

Toward a Conceptual Path of Support for School Library Media Specialists with Material Challenges

[Dianne McAfee Hopkins](#), Associate Professor, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison

The value of support during challenges to library media materials has been touted for years within the profession through its literature and its professional associations. Support groups such as state intellectual freedom committees and supportive statements such as the Library Bill of Rights (American Library Association 1996, 3–4) are examples of resources that are available to library media specialists who might experience challenges to the presence or appropriateness of library media center materials.

While the profusion of recommended resources, both human and material, may give the impression that assistance during a challenge is readily available, how likely is the library media specialist to actually seek assistance from others during a challenge? That question was among those posed in a national intellectual freedom study (Hopkins 1991b, 1993). The study of middle, junior, and senior high school library media specialists who had recently experienced challenges to library media center materials focused on identifying factors that influenced the outcome of those challenges. It was found that half of library media specialists responding sought no assistance from others within the school or district when a challenge occurred. An even larger percentage (88.4 percent) sought no assistance outside the district. The natural subsequent question is, Did it matter that assistance was not sought by the library media specialist during a challenge?

The answer is clearly yes. When assistance was received within the district from district library media directors or principals, for example, challenged material was more likely to be retained. Similarly, when assistance was provided by others outside the district such as library media specialists in other districts or state library media association officials, challenged material was also more likely to be retained. In fact, the national study found support, whether from within or without the school or district, to be one of the primary factors in the retention of challenged library media materials.

Given the value of support during a challenge, several questions emerge that guide further study:

- Why do many library media specialists choose to deal with a challenge to school library materials without professional support?

- What contributions can support make to the library media specialist during the challenge process?
- What support systems are likely to be most beneficial to the school library media specialist during the challenge? Why?
- What is known in support research, generally, that can assist in understanding responses of the school library media specialist to a material challenge?

The answers to these questions were sought through a review of research studies in library and information studies, sociology, psychology, and communications. The research review sought to identify the major findings and theories relating to support research. While primary sources were studied, especially works deemed seminal, major summary sources that synthesized and interpreted the research were emphasized. By examining research findings, the answers to these and other questions relating to support for the library media specialist could begin to be formulated.

Considerations about which studies to consult were framed by two assumptions. The first assumption is that a challenge to the appropriateness of library media material is likely to represent a stressful time for the library media specialist. Secondly, while support systems may vary from setting to setting, all library media specialists facing challenges have internal or external professionally related options for support.

For purposes of the research review, support is defined as assistance provided to the library media specialist during the period in which library media materials are challenged. An important emphasis must be placed on the library media specialist's initiative in seeking support during a challenge. Studies consistently show that challenges to school library media materials are rarely known outside the school environment in which the challenge occurs. It is therefore the responsibility of the library media specialist in most instances to seek support during a challenge, for others have few opportunities to learn of challenges.

Review of Selected Research within Library and Information Studies

There is little research in library and information studies that examines the phenomenon of support, particularly that offered to the library media specialist during a challenge to library media materials. Summaries of research by Fiske, Hopkins, and England provide some useful background. The well-known research of Marjorie Fiske (1959) on book selection, challenges, and censorship focused on school and public libraries in selected California communities. While support to librarians experiencing challenges was not a major focus of her research, some findings are useful to note. Fiske reported that the local school board, through its adoption and use of a materials selection policy, was often valued as a source of protection by school administrators and library media specialists alike. Positive local media support during a challenge could also be helpful.

Fiske (1959) suggested that role models who publicly articulated intellectual freedom principles and defended the right to read provided support by example to library media specialists experiencing challenges. Those viewed as role models could include school administrators, and especially national, state, and regional library association leaders. The following quote illustrates

the importance of role models: “On the few occasions when leaders of the profession have taken a strong and open stand on controversial issues, many librarians throughout the state have silently applauded, and felt strengthened in dealing with their own problems . . .” (105).

Some insight into whether the library media specialist feels supported is given in other intellectual-freedom research concerning the library media specialist’s feeling of being pressured in the selection of library media center resources. Hopkins (1991a, 1996) found that library media specialists who experienced recent material challenges were more likely to feel pressured in the selection of lmc materials than those without challenges. England (1974) found that the perception of the community environment and views of others were definitely associated with precensorship activities of public librarians in Canada. Research suggests that the library media specialist who feels under pressure in making selections may be less likely to make challenges known when they occur. A lack of assertiveness may contribute to the removal or restriction of materials. Although support is less likely to be sought by the library media specialist under pressure, support may be especially important given these circumstances.

Hopkins (1989, 1993) cited the research summaries of Price and Roberts (1987) in providing insights into reasons why library media specialists may not seek support. Library media specialists may feel that popular opinion is going against them or that others do not support them. Price and Roberts discussed the spiral of silence research of Noelle-Neumann, in which Noelle-Neumann concludes that people who perceived from media reports that trends of opinion were running counter to their views would refrain from expressing their opinion for fear of social isolation. Thus, even if such people constituted a numerical majority, withholding their views strengthened the opposition and created the spiral of silence. Asch, also cited by Price and Roberts, provided a theoretical foundation for the spiral of silence theory. Asch found that even a single partner siding with an individual enabled that individual to hold her or his own course against the majority. Might not this notion of support also be applicable to library media specialists?

Related research in library and information studies examines support as a response to stress and burnout. Since the library media specialist experiencing a challenge is assumed to be involved in a stressful situation, that research is relevant here. Among those who have examined this area are Bunge (1987), Haack, Jones, and Roose (1984), Nauratil (1987), and Caputo (1991). Their publications emphasize that levels of stress experienced varies according to the individual.

Bunge reported on a series of workshops that he conducted on stress in the library. While many commonalities existed, he found that there were differences in satisfaction and stress levels according to type of library as well as type of work within libraries. Bunge concluded that stress and its sources are unique to each individual librarian, and to the situation in which librarians find themselves. Bunge concluded that we all need resources. These resources include physical health and stamina, positive attitudes toward ourselves, support and encouragement from those around us, and effective strategies and skills for restoring physiological and psychological balance when confronted with stressors.

Haack, Jones, and Roose reported the results of a nongeneralizable burnout pilot survey of reference librarians attending a professional conference. Using a Staff Burnout Scale for Health Professionals, they concluded that many public service librarians were suffering from major stress at work similar to that of related occupational groups. They noted that much of the stress

related to interpersonal relationships with clients, coworkers, supervisors, and the work environment.

Nauratil recognized burnout as a growing phenomenon among human service professionals. She characterized burnout as a manifestation of alienation. While noting that the most effective intervention occurred at levels beyond the librarian, she suggested that individual coping could also be useful.

Of particular interest because of references to censorship as a stressor are the findings of Caputo. Caputo's focus on stress and burnout was based particularly on the research of stress researcher Hans Selye and Selye's theory of three reaction stages to long-term stress. In stage 1, the alarm stage, the body recognizes a stressor and responds to the stressor both physiologically and physically. In stage 2, the resistance stage, the stressor is either removed or remains. If the stressor remains, the body stays alert at stage 1 levels, and moves eventually to stage 3, the exhaustion stage, that if not relieved, results in death. Selye's studies suggested that stress was a cumulative process of increasing stress levels without appropriate reductions after initial alarms. Caputo also described personal and work environment causes of stress. Caputo cited research that suggested that the causes of stress were found within the person as well as within the work environment.

Caputo provides a list of stressors that are specific to the library environment. Censorship is one of nine stressors listed. Noting that the most carefully selected materials could be considered controversial by someone, and having no limit of time in which a challenge might or might not occur (including challenges to titles owned for decades without complaint), the most stressful censorship efforts reported were those highlighted in the media, those ongoing for long periods, and those presented directly to a governing body with no prior notification to the librarian. In these cases, librarians felt that they were forced to act as crusaders for freedom of choice whether they personally supported the materials or not. They felt unfairly attacked, and felt that censorship challenges suggested that they were bringing harm to the community. Caputo ended by offering suggestions to managers for effective stress management and burnout reduction. Supervisory support including mentoring was suggested. Peer support and active staff discussion were also encouraged, especially for controversial or pressure-generating issues.

Research from Sociology, Psychology, and Communications

With limited research in library and information studies on support to librarians experiencing challenges, it became increasingly important to learn more about support and stress in other relevant fields. The fields of sociology, psychology, and communications offer a wealth of research from which we may draw.

Beginning with the general topic of stress, a broad research-based definition is suggested: "a perceived dynamic state involving uncertainty about something important" (Schuler 1984, 36). The dynamic state, as used in the definition, can be associated with opportunities, constraints, or demands. As such, the definition incorporates the knowledge that organizational stress can be positive (an opportunity) or negative (a constraint or demand). Stress is a dynamic condition that most individuals try to avoid, resolve, or take advantage of.

Much of the research on stress is related to job stress. When this is taken into account, another definition emerges. Job stress is a condition in which job-related factors interact with the worker to change (disrupt or enhance) her or his psychological or physiological condition such that the person (mind, body, or both) is forced to deviate from normal functioning (Haack, Jones, and Roose 1984, 6–7).

The interest in stress in the workplace is compounded in light of adverse effects that stress places on employee behavior. These effects include neuroses, coronary heart disease, alimentary conditions such as ulcers, cancers, asthma, hypertension, backaches, and the use of alcohol and drugs. For the past two decades, an estimated \$45 billion dollars in lost economic productivity has been attributed to stress each year. Another indicator of stress's importance is worker compensation laws that include mental as well as physical illness due to or made more severe by employment (Beehr and Bhagat 1985).

Social support is the term used most often within sociology, psychology, and communications research. It has been defined as “the verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about a situation, the self, the other, or the relationships, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one’s life experience” (Albrecht and Adelman 1987, 19). Support is seen as a vital link in an individual’s ability to respond to stressful situations on both psychological and physical levels (Wilcox and Vernberg 1985). Research shows that individuals who have good, solid support systems regain their health more quickly than those with fragmented or weak support systems (Wasserman 1988). Additionally, support is seen as critical in making social environments less stressful, more healthy, and more conducive to effective adaptation to stress (House 1981). A massive body of research on the role of social support in health and wellbeing has accumulated over the past two decades. Research has identified an empirically demonstrable link between social support and health (Burlinson and others 1994). That link can be positive or negative for the person receiving the support.

A summary of early social support research history is relevant. Researchers John Cassel and Sidney Cobb are identified as having primarily influenced the initiation of cross-disciplinary study of social support. They did so in part through seminal papers published independently in 1976 (Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce 1990). John Cassel (1976) focused on the role of social support in preventing disease and maintaining health. He linked stress and susceptibility to organic disease, psychological distress, or both. Cassel’s principal hypothesis was that increased susceptibility to disease occurred for individuals who did not receive evidence that their actions were leading to desirable or anticipated consequences. Cassel noted that group supports could be protective of health (Wasserman and Danforth 1988).

Sidney Cobb’s research (1976) in clinical medicine found that social support had a buffering effect on stress and crisis situations. He saw social support as information leading to one or more of three outcomes: the feelings of being cared for; the belief that one is loved, esteemed, and valued; and the sense of belonging to a reciprocal network.

The research on social support since the 1970s has emerged primarily from three general approaches (Burlinson and others 1994): sociological or social network approaches, psychological or perceptual approaches, and communicative or interactional approaches. The discussions of support research, however, generally take an interdisciplinary, interdependent

approach that acknowledges and builds upon, rather than separates, the research of other disciplines (Tardy 1985).

Of these research approaches, the sociological perspective is said to be the earliest. Early sociological research investigated support's relationship to health as promoted through social networks. This approach focused on how the size, density, multiplexity, and other features of an individual's social network correlated with various indices of health and wellbeing. Findings from this research particularly related to the individual's perceptions of the quality and availability of support, and led to a focus on psychological approaches to social support. Psychological approaches emphasize the individual's perceptions of support availability and satisfaction. Perceptions of support availability can prevent a possible stressful event from being appraised as stressful (Winnubst, Buunk, and Marcelissen 1988). The perception of support can thus hinder the onset of physiological and psychological strains. This perception of a sense of support is believed to be a relatively stable personality characteristic that begins in attachment experiences early in life. This stable sense of support is believed to serve as an important buffer against stress and health problems (Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce 1990).

The psychological approach raises questions that are addressed in communications research, namely the examination of communicative and interactional processes through which social support is sought and conveyed. Most recently, communications support research has been strongly supported as the lens through which social support should be viewed (Burlinson and others 1994). It is believed that communication behavior is inextricably woven into support behavior, for interactions that assist individuals through the anxiety and uncertainty of difficult life events represent the kind of supportive communications that truly help. Researchers have noted that social support is ultimately conveyed through messages directed by one individual to another in a relationship that is created and sustained through interaction. Thus, researchers focusing on communications emphasize a focus on the messages through which people seek and express support, the interactions in which supportive messages are produced and interpreted, and the relationships that are created by the supportive interactions in which people engage.

Important to the study of support is research on coping with stressful situations, on perceptions of individuals of support available to them, and on the type of support that is best. The findings are summarized in the next section.

Perceptions, Coping, and the Best Types of Support

A provocative discussion of conceptual and theoretical dilemmas in social support research is presented by Wilcox and Vernberg (1985). Based on their analysis of research done to date on the question "Does social support work?" and its corollary "How does it work?", they answer, "It depends!" They suggest the following parameters that shape relationships between environmental stressors, health, and social support:

- The nature of the stressor may dictate whether social support will be a viable coping option. Some stressors may be so intense that all coping resources are ineffective.
- All sources of support are not equally effective for a given problem.
- Individuals vary in their need for support, and in their reaction to support. Among the individual differences are demographic variables of gender, age, race, and psychological constructs such as locus of control and self-esteem.

Albrecht and Adelman use their definition of social support to summarize current research findings, for the definition itself is based on a careful review of support research (Albrecht and Adelman 1987, 19). The definition places a major emphasis on the uncertainty that is associated with stress support. During uncertainty, the individual is less likely to believe in her or his ability to produce positive outcomes. Supportive communication can help decrease anxiety and stress, thus helping the individual develop a sense of perceived control.

Drawing from research on the uncertainty experience during illness, Albrecht and Adelman (1987) note the value of satisfying the need for information early as a means of orienting the individual during succeeding stages of the stressful event. Thus, individuals in need of support can be influenced by those who offer messages of clarity and information that may affect the meaning they assign to their stressors, as well as how they see themselves and interpret similar or pertinent future events.

People are generally motivated to seek support for a reason. Supportive interactions usually affect recipients and providers alike in meaningful and usually positive ways. Bonds start to form as information is exchanged. As greater amounts of mutual information are shared, uncertainty is likely to be reduced and a relationship may develop that may endure over time. Social support functions by emphasizing control and mastery in order to facilitate the achievement of personal goals and to aid in personal coping.

In summary, a primary benefit of social support to the recipient is a reduction of uncertainty that results in enhanced self-control and self-acceptance. This benefit facilitates the individual's ability to cope.

Research shows that the types of support offered vary greatly (Tardy 1985). Many researchers select the studies of House (1981) as providing the most useful topology of support content (Beehr and Bhagat 1985; Wells 1984; Winnubst, Buunk, and Marcelissen 1988). In fact, it has been suggested that the types of social support identified by House encompass the entire spectrum offered by the research literature (Schuler 1984). House notes four types of support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. Emotional support, named as the most important, focuses on caring by providing empathy, trust, and love. Instrumental support involves helpful behaviors such as the giving one's time and skill, or even the loan of money. Informational support offers advice or information useful for coping with the problem. Appraisal support offers feedback support. It is relevant to self-evaluation.

A complaint about school library media materials represents a problem to be solved. Several studies demonstrate that supportive messages improve subjects' performance on problem-solving tasks (Tardy 1985). Even supportive messages offered by persons who are not close to those experiencing stress can improve subjects' performance (Tardy 1994). People in distress who face problem-solving tasks are sensitive and responsive to messages. Statements offering assistance and indicating concern or giving advice improved performance while neutral statements did not. Minor, noninvolving, and costless efforts can make a positive difference. Nonintimates can provide instrumental and emotional messages of support, thus demonstrating that the provision of emotional support is not limited to close personal relationships. Supervisors and coworkers can be an important source of support. However, supervisors themselves are often cited as sources of stress.

The words “perception” and “coping” occur frequently in research discussions of stress and social support. Both areas represent special, interdependent interests that may apply to library media specialists’ responses to challenges to materials.

Perceptions

Of particular interest to researchers concerned with those experiencing stress is the individual’s perception of support available to them or received by them (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Winnubst, Buunk, and Marcelissen 1987; Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce 1990). The perception of social support is closely related to health outcomes, for example (Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce 1990). Research shows that perceptions of both the need for social support and its availability affect the amount of stress that is experienced. Thus, the manner in which support is offered is less important than the perception of value experienced by the individual in need.

Support offered by a significant other may not be as effective in reducing uncertainty as that offered by a coworker. Support may be fully realized only by those sharing the organizational context, for people in the workplace share common organizational referents which include a shared code and value system. Supervisors and coworkers are likely in a better position than nonorganizational members to provide support (Ray 1987).

Values held by the referent group also impact perceptions. Such values influence whether events or behaviors are labeled as serious problems. Gender may also influence problem perception. In research by Fisher and others, women were more likely than men to regard their difficulties as problematic, acknowledge a need for support, and actually seek aid (1988). Demographic variables such as age and socioeconomic status and the personality of the stressed individual may also affect her or his problem-solving behavior (ibid).

An individual’s experience of stress depends upon the interaction of her or his own perception of the environment with individual skills, needs, and characteristics (Wells 1984). Thus, something that produces stress for one person may not produce stress for another. An individual’s response to stress may alleviate the stress or provoke even more stress.

Coping

The act of coping is an important response to stress. Wells provides a basic definition: “Simply, coping is what people do, either behaviorally or psychologically, to deal with stress in their lives, and social support is what others do to help people cope” (1984, 137). Drawing on research, coping has been more specifically defined by Schuler as a “process of analysis and evaluation to decide how to protect oneself against the adverse effects of any stressor and its associated negative outcomes, and at the same time take advantage of its positive outcomes” (1984, 46).

Several aspects of coping are associated with Schuler’s definition:

- Coping is an intentional, cognitive act of analyzing the perceived qualities or conditions in the environment that are associated with a stressful experience.
- The degree to which the stressor is identified, uncertainty over the outcomes, and its importance determine the challenge and effort involved in coping.

- Stress can be tied to positive or negative outcomes, as long as they are important to the individual, and the process of coping can take place in either circumstance. In negative outcomes, an individual copes in order to protect. In positive outcomes, an individual copes to take advantage.
- The selection of a coping strategy is influenced by an evaluation and analyses of the personal environmental resources and constraints in addition to personal values and needs. Selection is also influenced by the immediate and future costs and benefits. The potential effectiveness of various strategies is also taken into account.

While similar in approach to Schuler, Rosenbaum (1988, 1990) emphasizes learned resourcefulness, which he suggests is a set of behaviors and skills by which individuals self-regulate internal responses that interfere with the smooth execution of an ongoing behavior.

Rosenbaum believes that any effort to cope with stressful events involves attempts at self-regulation in three phases of representation, evaluation, and action. In representation, the individual experiences an automatic emotional or cognitive reaction or both to real or imagined changes within herself or himself or within the environment. The reactions trigger automatic thoughts about one's self-worth and one's basic beliefs. The automatic reaction is followed by a conscious evaluation of its meaning for the individual. The individual can regard the stressor as a threat, a source of harm, a loss, or more benignly, as a challenge. If the individual is concerned and finds the disruption important, an evaluation of whether anything can be done to minimize adverse effects and maximize potential benefits takes place. When the individual concludes that negative effects can be minimized, coping results. Thus, coping is seen as the action phase of the self-regulatory process.

Research suggests that highly resourceful people do not differ from less resourceful individuals in their initial reactions to stressful life events or in their evaluation of the stressor. They do differ in their ability to reduce the interfering effects of stress reactions on ongoing behaviors. Thus, learned resourcefulness has its major impact on the third phase, the action phase, where coping takes place.

It is believed that individuals ultimately choose the alternative that has the most favorable cost-benefit ratio to them (Fisher and others 1988). They may calculate the benefit either at a conscious, deliberate level or at an emotional and reflexive level. Factors in their calculations include the likelihood that it will actually yield the benefits sought, as well as the perceived psychological and, where applicable, financial and effort-related costs of the option.

It is also possible that individuals may seek help in ways that we may not understand. Gottlieb (1985) recalled studies from his undergraduate years that showed people receiving psychotherapy did not fare better than their matched colleagues on a waiting list for psychotherapy. Only later did he appreciate the likelihood that those "untreated" probably availed themselves of other naturally occurring helpful resources.

Useful research has focused on social support among colleagues. Gottlieb reviewed the research of Stanley Schacter, who found that threatened individuals had a drive to compare their feelings, abilities, and judgments with others in similar situations. When people facing similar developmental challenges or situational crises are given an opportunity to compare notes with one another, the process of social comparison is set into motion. This facilitates the ventilation of

fearful emotions, normalizes feelings of undesired uniqueness, and minimizes threatening appraisals of the stressful circumstances. It further prompts joint problem solving about ways in which to cope with the common stressor or shared stressful emotions. Thus, the availability of peer consultants and advocates can add to the individual's confidence in her or his ability to master the demands of the stressor (Albrecht and Adelman 1987). These event-centered mutual-aid support groups are composed of others who have found themselves in the same situation and whose subjective experience of stress is cushioned by the cognitive guidance, emotional reassurance, and behavioral coping strategies they exchange with one another.

The dynamics of preexisting relationships between the individual and the social support provider influence the individual's choice of the people she or he seeks for help (Albrecht and Adelman 1987). Hence, simple contact with valued primary group members or links to significant associates may be an important factor in determining where a person turns for support (Gottlieb 1985).

Previous research has suggested that in times of stress, individuals seek support from those they know well. However, research has also suggested that where stressful conditions are perceived as irreversible, the selection of similarly stressed persons may not occur, for this could exacerbate the individual's feelings of helplessness. Personal credibility and higher status may also determine their selection of providers, with persons of higher status more likely to be selected.

In summary, coping is an important response to stress that can be enhanced through social support. Social supports give individuals greater control and efficacy over their lives that may positively condition them to believe that other goals can be accomplished through collective resources. An individual's effectiveness at coping is determined by several factors. Among them are the individual's learned resourcefulness and strategy effectiveness. In addition, an individual's confidence in her or his ability to overcome a stressor will either be augmented or diminished by the reaction of the referent group.

Individuals experiencing stress may find support from others in similar situations to be helpful unless they feel stress conditions are irreversible. A variety of factors determine whether persons known or unknown, in the workplace or outside, may be supportive in terms of work-related stress.

Implications of Research Review for Support During Challenges

This section summarizes the findings of stress and social support research as they may apply to the support of library media specialists experiencing challenges to library media center materials. Hypotheses and a conceptual path on the nature of support during challenges are then proposed.

The review of research literature was guided by four basic questions, as posed in the introduction. Those questions were "Why do many library media specialists choose to deal with a challenge to school library media materials without support?"; "What contributions can support make to the library media specialist during the challenge process?"; "What support systems are likely to be most beneficial to the school library media specialist during the challenge process

and why?"; and "What is known in support research, generally, that can assist in understanding the responses of the school library media specialist to challenges?"

Social support research represents a major area of interest to sociology, psychology, and communications researchers. While conceptual frameworks relating to support research are still evolving, the literature clearly suggests that actual support to individuals experiencing stressful situations, or the perception that support is available, is an important contributor to effectively coping with stressful situations. Social support effectiveness is dependent upon the individual's personal characteristics, the message that is conveyed, the person(s) delivering the message, and the environment in which that message is given. Support that serves to reduce uncertainty and enhance the individual's ability to problem-solve and gain mastery of the situation seems to be the most effective in improving individual skills and in promoting self-acceptance.

The research on stress and social support can help library and information studies researchers and professionals gain a better understanding of the nature of effective support to library media specialists experiencing challenges to school library media materials.

House (1981) posed a question that will be adapted for the review of the support research from the standpoint of challenges to library media materials: "Who gives what to whom regarding which problems?" It can be more specifically worded, "What support should be provided to school library media specialists experiencing challenges to school library media materials, and from whom should the support come?" In library and information studies, the emphasis is on which individuals or groups are likely to be best suited to provide support, who is likely to seek support, and what kind of support should be provided.

Who

Research suggests that support during stressful situations can be provided by a variety of individuals. Some support providers may seek out the library media specialist who is experiencing challenges. However, since most challenges are not known outside the school, it is necessary to focus on whom the library media specialist chooses for support (Wilcox and Vernberg 1985). Who is sought for support depends on many factors, including which library media specialist is experiencing the challenge. Personal characteristics such as gender, age, race, and psychological constructs such as locus of control and self-esteem affect the library media specialist's choices for support. Within a work setting, these may be coworkers and supervisors such as teachers, principals, and district library directors (Ray 1987). Other sources of support are peer consultants and advocates such as other librarians who have experienced challenges to materials themselves or who have unique knowledge about challenges to materials (Albrecht and Adelman 1987).

Research also suggests that the relationship that already exists between the library media specialist and a potential supporter can influence the choice of who is sought out for support. For example, if tensions already exist between the library media specialist and a potential supporter, or if past support has been ineffective, the school library media specialist may not select that person. Where confidence already exists with certain individuals, they may be most readily selected, and offer the most valuable social support available (Fisher and others 1988).

The school library media specialist may seek to identify others who have faced challenges in order to compare notes, ventilate fearful emotions, learn that the situation is not unique, and learn or reinforce coping skills. However, persons with similar experiences may not be sought if the challenge creates much stress and the belief that the conditions are irreversible, in which case support from others who faced similar challenges may only exacerbate the library media specialist's feelings of helplessness (Gottlieb 1985).

Other research suggests that the school library media specialist may seek or be influenced by persons believed to have higher status, such as district library supervisors, or representatives of state and national intellectual freedom associations or agencies (Fiske 1959; Gottlieb 1985). In addition, family members and friends outside the school or profession might also offer support. Their support may be emotional, rather than informational. Library media specialists are also likely to seek and value support from those with whom they are not close. Such nonintimates can also provide positive benefits, including emotional support (Tardy 1985).

Thus, *who* gives support to the school library media specialist experiencing challenges varies depending on several factors. Supporters may be other librarians including library media specialists who have had challenges themselves. Support providers may be teachers, the principal, or the district library director. Supporters may also be family members or friends. Supporters may be well known to the library media specialist or known by reputation or status.

It is also possible that the library media specialist may not seek the support of others. Several reasons are suggested for why this might occur. The costs of seeking support may outweigh the benefits, or the challenge may not be viewed as a problem. Specialists may fail to seek support because they believe that stress conditions are irreversible (Gottlieb 1985). It is also possible that the library media specialist may not believe that sufficient support exists (Price and Roberts 1987). In these cases, it seems important to communicate fully the benefits to the school library media specialist of receiving support (Fisher and others 1988). Librarians may not seek support because they already have a sense of control and confidence. They may be able to psychologically call upon support strengths based upon previous experience with successful support (Gottlieb 1985).

What

Although there are several possible sources of support, each is not equally effective in dealing with challenges to materials. Interactions between who provides the support, the support itself, who receives support, and characteristics of the problem are all important.

The type of support that is provided to the school library media specialist is likely to be one or more of the following: emotional, instrumental, informational, or appraisal. In emotional support, caring is shown through empathy, trust, and love. In instrumental support, helping behaviors are demonstrated by the giving of time, skill, or even money. In informational support, advice is given, and in appraisal, feedback is provided (House 1981).

Neutral statements intended to provide support seem to be less effective than those offering assistance, indicating concern, or giving advice (Tardy 1985). Support may have positive or negative effects on librarians receiving it (Burlison and others 1994). It is influenced by both objective and perceived characteristics of supportive relationships. For the person in need,

feeling valued may be more important than the kind of support that is offered (Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce 1990). How support is communicated is also important, for it is only when it is effectively communicated that uncertainty can be reduced (Ray 1987).

Research suggests that the most effective social support is that which most enhances the library media specialist's sense of control and efficacy over her or his life (Albrecht and Adelman 1987). Thus, the best support encourages the library media specialist to be self-accepting and to feel a mastery of the situation. Research also suggests that the earlier support is received, the better. Messages of clarity and information can aid in how library media specialists perceive themselves and how they interpret similar or pertinent future events. Such support can decrease stress (Gottlieb 1985). Library media specialists can gain a sense of reliable alliance with others and they may become conditioned to believe other goals can be accomplished through collective resources. Thus, social support provides resources for coping with stress (Bunge 1987; Caputo 1991; Schuler 1984).

The kinds of communications that are most helpful are those that assist library media specialists with anxiety and uncertainty, and enable them to cope independently with stress and perceive some personal control (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Bunge 1987). It is likely that where social support is effective, both recipients and providers benefit. It is also possible that, where support has been successfully given, the strategies the library media specialist learns and the sense of worth that she or he receives will undergird responses to future stressful situations (Gottlieb 1985).

The Library Media Specialist Who Experiences the Challenge

Because each school library media specialist is unique, considering the library media specialist who might seek support is complex. Research tells us that library media specialists can be expected to respond in different ways when a challenge to material occurs. Individuals vary in their need for support. Response to stressors is a product of the individual's own perception of the environment as set against the individual's unique skills, needs, and characteristics (Beehr and Bhagat 1985; Schuler 1984; Wilcox and Vernberg 1985).

The state of the library media specialist's physical and mental health is likely to affect her or his response to a challenge. If the specialist has a good, solid support system in place in the school or the home, she or he is more likely to recover quickly from the stress of a challenge (Wasserman and Danforth 1988). If the library media specialist feels that others are available to help, the challenge may not be appraised as stressful or the degree of stress may be lessened. The library media specialist's sense of support is important, and may relate to attachment experiences early in life (Winnubst, Buunk, and Marcelissen 1988).

Support systems existing in the workplace represent an important consideration. Stressful conditions may already exist in the workplace when a challenge to materials occurs. The day-to-day working relationship that the library media specialist has with teachers and the principal will affect how she or he responds to the challenge. Role ambiguity, role conflict, work overload, and difficult relationships with principal, teachers, and students all promote stress in the school. Research suggests, however, that if the library media specialist is in a participatory management situation such as site-based management, or already is involved in meaningful participatory decision-making in some way, stress is likely to be reduced (Wells 1984).

The referent group with whom the library media specialist identifies is important, for the reaction of the referent group to the stressor can augment or diminish confidence in overcoming the stressor (Wilcox and Vernberg 1985; Fisher and others 1988). The referent group can also influence whether an event is viewed as a serious problem. In school librarianship, library media specialists have two likely referent groups. One group consists of those within the school itself who are the principal and teachers. The other referent group can be said to be the library profession, which includes both librarians in the individual's life and professional tenets undergirding the profession. The reactions of the school referent group and the professional referent group may differ, and this difference may heighten conflict for the librarian. For example, the school referent group may believe the best way to resolve a challenge is to quietly and quickly remove the challenged title from the collection. The library media specialist's professional referent group, on the other hand, regards access to information as a critical tenet of the profession. Whether this group is actually knowledgeable about the specific challenge or not, the importance of intellectual freedom is likely to be embedded in the professional value system of the library media specialist dealing with a challenge.

Library media specialists are likely to attempt self-regulation when a challenge occurs. The challenge will trigger an automatic emotional or cognitive reaction that triggers thoughts about self-worth and basic beliefs. The library media specialist will then decide whether the situation represents a negative threat or a positive challenge. If the challenge is viewed as a threat, the specialist will choose action in order to cope (Rosenbaum 1988).

Coping action will involve attempts to resolve the challenge alone, or attempts to seek or receive support. For most who seek it, support is likely to empower the library media specialist. She or he will gain a sense of reliable alliance with others, and become conditioned to believe that other goals can be accomplished through collective resources (Gottlieb 1985). For others, however, it may negatively affect self-esteem, lead to feelings of obligation and guilt, and have a negative effect on future coping efforts (Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce 1990).

Thus, library media specialists are unique individuals who will respond in different ways to challenges to materials and who will vary in their need for support. The school environment, including existing relationships with principal and teachers, affects the existing stress environment. The perception that support is available is important. Finally, the presence of an existing good support system affects the degree to which a challenge will be viewed as stressful (Winnubst, Buunk, and Marcelissen 1988).

Hypotheses and Conceptual Path

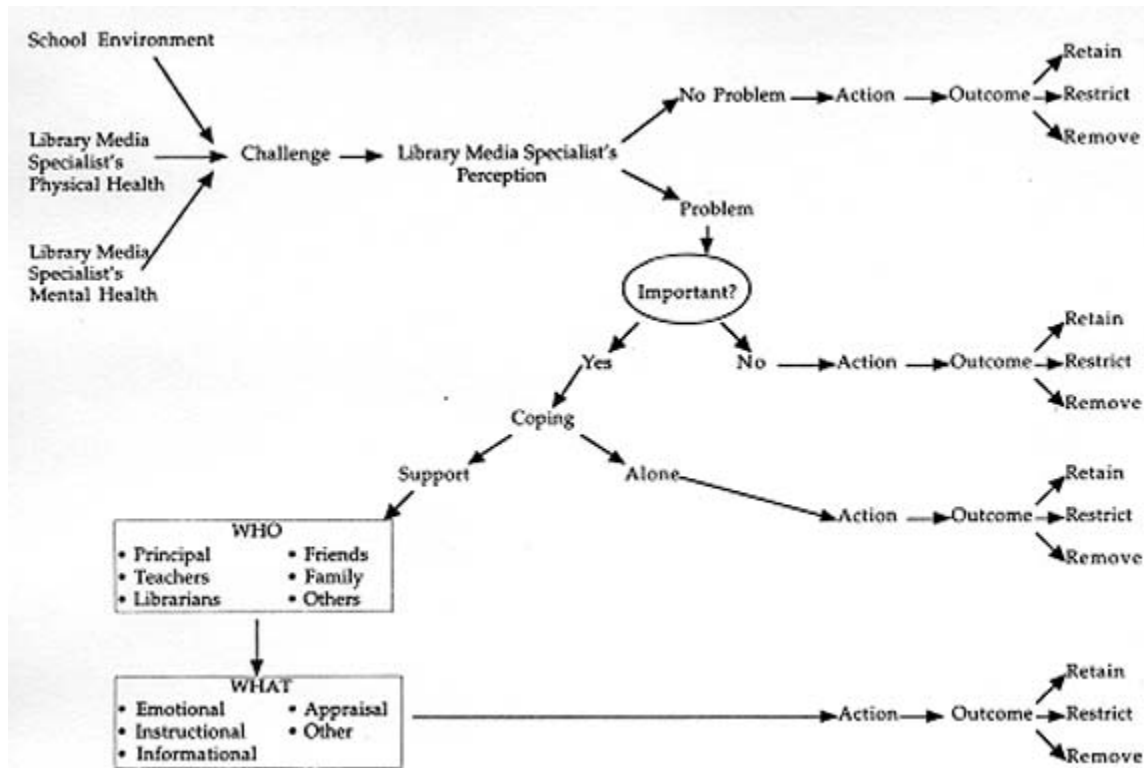
The research from sociology, psychology, communications, and library and information studies suggests tentative support hypotheses focusing on library media specialist characteristics, the school environment, and effective support.

1. Characteristics of the library media specialist
 - a. Good physical health
 - b. Good mental health
 - c. High internal locus of control
 - d. High sense of self-esteem
 - e. Perception of solid support system in school

- f. Perception of solid support system at home
- g. Low degrees of dogmatism
- 2. School environment
 - a. Positive ongoing working relationship with principal
 - b. Positive ongoing working relationship with teachers
 - c. Support of principal during challenge
 - d. Support of teachers during challenge
- 3. Effective support
 - a. Received early
 - b. Pertinent to coping
 - c. Promotes materials-retention
 - d. Received from educators known to library media specialist
 - e. Received from librarians known to library media specialist
 - f. Received from nonintimates with professional knowledge
 - g. Emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal
 - h. Promotes the library media specialist's perception of value

Social support and library information studies research, particularly the research of Hopkins, Schuler (1984), Rosenbaum (1988, 1990), and Gottlieb (1985), suggest the following conceptual path relating to support for the school library media specialist (figure 1).

Figure 1. Library Media Specialist Response to Challenges: Emphasis on Support



In the path, the school library media specialist exists in a school environment featuring varied professional relationships and levels of work stress. The state of the library media specialist's physical or mental health also varies. A challenge to materials occurs. The library media specialist's response relates to these existing conditions. The library media specialist considers whether the challenge is a problem. If the challenge is not considered a problem, action is taken and the challenge is resolved (i.e., retained, restricted, or removed).

If the library media specialist considers the challenge to be a problem, she or he considers whether the problem is important. If the problem is not important, action is taken and the challenge is resolved. However, if the library media specialist considers the challenge to be an important problem, then coping begins. If she or he copes alone, action is taken and the challenge is resolved. If the library media specialist receives support, the type of provider and support become important. The library media specialist responds to the support, takes action accordingly, and the challenge is resolved.

With the knowledge that assistance to the library media specialist during a challenge makes a difference in the outcome of the challenge, it is important to learn more about the nature of support.

Further research by the author will test the hypotheses suggested by research and the suggested conceptual path in regard the following questions: "Under what conditions is the school library media specialist most likely to seek support during a challenge to school library media materials?", and "Under what conditions is the library media specialist likely to receive effective support during a challenge to school library materials?"

Acknowledgments

The author expresses appreciation to University of Wisconsin–Madison Professor Emeritus James Krikelas for conceptual consultations. Appreciation is also expressed to student graduate assistants Edna Bouknight and Julie Fingerson.

Works Cited

- Albrecht, T. L., and M. B. Adelman. 1987. "Communicating social support: a theoretical perspective." In *Communicating social support*, ed. T. L. Albrecht, M. B. Adelman, and Associates, 18–39. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- American Library Association. 1996. *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. 5th ed. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Beehr, T. A., and R. S. Bhagat. 1985. "Introduction to human stress and cognition in organization." In *Human stress in cognition in organizations: An integrated perspective*, ed. T. A. Beehr and R. S. Bhagat, 3–19. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Bunge, C. 1987. "Stress in the library." *Library Journal*. 112:47–51.

Burleson, B. R., T. L. Albrecht, D. J. Goldsmith, and I. G. Sarason. 1994. "Introduction." In *Communication of social support: Messages, interactions, relationships, and community*, ed. B. R. Burleson, T. L. Albrecht, and I. G. Sarason, xi–xxx. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Caputo, J. S. 1991. *Stress and Burnout in Library Service*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

Cassel, J. 1976. "The contribution of the social environment to host resistance." *American Journal of Epidemiology*. 104:107–23.

Cobb, S. 1976. "Social support as a moderator of life stress." *Psychosomatic Medicine*. 38:300–14.

England, C. St. Clere. 1974. The climate of censorship in Ontario: an investigation into attitudes toward intellectual freedom and perceptual factors affecting the practice of censorship in public libraries servicing medium-sized populations. Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto.

Fisher, J. D., B. A. Goff, A. Nadler, and J. M. Chinsky. 1988. "Social psychological influences on seeking and support from peers." In *Marshaling social support: Formats, processing, and effects*, ed. B. H. Gottlieb, 267–304. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Fiske, M. 1959. *Book selection and censorship*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gottlieb, B. A. 1985. "Social networks and social support: An overview of research, practice, and policy implications." *Health Education Quarterly*. 12:5–22.

Haack, M., J. W. Jones, and T. Roose. 1984. "Occupational burnout among librarians." *Drexel Library Quarterly*. 20:46–72.

Hopkins, D. M. 1989. "Toward a conceptual model of factors influencing the outcome of challenges to library materials in school settings." *Library and Information Science Research*. 11:247–71.

———. 1991a. "Challenges to materials in secondary school library media centers: results of a national study." *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*. 4:131–40.

———. 1991b. *Factors influencing the outcome of challenges to materials in secondary school libraries: Report of a national study*. #R039A9004-89, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Library Programs. Madison: University of Wisconsin–Madison, School of Library and Information Studies.

———. 1993. "A conceptual model of factors influencing the outcome of challenges to library materials in secondary school settings." *Library Quarterly*. 63:40–72.

———. 1996. "Library media challenges: the Wisconsin experience." *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*. XLV: 1,28,31.

House, J. S. 1981. *Work stress and social support*. Reading, MA: Addison–Wesley Publishing Co.

- Nauratil, M. J. 1987. "Causes and cures: librarian burnout and alienation." *Canadian Library Journal*. 44: 385–89.
- Price, V., and D. F. Roberts. 1987. "Public opinion processes." In *Handbook of communication science*, ed. C. Berger and S. H. Chaffee, 781–810. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Ray, E. B. 1987. "Supportive relationships and occupational stress in the workplace." In *Communicating social support*, ed. T. L. Albrecht and M. B. Adelman and Associates, 172–91. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Rosenbaum, M. 1988. "Learned resourcefulness, stress and self-regulation." In *Handbook of life stress, cognition and health*, ed. S. Fisher and J. Reason, 483–96. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Rosenbaum, M. 1990. "The role of learned resourcefulness in the self-control of health behavior." In *Learned resourcefulness: On coping skills, self-control, and adaptive behavior*, ed. M. Rosenbaum, 3–30. New York: Springer Publishing Co.
- Sarason, B. R., I. G. Sarason, and G. R. Pierce. 1990. "Traditional views of social support and their impact on assessment." In *Social support: An interactional view*, ed. B. R. Sarason, I. G. Sarason, and G. R. Pierce, 9–25. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Schuler, R. S. 1984. "Organizational stress and coping: a model and overview." In *Handbook of organizational stress coping strategies*, ed. A. S. Sethi and R. S. Schuler, 35–67. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Co.
- Tardy, C. H. 1985. "Social support measurement." *American Journal of Community Psychology*. 13:187–202.
- . 1994. "Counteracting task-induced stress: Studies of instrumental emotional support in problem-solving contexts." In *Communication of social support*, ed. B. R. Burleson, T. L. Albrecht, and I. G. Sarason, 71–87. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wasserman, Harry and H. E. Danforth. 1988. *The human bond: Support groups and mutual aid*. New York: Springer Publishing Co.
- Wells, J. A. 1984. "The Role of Social Support Groups in Stress Coping in Organizational Settings." In *Handbook of organizational stress coping strategies*, ed. A. S. Sethi and R. S. Schuler, 113–43. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Co.
- Wilcox, B. L., and E. M. Vernberg. 1985. "Conceptual and theoretical dilemmas facing social support." In *Social support: Theory, research, and applications*, ed. I. G. Sarason, and B. R. Sarason, 3–20. Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Winnubst, J. A. M., B. P. Buunk, and F. H. G. Marcelissen. 1988. "Social support and stress: Perspectives and processes." In *Handbook of life stress, cognition, and health*, ed. S. Fisher and J. Reason, 511–27. New York: James Wiley and Sons.

Web Links

1. A copy of the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights is available in both English and Spanish language versions from www.ala.org/work/freedom/lbr.html.
2. Links to a variety of resources on intellectual freedom is provided by the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom at www.ala.org/oif.html. Another comprehensive intellectual freedom resource listing is provided at the [Intellectual Freedom page](#) by Steven Dunlap at Golden Gate University.
3. An article titled "How Books Get Banned or Not in Schools," (www.txla.org/pubs/tlj3q97/article6.html) Terri Boucher Vrabel addresses the results of a recent survey of Texas school library media specialists and their perceptions of why some materials challenges are upheld and others are not. Vrabel deals with issues such as support networks and selections policies.

School Library Media Research (ISSN: 1523-4320) is the successor to *School Library Media Quarterly Online* and the predecessor to *School Library Research*, an official journal of the American Association of School Librarians. The purpose of *School Library Media Research* is to promote and publish high quality original research concerning the management, implementation, and evaluation of school library programs. The journal also emphasizes research on instructional theory, teaching methods, and critical issues relevant to the school library profession. Visit the [website](#) for more information.



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

a division of the American Library Association

The mission of the American Association of School Librarians is to advocate excellence, facilitate change, and develop leaders in the school library field. Visit the [AASL website](#) for more information.