the five regions of the United States, analyses indicate most responses were coded at the individual/micro-level. The next most frequently coded level was the local/meso-level followed by the national/macro-level. Significantly fewer responses were coded at the state/exo level. Table 2 and Figure 1 present a summary of the percentage of all codes by region and level.

Table 2. Percent of Overall Responses by Region

	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	Midwest	West
Individual	47	57	54	49	48
Local	45	46	34	53	48
State	11	25	12	18	10
National	53	38	42	42	43

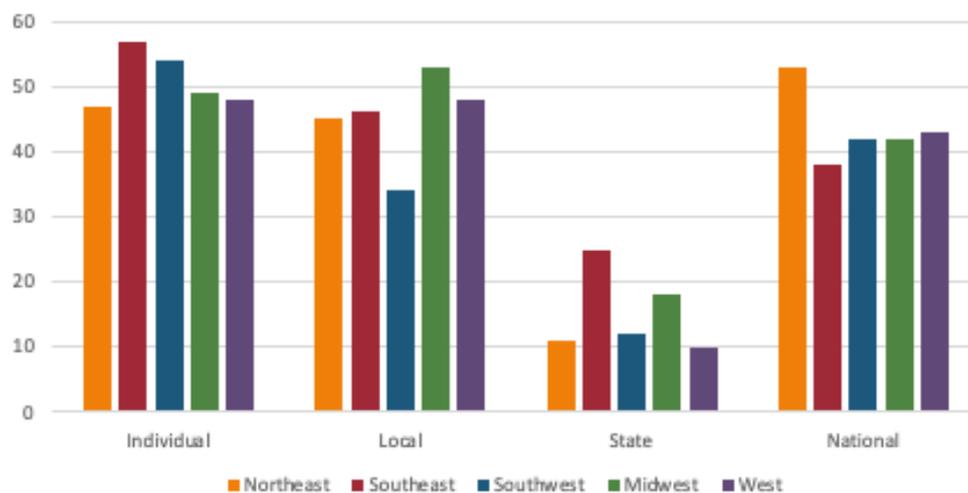


Figure 1. Overall Responses by Region (% only)

At first glance it appears that the response ranges are similar, however closer analysis shows variance. At the individual level, the Southeast and Southwest had the highest percentage of responses, with the Southeast also showing the highest at the state level. As a large number of current book bans and legislation are happening in states in the Southeast and Southwest, it appears that respondents in these regions are focused on how book bans can impact themselves and their classrooms, personally, as they live in states most likely to be involved. According to statistics by PEN America (2022; Meehan & Friedman, 2023) and the World Population Review (2023), Texas, Florida, and Tennessee are the states with the highest number of book bans in the first six months of 2023, and instances of school book bans are highest in Texas, Florida, Missouri, and South Carolina. Respondents from the

Northeast were more focused on national issues, with many respondents commenting on concerns about the general national trend toward book banning.

**Individual**

At the individual level, there were three main themes that emerged from the data analysis (summarized in Table 3 and Figure 2): insular individual responses, comparative individual responses, and discussion about teachers’ professionalism and desire for curricular freedom. The individual level received the largest number of coded responses for all but one of the regions, the West (whose largest number of codes were split equally between individual and local levels).

Table 3. Percent of Overall Responses by Region: Individual (Micro)

	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	Midwest	West
Insular individual responses	54	29	46	40	50
Comparative individual responses	39	53	32	40	33
Teachers’ professionalism and curricular freedom	13	30	37	33	23

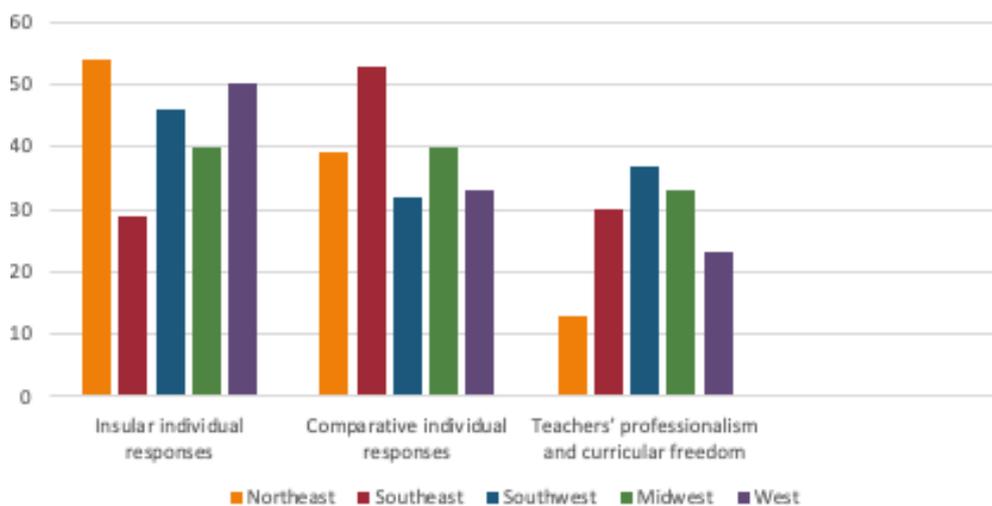


Figure 2. Overall Responses by Region: Individual (Micro)

*Insular Individual Responses*

The first theme related to insular individual responses, distinct from any sociopolitical commentary and related to personal classroom teaching and personal beliefs. Within this theme, teachers commented on the children’s literature they used in their individual classrooms and their responses fell into four categories: selecting literature that meets student needs, the need for culturally relevant literature, that the literature they are required to use in their classrooms does not meet their students’ needs, or the availability of funds to purchase titles. Teachers from the Northeast (54%) and West (50%) were coded as having the most insular individual responses, showing that they are focused on their individual teaching practices. Within both of these regions, over half of teachers’ comments related to their focus on identifying materials that meet their individual students' needs.

To illustrate regional differences at the individual level, three teachers in the Northeast and West describe their perspectives on selecting materials for instruction. In the Northeast, one teacher commented:

We recently had a mandated program that was absolutely awful. Neither teachers nor students enjoyed. It was developmentally over my students' heads, the stories were boring and not relevant to their age. I did each unit, but every marking period I inserted a novel of my choosing. This alone was what made my students love reading that year. They were so excited and invested in each of the stories and couldn't wait to read. The fact that I had that choice to insert meaningful novels into a prescribed and data driven program salvaged my students love to learn.

This teacher noted that their ability to supplement with texts appropriate to their students' needs was critical to their individual teaching, as they were able to instill an enjoyment of reading by having autonomy to include relevant literature.

Two teachers in the West also discussed the need to select titles that align with their individual students' needs. Comments reflecting this include:

Due to the pandemic, my students are having a hard time with social emotional skills including inclusion. It is important for me to read and teach on these topics daily. As for curriculum, I think it's important for teachers to be able to choose books due to meeting the class where they are developmentally and applying additional supplemental books for added content knowledge and engagement;

and, *"I prefer books that are relevant and authentic. I like to change the books I use based on the children in my classroom, their interests and anything that helps tie learning standards together. I love The Book Whisperer and offering personal choice."*

### *Comparative Individual Responses*

The second theme at the micro level was comparative individual responses, reflecting on individual practice and classroom teaching in comparison to outside influences, primarily sociopolitical in nature. Responses coded to this theme either related to respondents who noted they were grateful or fearful to live in a state with more or less curricular autonomy, or who commented on whether or not sociopolitical content is impacting the literature they can or cannot bring into their classrooms. These two categories both fell on a binary. In this theme, teachers compared their individual teaching practices to what is happening outside of their immediate teaching environments. Teachers from the Southeast had the largest number of responses in this theme, likely relating to the impact current legislation and book bans are having in their states and, by proxy, to their individual classrooms.

Across four of the regions, respondents noted they were considerably more fearful regarding where they live/teach. Some of these teachers referenced specific legislation or policies correlated to the state in which they live, for example, one teacher from the Southeast commented,

What is happening in Virginia is scary. There's so much I'm afraid to teach because of these crazy tip lines. I'm not supposed to teach anything about race because critical race theory is scary and might make White kiddos uncomfortable. What about my Black kiddos? I don't even really know what critical race theory is and I don't think most administrators and parents know either, neither does the governor!

This teacher referenced a tip line set up in January 2022 by Virginia Governor Youngkin encouraging parents to report instances they felt their children were being taught subjects that some perceive as "divisive" in schools, such as systemic racism or current and historical inequality. Another Southeastern teacher from the state of Florida commented on the March 2022 Parental Rights in Education Act (HB1557), also known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, noting:

The Don't Say Gay bill that just passed. I'm horrified and disturbed and scared. How can I help my LGBTQ+ students if I can't bring in books that support them or even bring the subject up? I want all of my students to feel comfortable being themselves in my classroom.

This teacher noted that this piece of legislation both made them fearful about where they lived, but that it also impacted what materials they felt they could safely bring into their classrooms.

The exception was in the Northeast, where teachers were grateful they lived in the region and felt "fortunate to be in a state and district where parents and politicians are not trying to control or censor literature." One teacher directly referenced the Florida legislation and made a comparison to feeling fortunate to be living in the Northeast. They wrote,

Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law makes me extremely grateful to teach in NY. Also, teaching in a mostly white suburban school district has made me think about including more books with characters who DON'T look like my students. I want them to have understanding and compassion for others and that comes from experiencing how different people's lives are.

One consistency across all five regions was that the majority of responses noted that sociocultural issues were impacting what they bring into the classroom, as referenced above by both the Virginia and Florida teachers.

### *Professionalism and Curricular Freedom*

The final theme at the individual level related to teachers' perceived professionalism and curricular freedom within the individual microsystem. This area included responses that were both insular and comparative and focused on the decisions teachers made based on the concept that they are professionals and are trained to do what is best for their students, educationally and emotionally. Four categories emerged within this theme: teachers feeling like they were professionals and should be allowed to do the job they were trained to do; administrative oversight versus teacher choice; issues surrounding censorship, such as teachers being moral gatekeepers and the appropriateness of content brought into the class; and the need for diverse literature that represents all children.

Comments from Southwestern teachers were coded as having the highest number of responses to this theme; however, it was only 37% and this was the theme with the lowest number of responses. Coded responses in this theme were highest in two categories, the first being that teachers are professionals. Two teachers referenced their "*experience and my education qualifies me to make these decisions,*" with one describing how they self-censor:

I believe I pick books carefully and use criteria, such as: is it appropriate, what will they learn from reading it? What is the book's message? So in that sense, I already am a censor in my classroom, based on my own studies of literature and education and my own common sense.

The second category in this theme with significant responses was curricular freedom aligned with censorship.

Responses coded under the censorship category were split with some teachers noting that “*personal agenda should never intervene*,” and others believing that certain topics and “*liberal nonsense*” do not belong in the classroom and their personal beliefs should impact their curricular materials.

I personally do not agree with the "gender identity" or CRT [Critical Race Theory] ideas, and I would not teach with materials that I feel are not in the best interest of my students.

In all of these cases, teacher respondents reflected on their individual classrooms and practices and personal beliefs on curricular freedom and autonomy.

**Local**

At the local level, which includes references to both school and district responses, there were four primary themes as summarized in Table 4 and Figure 3: curriculum, funds, censorship, and professional development. The local level received comparable numbers of overall responses from four of the five regions, with the Southwest responding the least frequently (see Table 1).

Table 4. Percent of Overall Responses by Region: Local (Meso)

	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	Midwest	West
Curriculum	92	61	58	50	50
Funds	5	10	8	2	0
Censorship	35	44	39	35	46
Professional development	14	2	0	2	4

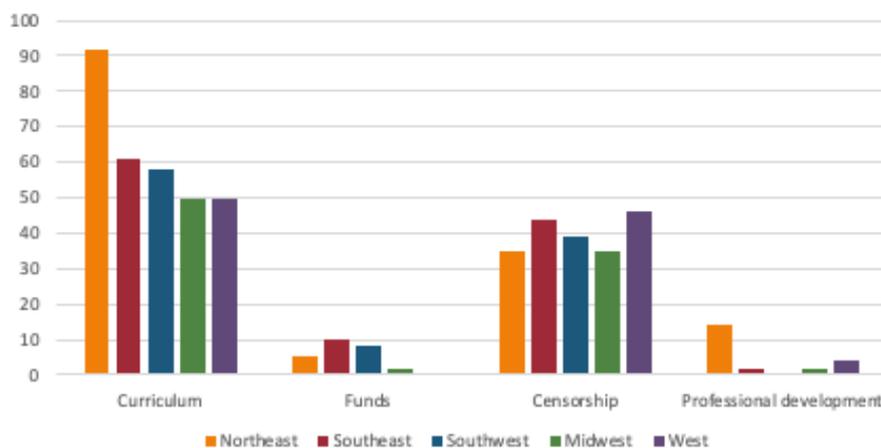


Figure 3. Overall Responses by Region: Local (Meso)

*Curriculum*

The first theme at the local level included discussion of curriculum and curricular freedom in their responses. There were six categories that fell under this theme: teachers’ perspectives when there is a change to a curriculum and they are or are not given choice; that teachers do not like the literature included in their curriculum; the existence of too much structure or restrictions in their existing curriculum; a need to supplement or have choices

in delivering the selected curriculum; pointing out positive things about the existing curriculum; and, in contrast, a few comments indicated a need for guidance and oversight. Teachers in the Northeast focused their comments on the curriculum category more than the other regions, with one exception.

Many comments specifically highlighted their dislike of their current literature selection within the adopted curriculum programs. One teacher focused comments on the content of the literature selection, *“The books in our current curriculum magazine reader in Benchmark advance are horrible and make no sense.”* Another teacher commented about the goodness of fit for the literature related to student skill or interest, *“Some stories in the curriculum are very boring for kids or too advanced for them to comprehend even during a read aloud. Some stories students can relate to, others cannot.”*

Additional comments from the Northeast revealed perceptions that the adopted curriculum did not provide teachers with enough choice. In these statements teachers made clear they felt there was too much restriction on their autonomy, *“This year my district mandated that we use exclusively Amplify CKLA with ‘fidelity,’ and this has NOT gone well. The material is too hard for my students, and they are not interested in the reading material.”*

The Northeast was the only region that did not have a single comment indicating a need for guidance or oversight regarding the curriculum. A teacher from the Southeast said, *“I don’t trust all teachers to make that decision. There needs to be an oversight committee to vet the chosen books,”* and a teacher from the Southwest indicated:

A good example is that I observed a teacher whiting out information that she deemed offensive due to her own religious beliefs. I think that, if the district already approved the material, she has other options than just apply her own bias to the book at hand.

### *Censorship*

The second largest theme at the local level focused on concerns or instances of censorship and book challenges happening at the local level and their perceived support or lack of support by their administration in instances of book challenges or parental concerns. These instances were often framed in relation to the larger, state- and national-level, political-oriented occurrences of book banning. Categories in this theme included: general concerns; commentary about the content of books/curriculum; concern over the restriction of teacher choice; a focus on Critical Race Theory (CRT), a current political buzzword taking an academic theory used in higher education and applying it incorrectly to any discussion or race and inequality in the classroom; thinking about parents and the community regarding their complaints and their rights to be heard; indication that teachers feel support or are grateful for where they live; or, sentiments regarding a perceived lack of support.

Regional differences were observed regarding censorship, with the Southeast and the West commenting more frequently. In the Southeast, teachers focused on the content of the books whereas in the West, teachers more frequently acknowledged that parents are making complaints regarding curriculum. Comments coded for concern over book topics from teachers in the Southeast were more frequently referencing gender and/or sexuality than comments with similar codes from other regions. One teacher stated, *“I know that some books have been removed*

county wide that discuss topics that are controversial...like having 2 moms.” Another explained that books with gay parents as characters are prohibited, “I am a teacher in a somewhat "rural" area and the reading program we use has books about families with gay parents and we are not allowed to include those books.” Finally, a teacher in the Southeast described censoring her book selection process writ large to avoid controversial conversations, “Many staff are purposely choosing to avoid books with diverse characters that would spark conversations (either in school or home) about immigration, diversity, and different family roles.”

Whereas in the Southeast teachers focused on content of the books that prompted censorship, teachers in the West focused on illustrating the kinds of concerns over parent complaints they had been fielding regarding censorship. One teacher from the West shared her experience of a complaint and her response to it, “Parents were upset recently about a book read aloud about families have two moms and two dads. I explained that it was grade level appropriate and that we represent all students with our student library and read-alouds.” Another teacher indicated, “We have many teachers worried about angering parents due to the current political climate around book banning and challenges. It is definitely a hard climate to be a responsive teacher.” Two teachers debated the extent to which they need to act on disdainful comments from parents. The first said, “There has been a lot of pushback in my conservative community about certain topics and literature. This makes me ponder the balance between community input and teacher input on these issues.” The second said, “Disagreements are always from parents, who are more conservative, never from my admin or district. Most parents see the list of books utilized in my class and only focus on the recognizable names they have heard in the media.” The impact of parents’ commentary and concerns on teachers is palpable:

I had a few parents complain last year about my use of excerpts from Trevor Noah's young people's version of *Born a Crime* because it was too political and its "indoctrination." This has caused me to be very selective when choosing books to present.

#### *Funds and Professional Development*

The other two themes coded under the local level were funds and professional development. Comments aligned these themes were under 15% across all regions. There were few differences observed across regions regarding these themes.

#### **State**

At the state level, there were three main thematic areas as summarized in Table 5 and Figure 4. This was the level with the least number of coded responses.

Table 5. Percent of Overall Responses by Region: State (Exo)

	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	Midwest	West
Fearful of state curricular control	44	77	56	15	60
CRT/Book banning	78	41	44	60	50
State standards/curriculum	11	18	22	35	10

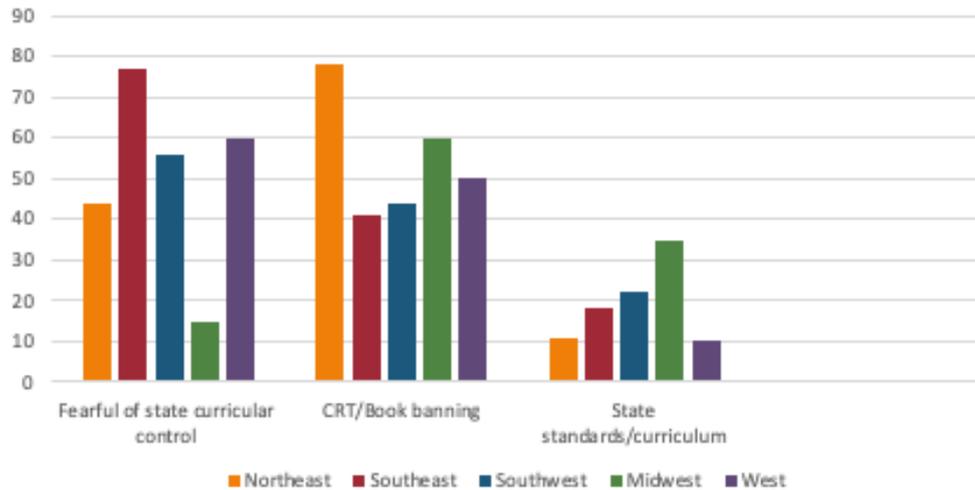


Figure 4. Overall Responses by Region: State (Exo)

### *Fearful of State Curricular Control*

The first theme at the state level was teachers being fearful of what is happening in their state with regards to control of curriculum, relating specifically to how it impacts them as teachers. The two categories within this theme were whether the teacher respondents lived and taught in a restrictive versus a non-restrictive state.

The Southeast had the highest number of responses for this theme, with 100% of their responses coded as living in a restrictive state and being fearful. Forty-three of the 134 teachers from the Southeast live in Florida, a state with high-profile recent legislation. Three Florida teachers specifically mentioned their governor and the recent bill, commenting that they, “worry about the recent legislation that our governor has signed that impact schools and the classroom,” and the “bill saying public school teachers could only teach from the materials approved by the state...and the state is on the warpath to remove as many options as possible.” They also reflected on the impact this legislation could have on their teaching and job security, with one teacher sharing, “our governor has banned certain titles and recently blocked certain curriculum due to the topics included. I don't think government should be that far reaching, but I also need to protect my career.” Teachers in this region expressed concern and distaste at how decisions made by government at the state level were negatively impacting their autonomy as teachers.

The region with the second highest number of responses to this theme was the West. In contrast, responses from these teachers reported they felt grateful they did not live in a restrictive state. A representative response came from a teacher who noted that although they were aware of several instances of censorship of children's books nationally, “I'm grateful I live in a state which allows for quite a lot of teacher autonomy. I do know school librarians who are considering leaving their career over censorship incidents, though.”

Few teachers from the Midwest commented on state control over curriculum, although two did report living in states where there had been some concerning discussions about censorship.

### *Critical Race Theory/Book Banning*

The second state level theme related to comments specifically mentioning book banning and/or CRT. The comments either reflected general criticism of the phenomenon of book banning or mentioned a specific state regarding the criticism. Although responses from teachers in the Northeast were not focused on issues surrounding curriculum, they were very concerned over issues related to book banning and were coded considerably higher than other regions in this theme. They reported feeling frustrated or concerned about legislation and book banning news occurring in other states, and named states outside their region, specifically and most frequently Florida followed by Texas. Two teachers wrote that “*Florida's new legislation is appalling,*” with one adding that while “*there have occasionally been issues in Vermont with parents having input into book inclusion or not, but for the most part, we are supported.*” The comments reflected fear that book banning can even be:

...happening in our country. There seems to be a lot of new laws and priorities put on monitoring what teachers teach and how they teach it, or more so, what teachers can't teach and the penalties that might occur if teachers bring in material they shouldn't. Fear based. Like the Don't Say Gay law, that's ridiculous!

### *State's Role in Determining Curricular Content*

The third theme at the state level relates to a state's control in determining what is taught. Comments coded under theme were divided into two categories: state standards and the availability of state or organizational funding.

Teachers from the Midwest were coded the highest in this theme. These teachers were focused on requirements of meeting state standards or being assessed by standardized tests. Comments coded in this category focused on Midwestern teachers knowing their students, curriculum, and children's literature and in using this knowledge to “*best meet our state standards as needed.*” One teacher related this to professionalism, saying that teachers are trained “*experts on the standards so they know how to select the best literature to read and reread and use as sources of information or mentor texts.*” A few noted that the literature they were provided in their curriculum did not meet their needs but that they were allowed to supplement as long as selected literature assisted them in meeting the standards. One teacher who was not allowed to supplement, however, and mentioned they were frustrated by their required curriculum because “*we are evaluated merely by standardized tests, but are given material that does not support that tool.*”

Teachers in other regions did not emphasize state standards but instead noted issues related to funding. Teachers in the Southeast reported state initiatives to purchase classroom library materials that were not well suited to students' needs or aligned to the legislation being passed by the state. For example, titles on the required vendor list did not align with the local district guidelines for content:

We just got \$3,000 to spend on our classroom books. We had to order sets from Booksource. The school is now having to go through them before we use them because some titles cannot be used per the district guidelines. Makes me wonder where this list was when we ordered because we were told that all books from Booksource were approved by the district.

**National**

At the national level, there were four main themes that emerged from the data analysis summarized in Table 6 and Figure 5.

Table 6. Percent of Overall Responses by Region: National (Macro)

	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	Midwest	West
Censorship/book banning	64	63	50	67	74
Media/News	11	8	6	13	14
Professionalism	27	29	31	22	26
Literature/curricular material selection	27	26	22	35	30
Other	7	6	0	0	7

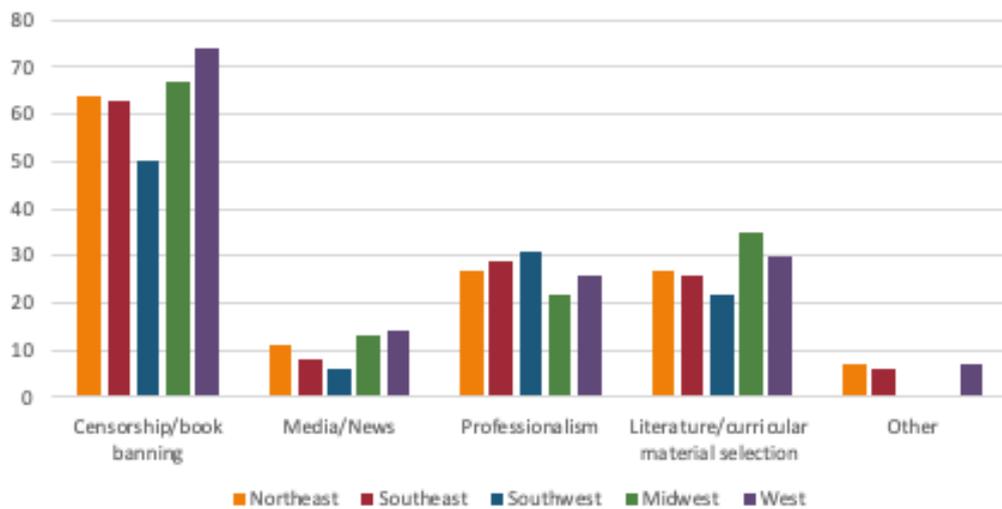


Figure 5. Overall Responses by Region: National (Macro)

*Censorship/Book Banning*

The first and largest theme at the national level focused on the current emphasis of censorship and book banning practices being implemented nation-wide. This was the most complex theme of the national level, with eight categories and 14 subcategories. Categories included instances in which teachers specifically mentioned book bans and censorship or where they implied censorship. Some teachers called out far right/conservatives or far left/woke society. In the former instances, all were against censorship and banning, whereas when teachers spoke about the far left/woke society fewer were against censorship and banning. In this theme teachers also expressed concern for topics for censorship and/or bans and concern about the politization of materials, in a general sense or with specific mention of the right. Many teachers also commented they felt scared over the trends observed with censorship and banning.

All respondents were generally very concerned about censorship, but the frequency of codes for this category were lowest among teachers in the Southwest. Within this theme, the highest coded category was specific mention

of censorship and book banning. The second most frequently coded category was teachers' concern about topics, with race and LGBTQ issues being the most expressed concern overall. In the Southeast, responses indicated some concerned about The Holocaust. Given the news and action (e.g., Hernandez, 2022) pertaining to one specific graphic novel, *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986), comments pertaining to this topic were front of mind for teachers in the Southeast:

I'm worried about the Don't Say Gay bill and how other states are copying it, including mine. I'm in TN, we had the *Maus* situation a few months ago and now possibly restrictions on LGBT books. Children need to feel loved and safe, all of them. I worry that teachers are going to be afraid to bring in LGBT books or even talk about it with their students and how many lives are going to be harmed?

Yet, teachers in other regions were also commenting about The Holocaust as well as other issues. In the West, teachers were particularly concerned with book bans around CRT and LGBT issues. Three responses illustrate these. First, "*Hearing about books being banned, especially those about the Holocaust or LGBTQ issues is frustrating and alarming. Students need to know about these topics.*" Second, "*The societal pressure upon state and local boards creates a scary situation when choosing books that reflect our actual society (racism, same-sex relationships, gender bias...).*" And third, "*The horrendous sex talk debate for kindergarten. Appalling that this is even being considered.*"

Although commentary in the West was most frequent, teachers from the Midwest echoed the concerns documented from teachers in the West, "*Recent stories (news or from teachers directly) of parents getting angry or complaining about certain topics being taught/read about (LGBTQ, race, Holocaust, etc) have made me nervous/hesitant to read about said topics.*" Similar comments were returned from teachers in the Northeast and the Southwest:

Hearing about all the book-banning, especially of books with queer content, is chilling and nauseating. I'm additionally disgusted by the books targeted for exclusion because of their representation of history. This whole CRT panic is a second round of McCarthyism, but led by white fragility.

Whereas in the Northeast the concerns were more frequently against censorship and banning, and oftentimes indicating significant fear of censorship and empathy for states in which bans were more common, the comments from the Southwest also indicated some support for these actions, "*LGBTQ books should not be allowed in schools, period.*"

### *Media*

The second theme at the national level was a mention of the role media, including the news and social media, played in the larger censorship debate. This theme was the least frequently coded overall in the national level, but the Midwest and West were highest followed by Northeast.

In the Midwest, teachers pointed to "*a LOT of buzz in media and politics around CRT.*" In the West, fear from hearing what is presented through the media and social media is identified as a source of fear and, sometimes, conviction. Fear was expressed when a teacher stated, "*I see on Facebook and hear in the news that people around*

*the country are creating large waves against the texts teachers are choosing in classrooms. It's a very, very scary time to be a teacher.*" Conviction in their current teaching practices was framed accordingly:

The reports in the media about banned books has solidified my point of view on teacher choice. Limiting books because it is an uncomfortable topic should not be allowed. Of course teachers much choose books which are developmentally and age appropriate, but it should not be dictated by non-educators with an agenda.

Teachers in the Northeast highlighted the roles of news and social media as integral components that shaped their perceptions about selecting children's literature for their classrooms. One teacher recognized how the news stories make them feel, "*Honestly everything that has been in the news is making me nervous.*"

Although there were fewer comments from the Southeast and Southwest regarding the role of media in shaping their perceptions, they were not absent. For example, a teacher in the Southwest drew upon social media to make comments about parents' role in censorship, "*The uninformed parent presence on social media has seemed to have spiraled out of control. They are being critical of a free education where most things are teacher supplied (my classroom library is 75% generated by me and 25% inherited from other teachers),*" and a teacher from the Southeast suggested, "*Recent conversations in media about "parental rights," usually related to certain topics that a loud minority of parents don't want their children to read about, have influenced my views. In addition, the passage of Florida's new law and other legislators' suggestions that similar laws should come up to a vote in other states greatly concerns me and influences my view.*"

### *Professionalism*

Commenting on the attack on teacher professionalism comprised the third theme at the national level. Three categories emerged within this theme: that teachers know their students, a generalized commentary on the trend of distrust toward teachers, and the role of parents in determining curriculum. Teacher responses were relatively consistent across the five regions, with slightly higher responses from teachers in the Southwest and Southeast. In these two regions, responses were evenly split between the first and third categories, although the category of trust was embedded within both.

Reflecting on their professional role as teachers, respondents wanted autonomy and trust in their ability to select appropriate literature for their students. A common sentiment was succinctly said by one Southeastern teacher, quite wimple, "*Teachers know their students.*" Two teachers emphasized the aspect of being trusted in knowing their students and curricula, saying, "*I believe teachers should be treated as professionals and given free rein to choose the literature they believe will be best to teach their students the standards and more,*" and "*I think teachers should be trusted to make educated choices about literacy used in their classrooms based on their knowledge of their students.*" Building upon this, teachers believed that the government should not be involved in curricular selection as they "*do not have a background in education, literature, or curriculum [and] should not be making decisions on what is appropriate for my student.*" They reflected on the value of getting an education degree and certification if they are not respected. One Southeastern teacher directly said,

Most teachers are trained/educated to make decisions for the students they teach. I am concerned that

political people including politicians are influencing school boards and people who do not directly work with students. Why get an education degree if your training doesn't qualify you to make decisions for the interests of the students you teach?

A final aspect of teacher comments related to knowledge of their students reflected not only that politicians do not have the same level of educational training and knowledge, but also that teaching should be focused on the children and not monetary issues. One Southwestern teacher noted that book selection was often influenced by *“private companies that have a monetary interest in what they are recommending,”* and that *“Educators should be able to discern what is best for their students and not dictated to by outsiders that have no vested interest in the educational success of the students.”*

The second category in the professionalism category related to parental roles, with subcategories of the potential danger of parents having a say in curriculum; angry parents who want control over curriculum; issues related to public schooling; and lastly a need for dialogue between parents, teachers, and administrators. Issues related to the danger of a few parents impacting the rights of what all children have access to read was a strong sentiment. Teachers acknowledged that parents have a right to decide what their own child reads, but they have *“a huge problem with a few parents taking away other children and parents' ability to have a wide, diverse book experience”* and that *“as teachers we need to understand parents' concerns but I don't think literature should be taken out of schools because the opinion of a few people.”* One Southeastern teacher added to this, noting not only the danger of parents determining what other people's children can read, but also on how that infringes on the ability of teachers to successfully do their job:

There is a danger in allowing the public to pick and choose what is appropriate and what is not. They can voice their opinions and remove their children from the classroom, but teachers should be trusted to make educated decisions about the books used in their classrooms.

Issues related to what public school is and should be was also discussed by these teachers. Public education in the United States is free, follows state and national curricula. *“Teachers should have control. It is their classroom. It is a free public education with standards. As long as the books support the standards, I don't see how outside opinions should impact the classroom.”* Other teachers noted that if parents do not like what books and materials are being used in public schools then they have the option to enroll their children in private schools or opt to homeschool, avenues in which they would have more control. *“These parents who are boohooing about CRT in other states are morons. If parents want that kind of control they should homeschool.”*

A final subcategory wished to bridge the gap and emphasized that they should be a dialogue between parents and school personnel. Reflecting on situations happening in their specific district and expanding to the wider state, one Texas teacher felt *“It is good to have involvement, but it must be respectful. Also, parents (and teachers) need to be educated about the argument. We need to listen to one another's reason for wanting to ban/not ban certain books.”* Teacher respondents wanted to be treated as professionals who know and want to have autonomy over using appropriate books for their students. They fear what the impact a few loud parents can have over the materials all students have access to. However, some do acknowledge that there needs to be a middle ground in which the needs and desires of parents and teachers/schools are both discussed and heard.

*Literature and Curricular Material Selection*

The final theme at the national level was teachers' ability to select children's literature and curricular materials. There were four categories within this theme: knowledge of the content of selected books, the need for diverse books, teacher knowledge of both literature and their students, and the oversight of administration. Teachers from the Midwestern and Western regions were coded highest at this theme. Midwestern teachers focused on the need for diverse books, and teachers in the West focused on utilizing their knowledge to select appropriate books on appropriate topics.

Midwestern teachers focused on the need for diverse books and that *"now more than ever it is important to have inclusive books in schools."* They also emphasized the role of schools as places where diversity should be taught and explored. *"School is a place that children should be able to be exposed to materials that reflect themselves and their world, as well as ideas and concepts that are new to them."* Several teachers in this region were concerned that current censorship issues will severely restrict books children have access to in school settings. This concern was echoed by teachers across all regions, and several responses further rationalized that school might be the only place some children are exposed to diverse books as a child's exposure to diversity is greatly impacted by what they are introduced to at home. One teacher emphasized this, stating, *"So many states are placing restrictions on what books can be brought into the classrooms. We need diverse books. Race, gender, sexuality, diversity. We need to teach kids about these things. What if they don't get it at home?"*

Teachers in the West were focused on the categories of teachers' knowledge of literature to meet students' needs through the ability to select titles relevant to their classroom's student and curriculum, and the appropriateness of topics being brought into classrooms through children's books. Teachers in this region wanted to be seen as professionals allowed to use their knowledge and skills to bring in appropriate titles, as they know their students and they know the literature. These teachers capitalized on the previous theme of professionalism and trust in teachers' knowledge, commenting that *"Classes change each year and the dynamics of the students and the world change. Teachers need to have the ability and freedom to be flexible in choosing books to address current academic and social needs of students,"* and *"Teachers spent years learning how to be effective teachers. Let us do our jobs and trust us to do them efficiently. That includes choosing the materials we use to teach!"*

In addition, several teachers from the Western region discussed concern that other teachers are allowing their personal beliefs to influence the books they bring into their classrooms insofar as teachers *"allowed their own personal beliefs to sway the choice of content they teach in classrooms."* More problematic, several teachers commented that they were worried that some teachers were intentionally using *"books/readings to promote an individual's ideals or political goals"* or *"there are teachers reading material to students that is not age or ability appropriate and isn't directed at a standard, but fits the teacher's personal interests, values, or opinions."* In these ways participants felt a teacher's personal beliefs should not overtly impact the content they share in class and are concerned over some of what they have observed regarding teachers' selections of children's literature.

## **Discussion**

Recent events and experiences of teacher respondents clearly influenced their perspectives of teacher autonomy over selecting children's books for their curricula and classroom libraries. When interpreting the results, the content of the responses presented in Figures 2- 5 is more significant than the number of responses at each level as presented in Figure 1. Although numerically it appears that many of the regional responses are similar, the emphases of what teachers are focusing on did vary in nuanced ways across the four levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The findings of this study reinforce and extend the body of research around teacher autonomy in two important ways. First, regardless of regional location in the US, censorship and teacher autonomy impacted the lives of all responding teachers. Teachers either discussed censorship at their immediate micro level or more broadly across the larger meso, exo, and macro levels, but all reflected on how it did or did not impact them at their immediate level. An identified theme of censorship and banning emerged at the local, state, and national levels, and issues related to censorship were embedded in two of the themes within the individual level. It was clear that all teachers were thinking about and impacted by issues of censorship, although it presented in different ways.

The second finding related to the observation of variation in responses rates across the regions which varied overall and within each theme at the individual, local, state, and national levels. The variation demonstrated teachers are thinking differently about sociocultural issues across the regions. Because of this, responses seem to be both situated and connected to what is happening individually and locally and, at the same time, considering current events as shaping their perspectives about the ways children's literature is and ought to be utilized for curriculum and instruction. In these ways, teachers' comments are demonstrating interaction across systems of the model of the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) anchoring this analysis.

Political ideologies vary across different states in the US, with red states leaning more conservative (often associated with the Republican Party) and blue states leaning more liberal (often associated with the Democratic Party). Although it is state specific, when considering a map of the US, the Southeastern and Southwestern regions tend to lean red, the Northeastern and Western regions lean blue, and the Midwestern region is more mixed, with several so-called swing states, or states that fall in the middle and where the political landscape is more evenly split between Republican and Democrat voters are found in the Midwest. Although when looking at a map of the US the Western region appears mixed, states on the western coast of the US are blue and more heavily populated than Western states more inland that are red. These political differences have significant implications for various policy areas, including public education. Educational gag order bills and direct legislation focused on book bans are highest in Republican states, with three of the five states in which book banning is most prevalent fall in the red-leaning Southeast and Southwest (Florida, South Carolina, and Texas). The remaining two states (Utah and Missouri) are red states in blue or mixed regions. Also, a majority of Western states had few to no documented school book bans between July 2021-April 2023 (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Meehan & Friedman, 2023).

As the United States varies politically by region, so too do teachers' responses, often dependent upon the region

in which they live. However, not all residents of red or blue states necessarily align with the dominant political ideology of their state and there are often diverse perspectives and opinions even within predominantly red or blue areas.

Considering that the largest number of respondents from the Western region live in blue states, responses from Northeastern and Western teachers tended to reflect more liberal ideologies. These regions had the highest responses at the National level, showing that teachers in these regions were less concerned about legislation and book banning attempts in their local or state location and rather were more concerned with the national trends. This aligns to PEN America's reports (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Meehan & Friedman, 2023) documenting the number of book bans per state, and only one state that proposed legislation or an educational gag order on book banning stemmed from a Democratic blue state (Young & Friedman, 2022). When responding at the individual and local levels, teachers from these regions predominantly reflected on how recent events and experiences impacted them at the insular individual level, separate from any sociopolitical issues, or focused on issues related to curriculum and its impact on the literature they were able to bring into their individual classrooms.

Conversely, responses from Southeastern and Southwestern teachers were highest at the individual and state levels. As these regions are heavily Republican and heavily Christian, many of these states are leading the charge for banning books and censoring content in public schools. The state of Texas, the largest in the Southwest and second largest in the US, is known for being heavily conservative, and the Southeast is known for being the bible belt of the US, an area dominated by socially conservative Christians with strong political and ideological conservative beliefs. Additionally, the state of Florida is in the Southeast and it has been a leader in the conservative book banning movement, fighting against "wokeness" (Mudde, 2023). Teachers in these states and regions are directly impacted by new legislation and gag order bills, and their responses reflected this concern. Their responses, some of which utilized the term "woke," focused on their individual concerns as set against the sociopolitical backdrop of censorship attempts, and rather than being concerned about what is happening on a national level, they focused on their microcosm of classroom and school and on issues in their state. Perhaps as a reflection of the emphasis of censorship and book banning legislation taking place in their regions, the Southeast had the largest response rate, with a large number of respondents coming from the state of Florida. The Southwest had the lowest response rate, however there are only four states in the region to draw from.

Responses from Midwestern teachers were mixed across Bronfenbrenner's levels, aligning to the Midwest's mixed political views. Their responses tended to fall in the middle range at each level, with the exception of their responses reflecting little to no concern about state curricular control. The highest number of responses from the Midwest came in relation to state standards and their impact on curriculum. Teachers in this region were not overly concerned about censorship issues within their states. Just as this region is in the middle politically, it is also in the middle regarding school book bans. Only a few states have more than 10 book ban attempts, again according to the PEN America reports aligns to PEN America's reports (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Meehan & Friedman, 2023). As book bans aren't prevalent in their daily lives, teachers from the Midwest are not thinking about censorship at the local or state levels.

Across all of the regions, there was infrequent mention of any specific news media article or social media post that has shaped teachers' perspectives about their curricular freedom in response to the research prompt. None of the themes coded at the micro, meso, or exo levels involved news media and/or social media. Responses at the national level generally alluded to things that would have reasonably been circulated in such ways, but simply did not frame claims in ways that would point the research team to any specific source for the myriad comments referencing "what's happening in Florida." Rather, references to any media were vague and generalized: "on social media" or "in the news." While the prompt utilized for the analysis did not request references to examples or citations, the obvious lack of specificity to sources for reports of events or experiences suggests that the sources themselves are not relevant or necessary components of the conversation around children's books in contemporary classrooms.

## **Conclusion**

Considering that teacher autonomy encompasses elements of capacity, self-direction, and freedom, teachers' feelings of control over themselves as professionals, their ability to do their jobs to the best of their abilities, and their sense of being trusted and supported by their administration and community is essential. Issues related to national, state, and district-level matters will inevitably impact teachers' perceptions of their curricular freedom. The responses in this study made clear that most teachers are affected by issues of censorship across several different levels of their environments. Their individual classrooms are impacted both by their knowledge of parent and community concerns regarding children's literature being used in classrooms, and by perceptions of what is going on in the media and national arena. Depending on where teachers live, these events and experiences differentially impact their daily lives, either immediately or abstractly.

In a macrosystem where news media is saturated with reports of state legislatures making laws to remove books perceived to contain content claimed to be not "age-appropriate," teachers' awareness of where their individual teaching fits into the larger microcosm is critical. An awareness of news and social media and professional reflection on the ways in which these sources of information influence and shape teachers' perceptions and actions around curriculum may prove beneficial as a means by which teachers may take steps to either reclaim their autonomy or elect to further support the political actions reported on in the media. Despite claims that teachers should not infuse their beliefs into the classroom, we note that media literacy is an essential skill for all teachers (Torres & Mercado, 2006). Programs designed to facilitate reflection, advocacy, and action related and responding to national news are critically important.

In the context of recent book bans and censorship in the United States, the issue of education and teacher autonomy over children's books is critical. Regardless of political ideologies associated with red and blue states, the principles of intellectual freedom, critical thinking, and diversity in education should guide decision-making. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' perspectives and should have the autonomy to choose books that reflect diverse experiences and address important social issues. Recent censorship efforts undermine this autonomy, limit students' exposure to different viewpoints, and hinder their development of critical thinking skills and empathy. To address this issue, it is vital to advocate for teacher autonomy in book selection, engage in

professional development focused on diversity and inclusion, and foster supportive environments that value diverse literature and open dialogue. By upholding the principles of free expression and supporting inclusive educational practices, we can create learning environments that nurture intellectual growth and understanding among students.

## **Recommendations**

Several recommendations for research, practice, and policy emanate from the present research study. In terms of research, a lot has happened socially, practically, and politically since the data were collected. Additional data collection in the coming school year could provide a contemporary snapshot of teachers' perspectives on the issues reported on in this study. In terms of practice, teachers are encouraged to continue to monitor their own/individual curricular freedom and that of others in their local, regional, and national networks. Moreover, teachers should seek out ways of engaging civically to advocate for their autonomy regarding children's literature in their classrooms. In cases where many teachers object to bills being passed that restrict curricular freedom, teachers can learn more about the ways in which bills are proposed and become law so that they know the levers to pull in terms of their advocacy, voting, and lobbying for change. In cases in which local teachers are not safe or protected when they speak up or out, support can be found through the larger systems that are more removed from the individual, local, and state levels. National news media and larger trending movements on social media can be coordinated and eventually function as pressure points to help teachers recover some of the curricular freedoms they have clearly expressed desire to have.

Politically, news and social media channels have long been utilized as critical components for any campaign. Recently, teachers have begun to turn to these channels to help, but more could be done to advance the goals and to alleviate the concerns teachers reported in the current study. Two essential understandings about media will benefit teachers. First, teachers should understand how news is built, circulated, and recirculated via social media (sometimes by artificial intelligence). Second, knowledge regarding the ways mis- and disinformation are created and sustained or deconstructed are essential. Teachers must possess such understandings and build concomitant skills to combat the existing challenges and bans that restrict their curricular freedom and autonomy. Teachers will require additional media literacy programs to build these understandings. Civic and media literacy programs that have been initiated in some states and institutions of higher education have potential to help educate stakeholders at all levels of the model of ecological systems theory to critically examine the ways in which news media can circulate and impact their own experiences of curricular freedom.

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**Author Information**

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**Melanie D. Koss**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9450-3693>

Northern Illinois University

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

GA 147

DeKalb, IL 60115

USA

Contact e-mail: *mkoss@niu.edu*

**Kathleen A. Paciga**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4026-1745>

Columbia College Chicago

Department of Humanities, History, and Social  
Sciences

600 South Michigan Avenue

Chicago, IL 60605

USA

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