

“I Wouldn’t Bring in Anything that Could Be Challenged”: Educators as Moral Educators

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Carol S. Walther¹, Corrine M. Wickens¹,
and Melanie D. Koss¹

Abstract

Rooted in protectionist discourses, would-be censors regularly frame censorship and book challenges as defenses against portrayals of deviance and social ills. Such concerns often feed into social control of community values and moral panics around the degradation of children’s presumed innate innocence. In this study, we investigated perceptions of public K-12 educators regarding the inclusion or exclusion of controversial materials in schools. We found that the “parent phone call” both served to define what constituted controversial materials and constrain educators’ professional decision making. Although the rare teacher used parent phone calls as opportunities to educate parents about curriculum, the majority of educators avoided instructional practices that might elicit such a phone call, thus engaging in self-censorship and moral entrepreneurship as rule enforcers.

Keywords

censorship, educators, moral entrepreneurs

If you ask yourself if maybe a text might be controversial, then it probably is, so don’t use it.

—Waterloo School District, Iowa, Curriculum Director Debra Lee (Anderson 2015: April 8)

In a response to a parent complaint, Waterloo School District, Iowa, pulled the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Alexie Sherman (2009) from all middle school classrooms. Despite having a district review policy for books that are challenged, district administration contended that the book was “inarguably inappropriate” for middle schoolers and therefore did not require a review process. Another challenge came from a South Carolina police force challenging two out of four texts on a ninth-grade summer

reading list, *The Hate U Give* and the *All American Boys* (McLeod 2018: June 11). Both books deal with racial profiling and police brutality. John Blackmon, the president of the local Fraternal Order of Police, argued,

Freshmen, they’re at the age where their interactions with law enforcement have been very minimal. They’re not driving yet, they haven’t been stopped for speeding, they don’t have these types of interactions. This is putting in their minds, it’s almost an indoctrination of

¹Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, USA

Corresponding Author:

Carol S. Walther, Department of Sociology, Northern Illinois University, 905 Zulauf, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA.
Email: cwalther@niu.edu

distrust of police and we've got to put a stop to that. (McLeod 2018: June 11)

Blackmon and other police officers wanted to protect young teens from negative perceptions of the police. Debra Lee, the curriculum director from Waterloo School District, removed Sherman's novel to protect middle school-aged students from content which she believed was too mature for that age group. As with most cases of book challenges, such would-be censors capitalize on protectionist discourses that foreground young people's age, immaturity, and innocence, framing their arguments as "protection" rather than censorship (Authors 2010).

We argue in this article that such individuals, whether parents, community members, or school personnel, act as moral agents as they regulate exposure to texts based largely upon perceptions of controversial texts and age appropriateness of content. To do so, we investigate the belief systems and experiences of teachers, librarians, and principals related to the inclusion or exclusion of potentially controversial materials. Although books are often considered for inclusion in schools' curricula or libraries either by using the selection criteria established by the National Council of Teachers of English (2014), the American Library Association (2018), and/or by looking at books that have received literary accolades (e.g., starred book reviews, award winners, or honorees), books selected based on these criteria often have not withstood censorship challenges. We examine reasons educators might act as "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1973), who enforce rules in terms of larger moral and community standards, as well as ways in which educators participate and enact contemporary moralizing discourses.

This article contributes to the literature primarily through the examination of educators' perceptions about the inclusion or exclusion of potentially controversial materials through the perspectives of Durkheim and Becker, and Cohen. Educators often demonstrate overlapping roles of maintaining social cohesion and exerting social control. By attending to educators' perceptions of controversial materials and

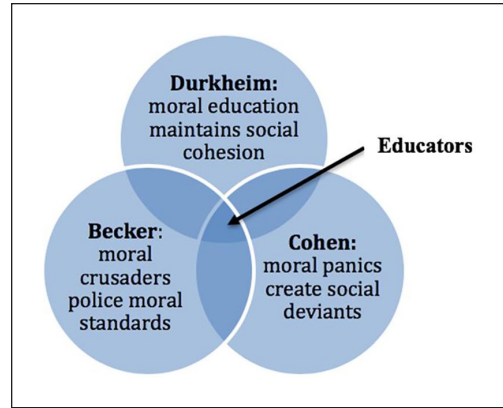


Figure 1. Relationship of educators to theorists.

their decision making about the inclusion or exclusion of potentially controversially, we also demonstrate how the abstracted "parent phone call" curtails educators' choices to avoid such challenges in the first place.

Moral Education, Moral Entrepreneurs

In examining the issue of censorship and controversial materials among school personnel—including teachers, librarians, and administrators—we attend to distinctions and associations between sociological framings of education by Durkheim ([1925] 1973) and theories of moral deviance by Becker (1973) and Cohen (1972). Educators often find themselves in the unique intersection of these theories, maintaining cultural values, enforcing community standards of behavior, and responding to moral panics and social mandates (see Figure 1).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Durkheim introduced initial sociological framings of education as a secularly based moral endeavor. According to Durkheim ([1925] 1973), morality "presupposes a certain capacity for behaving similarly under like circumstances, and consequently it implies a certain ability to develop habits, a certain need for regularity" (p. 27). Then, "when a mode of behavior has become customary in a group, whatever deviates from it elicits a wave of disapproval very like that evoked by moral

transgressions” (pp. 27–28). This regularity ensured social order through the continuance of social norms and mores.

Given his focus on social integration, Durkheim largely did not attend to the construction of deviance itself. If individuals transgressed cultural norms of morality, they were deviant. Becker (1973) and Cohen (1972), however, demonstrated that deviance often resulted from the characterization of specific groups, individuals, or conditions as deviant by socially powerful individuals or institutions. Becker (1973) argued that such groups create deviance through the establishment of specific rules and the application of those rules to groups and individuals.

The process of determining such deviance is contingent upon sustained energy and commitment by varied individuals and groups to bring public attention to the wrongdoing and demand a call to action. Becker (1973) focused on both the crusaders who championed the cause and those who enact and enforce the rules that define that deviance. However, moral crusaders are more interested in the end result of social reform than the means, for example, laws and legislation, and so depend upon experts in those arenas. Becker (1973) describes such experts as “moral entrepreneurs,” whose “enterprise” involves the creation and enforcement of rules. Rule creators include politicians and other legal bodies, which establish specific acts as deviants, religious personnel, and psychological professionals who bolster such claims of deviance. Rule enforcers then are exacted with the responsibility of enacting those regulations.

While Becker addressed the processes by which individuals, groups, and specific acts came to be labeled as “deviant,” Cohen (1972) investigated the nature of such moral crusades, which affected the positioning of groups characterized as deviant. Likening these crusades to social epidemics, Cohen characterized these moral crusades as “moral panics,” which he defined as follows:

A condition, episode, person or group emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and

stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes visible. (P. 9)

In the simplest terms, moral panics are an exaggerated public and political response to beliefs about a threat from perceived moral deviants (Victor 1998). Many of these moral panics revolve around protection of young people and sexuality (McClelland and Hunter 2013). For instance, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, doctors, parents, and school personnel all coalesced around the regulation of adolescent male masturbation (Foucault 1977). Fears around homosexuality, AIDS, and sex education all prompted moral panics in the twentieth century (di Mauro and Joffe 2009; Dowsett 2009).

Although some have debated the credibility of moral panics as an effective analytical device (B. Thompson and Williams 2015; Waddington 1986), the construct remains an instructive hermeneutic for examinations of wide-ranging issues around deviance (Ben-Yehuda 1990), pop culture (Sternheimer 2015), media (Critcher 2013), sexuality (Fahs, Dudy, and Stage 2013; Herdt 2009), and school curricula (Rodwell 2018). Likewise, moral panics may comprise a myriad of forms, that is, institutional, legal, media, capitalistic, and empirical (K. Thompson 1998). The term, moral panic, has come to be so widely invoked that Rodwell (2018:1) asserted, “We live in an age of moral panics.”

The exact characteristics of moral panic are also widely contested; however, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994a) delineated five major attributes that are commonly associated with moral panics. First, there must be a heightened level of concern within specific group(s) of society. Second is an intensified hostility toward that behavior and/or group. Third, there must be a certain degree of agreement and consensus around the behavior, increasingly dichotomizing purportedly right-minded

thinkers (the moral entrepreneurs) and deviants. Fourth, an impassioned response to the behavior is disproportionately exaggerated to the actual threat. Finally, moral panics tend to be highly erratic and volatile, erupting suddenly and subsiding just as quickly. It is important to recognize, however, historical ideologies and latent fears that underpin such moral panics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994a).

What is central . . . what explains the outbreak or the existence of the moral panic—is deeply felt attitudes and beliefs on the part of a broad sector of the society, that a given phenomenon represents a real and present threat to their values, their safety, or even their very existence. (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994a:161)

Moral crusaders and moral entrepreneurs then capitalize on catalytic events to condemn such behaviors and reassert their own moral and political authority (Fahs et al. 2013).

Moral Panics, Moral Regulation

Through the examinations of deviance, moral panic studies have attempted to explain seemingly irrational and exaggerated social reactions to perceived threats to moral citizens (Hier 2008). Other scholars have situated moral panics in contexts of moral regulation and risk assessment (Critchler 2009; Hier 2011; Hunt 2011). Moral regulation focuses on discourses, techniques, and practices acquiring moralizing tones or attributes, described as *moralization* (Hunt 2011):

By moralization, I mean that social practices are subjected to scrutiny in moral terms requiring judgments about whether practices are “right” or “wrong”; this involves appeal to some set of criteria that work through a continuum of evaluation that moves from conduct that is morally neutral, to varying degrees of wrongness or immorality of the practice. (P. 64)

Moralization, then, serves as an overarching framework through which social behavior is

defined in varying gradations of right and wrong. Rather than explaining erratic episodes of disproportionate social responses to moral threats, moralization functions as “a routine feature of social life” (Hier 2008:181). “[I]t involves myriad discourses, symbols, feelings, actors, and truth-claims that are always rationally ‘productive’ in the sense that they continually generate ways of thinking about oneself and others” (Hier 2008:181). These discourses construct meanings attributed to self, other, and object, and in so doing constitute how “subjectivities are enacted, promoted, institutionalized, internalized, and performed” (Hunt 2011:55). As a result, the boundaries between traditionally moral and nonmoral activities have blurred with everyday activities increasingly characterized through a moral dialectic of right and wrong (Hunt 2003).

Another central construct associated with moralization is risk assessment. Although the nature of risk may have shifted in modern society, perceptions and fears surrounding risk have intensified in recent decades (Critcher 2009; Hier 2011; Hunt 2011). Hier (2011) contended, “moral regulation entails a long-term process of encouraging others to internalize codes of moral conduct and act on their own behaviour to affirm a sense of phenomenal security in a world of perceived or potential insecurity” (p. 528). Amplified anxieties lead to adoption of risk avoidance and management mind-sets and behaviors (Hunt 2011). Concerns about potential harm incurred in turn propel individuals to more responsible action.

The greatest forms of anxiety nearly always invoke threats to children, whether it be their physical, socio-emotional, mental, and/or moral well-being (Rodwell 2018). “No age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of ‘youth’” (Thompson 1998:44). As such, intense pressure is placed upon educators regarding the protection of children’s well-being, which includes challenges to purportedly salacious and dangerous young adult literature in school libraries and curriculum.

Data and Method

Using an online survey, we targeted a random stratified sample of middle and high school Language Arts teachers, librarians, and principals from rural, suburban, and urban K-12 schools in a greater Midwest metropolitan area. To create this sample, we compiled a list of all such schools within a 100-mile radius of a large Midwestern city. In an effort to gain increased racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity, we oversampled low socioeconomic and racially diverse schools. Also, because secondary schools are fewer in number when compared with elementary schools, we also oversampled secondary schools to seek a balanced representation. Finally, we sent out over 1,500 email invitations to the survey (1,628 emails) to English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers, librarians, and principals. If the initial email did not receive a response, the individual was emailed three more times between February 2009 and April 2009.

At the end of the online survey, respondents were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Of those respondents who participated in the follow-up interviews, we interviewed seven ELA teachers, two librarians, and one principal. The follow-up interview asked for respondents to elaborate on the following key issues: attitudes, policies and procedures, and experiences of teachers, librarians, and principals related to the inclusion or exclusion of controversial materials. Interviews lasted between one-half and one hour, and were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researchers. After doing this, we analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As meaning emerged from the data, tentative themes were explored.

Demographically, the online survey respondents (OSR) were middle age, white, and worked in middle-class suburban schools. Their average age was 42.2 years. The face-to-face interviewees (FF) were slightly older at 47.9 years. A little more than 60 percent of the OSR and 70.0 percent of the FF were women ($n = 68$ and $n = 7$, respectively). Interestingly, although the majority of respondents were

female, 10 out of 12 OSR principals were male, as were 10 percent of the FF. The majority of FF were teachers ($n = 78$). Over 90 percent of the OSR and all of the FF self-defined as white ($n = 105$ and $n = 10$, respectively). The majority of both the OSR and FF have worked at the high school level for more than four years. The educators worked predominantly in suburban schools with less than 5 percent of the schools having children with free or reduced lunches ($n = 24$). The majority of educators felt that their schools were located in highly conservative areas, both politically and religiously. The supplemental appendix contains demographic characteristics of the online survey and interviews, while specific characteristics of interview participants, for example, role and educational level, are included within the text.

With all methodology and data, there are limitations. We had a low rate of return for the online survey (less than 10%) and we have only 10 interviews. With many mixed method studies and with more of a focus of this study on the interviews, we do not argue that this study is generalizable to educators in general but exploratory in nature. Furthermore, for both the OSR and the FF, the samples are from predominantly suburban, white, affluent schools, despite oversampling of low socioeconomic status, rural, and highly diverse school populations. Moreover, some schools had technological issues such as firewalls or no access to computers or Internet during work time. Finally, our sample of interviewees was self-selected, and they may have wanted to discuss controversial materials.

Results

In this article, we focus upon educators' perceptions of the inclusion or exclusion of potentially controversial materials. First, we examine how educators define controversial materials, typically based upon negative reactions by parents. Then, we discuss how educators will often not teach, purchase, or suggest certain materials to students if the materials are deemed socially/emotionally inappropriate for the age group. Finally, we discuss some educators' sense of

responsibility as public servants shape their instruction either to align with communities' norms or to critically expose adolescents to a multicultural, multiethnic world via controversial materials instead.

Defining Controversial Materials

Most of the educators defined "controversial materials" typically as any material that parents might consider inappropriate for young people to read or to be exposed to, particularly when sanctioned by schooling authorities. For instance, William, a male English teacher (FF) at a liberal, suburban high school, defined controversial materials as ". . . anything sexually explicit, violence, (profane) language—the 'big things.'" Dirk, a white male English teacher (FF) at a rural school, agreed but qualified his response based upon a text's presentation of such issues. He stated,

I would view something controversial as something that would lead a child to think that something morally wrong is ok. So, in a piece of literature, something could be wrong; I talk to kids and parents at the beginning of the year that sometimes literature has sex, drugs, and violence in it, but within the context of the story, it is not being gratuitous, it's not being derogatory. So, it might be going on, but it's not "dirty" in a sense . . . But if a piece of work gave the impression to a child that something wrong was ok, then I would say that is controversial.

Beth, a female English teacher (FF) at a rural high school, summed up these descriptions, simply describing controversial materials as "anything that's going to get us a parent's phone call. Or something that is going to be, that is not quite in the conservative Christian line."

Concerns about texts that would elicit a parent phone call were well justified. For example, one suburban high school teacher, Renee (OSR), included the text *Running with Scissors* on an independent reading list (Burroughs 2002). One parent called, complaining about that book which her child had chosen. Renee easily accommodated the parent's concern by having the student choose another book.

However, removal of the text for her own child was insufficient. She stated,

The parent went to the principal and was "I'm going to go to the board; I'm just going to do this, do that . . ." and we were forced in that same year to take that book off the list and not allow any other kids to read that book. Even as independent reading. Based upon that one parent.

Although such parent calls were not necessarily frequent, the potential of such challenges framed much of educators' thinking about how they defined texts as potentially controversial and then the selection of such texts. Michael, a high school ELA teacher (OSR), commented that if he wanted to pick "something a little controversial, they [the administration] are like 'let me know if there's going to be a problem.'" In this case, the administration did not discourage Michael from more controversial texts, they just wanted to be forewarned, in case an issue would arise. In another situation, Anna, a high school ELA teacher (OSR), described a parent complaint accusing Anna of teaching "witchcraft" during an instructional unit on the *Crucible* (Miller 1953). "When the principal told me, I started laughing. I thought she was joking." Anna followed up with the parent, explaining the principle analogy in the text between the Salem witch trials and 1950s McCarthy era, "witch hunts" for potential communists. "Sometimes they [parents] want to be enlightened a little bit and they want to understand," Anna noted. Regardless of basis for the challenge or the outcome, the "parent phone call" mattered heavily in routine operations and professional practices in schools.

While controversial materials may be canonical texts or contemporary young adult literature, canonical novels are integrated into schools much more frequently than young adult literature. For instance, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (2001) was carried in 86.4 percent of all the schools, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger (1951) in 78 percent of the schools, and *I Know Why the*

Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou (1970) in 76 percent of high schools.

The American Library Association explains the term “challenges” as attempts made by an individual or group to remove or restrict materials. “Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others” (American Library Association 2018). The American Library Association (2018) also reports that censorship challenges to textual materials in public schools and libraries persist at an average of 500 titles per year. As with the initial anecdote from the Waterloo School District, over half of the challenges resulted in a removal of a text without following established procedures (National Coalition against Censorship [NCAC] 2016).

Given the persistence of the challenges, we examined the frequency of rationales provided for different challenges of texts in school libraries. Using the top categories for censorship challenges as reported by American Library Association (ALA), we inquired in the online survey whether, over their entire professional career, they had experienced any challenges or attempts to ban materials. Table 1 reports the bases for the challenges by individual parents. Of the 248 challenges, offensive language ($n = 43$) was cited as most frequent reason for a challenge. Sexual content ($n = 40$) and unsuited for age group ($n = 34$) were the second and third highest categories. Reasons based upon prevalence in texts of violence, occult, drugs, insensitivity, and anti-family incurred the fewest challenges. Of the two reasons based on social demographics, that is, race and sexuality, racial concerns prompted more challenges than homosexuality (10.9% and 9.7%, respectively), but texts dealing with homosexuality were more likely to be banned. Just from the data gleaned by this small sample, we see continuing concerns by parents with content that young people are reading. Through the challenges, parents and other community groups engage in one form of discursive moral regulation of texts and ideas to which young people might be exposed through literature.

We also analyzed the environment of the school and community with challenges and/or bans of materials. First, we asked the extent to which the following individuals or groups challenged materials in schools: community organizations, individual parents, parent teacher associations, and religious organizations. Not surprisingly, the greatest number of challenges came from individual parents ($n = 60$), although several challenges came from the other groups as well (parent teacher associations, $n = 5$; religious organizations, $n = 9$; community organizations, $n = 11$) (data upon request). Then, we analyzed the social demographics of the schools. Of the schools with challenges specifically made by individual parents, elementary schools encountered 25 percent of the challenges, middle or junior high 60 percent, and 41.2 percent (because schools may have reported more than one challenge, total surpasses 100%).

School demographics significantly impacted the likelihood for challenges. For instance, if a school was located in a politically conservative environment, parents challenged material 52.5 percent, as compared with 22 percent in politically more liberal environments and 25.4 percent in environments characterized as neither very conservative nor very liberal. Schools that are located in the suburbs received the greatest amount of parental challenges (76.3%), while schools located in mixed rural and urban only had 10.2 percent and rural schools 8.5 percent. Urban schools demonstrated the lowest percentage of challenges by individual parents (5.1%). In addition, schools with lower percentages of free and reduced lunches had a higher percentage of individual parents challenging material. For example, schools with less than 5 percent free and reduced lunch student population had individual parents challenge materials 24.6 percent. Schools with less than 20 percent of their student body who qualified for free or reduced lunch encountered parental challenges (21.1%). However, schools with more than 71 percent of students who receive free and reduced lunch had no challenges from parents whatsoever. Researchers have found

Table 1. School Library Holdings of the Most Challenged Texts in Order of Number of Challenges (American Library Association), 2000–2008, by Type of School from Online Survey.

Texts	Elementary school percentage (n)	Middle school percentage (n)	High school percentage (n)	Total percentage (N)
<i>Scary Stories</i> (Series) by Alvin Schwartz	0 (0)	44.1 (15)	25.3 (19)	35.6 (42)
<i>Daddy's Roommate</i> by Michael Willhoite	0 (0)	0 (0)	5.3 (4)	4.2 (5)
<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> by Maya Angelou	0 (0)	23.5 (8)	76.0 (57)	72.9 (86)
<i>The Chocolate War</i> by Robert Cormier	33.3 (1)	50.0 (17)	68.0 (51)	74.6 (88)
<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> by Mark Twain	33.3 (1)	47.1 (16)	84.0 (63)	86.4 (102)
<i>Of Mice and Men</i> by John Steinbeck	33.3 (1)	35.3 (12)	85.3 (64)	84.7 (100)
<i>Harry Potter</i> (Series) by J. K. Rowling	66.7 (2)	70.6 (24)	82.7 (62)	93.2 (110)
<i>Forever</i> by Judy Blume	33.3 (1)	17.6 (6)	50.7 (38)	53.4 (63)
<i>Bridge to Terabithia</i> by Katherine Paterson	66.7 (2)	67.6 (23)	58.7 (44)	74.6 (88)
<i>Alice</i> (Series) by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	0 (0)	32.4 (11)	26.7 (20)	33.1 (39)
<i>Heather Has Two Mommies</i> by Leslea Newman	0 (0)	0 (0)	8.0 (6)	7.6 (9)
<i>My Brother Sam Is Dead</i> by James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier	33.3 (1)	58.8 (20)	29.3 (22)	50.0 (59)
<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> by J. D. Salinger	0 (0)	23.5 (8)	84.0 (63)	78.0 (92)
<i>The Giver</i> by Lois Lowry	66.7 (2)	76.5 (26)	70.7 (53)	88.1 (104)
<i>It's Perfectly Normal</i> by Robie Harris	0 (0)	5.9 (2)	5.3 (4)	6.8 (8)
<i>Goosebumps</i> (Series) by R. L. Stine	66.7 (2)	55.9 (19)	42.7 (32)	50.0 (59)
<i>A Day No Pigs Would Die</i> by Robert Newton Peck	66.7 (2)	47.1 (16)	52.0 (39)	63.6 (75)
<i>The Color Purple</i> by Alice Walker	0 (0)	11.8 (4)	77.3 (58)	68.6 (81)
<i>Earth's Children</i> (Series) by Jean M. Auel	0 (0)	0 (0)	14.7 (11)	12.7 (15)
<i>The Great Gilly Hopkins</i> by Katherine Paterson	33.3 (1)	32.4 (11)	17.3 (13)	24.6 (29)
<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> by Madeleine L'Engle	66.7 (2)	64.7 (22)	65.3 (49)	78.8 (93)
<i>Go Ask Alice</i> by Anonymous	0 (0)	23.5 (8)	74.7 (56)	69.5 (82)
<i>Fallen Angels</i> by Walter Dean Myers	0 (0)	23.5 (8)	74.7 (56)	69.5 (82)
<i>In the Night Kitchen</i> by Maurice Sendak	33.3 (1)	35.3 (12)	60.0 (45)	63.6 (75)
<i>And Tango Makes Three</i> by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell	0 (0)	5.9 (2)	10.7 (8)	10.2 (12)
<i>Gossip Girl</i> by Cecily von Ziegesar	0 (0)	26.5 (9)	50.7 (38)	47.5 (56)
<i>The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things</i> by Carolyn Mackler	0 (0)	23.5 (8)	22.7 (17)	28.8 (34)
<i>The Bluest Eye</i> by Toni Morrison	0 (0)	8.8 (3)	66.7 (50)	57.6 (68)
<i>Athletic Shorts</i> by Chris Crutcher	33.3 (1)	20.6 (7)	33.3 (25)	39.0 (46)
<i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i> by Stephen Chbosky	0 (0)	11.8 (4)	50.7 (38)	46.6 (55)
<i>Beloved</i> by Toni Morrison	33.3 (1)	8.8 (3)	77.3 (58)	67.8 (80)
N	3	36	75	118

^aTotal counts may be different than school counts because not all respondents indicated at what level they worked.

that low-income schools and low-income families tend to have less social interactions overall and spend less time in schools, parent teacher conferences, or attending school events (Lareau 1987). In summary, class and political persuasion greatly influenced the likelihood of parents challenging school materials: the more affluent and socially conservative the environment, the greater percentage of parental challenges.

Our data noted 248 challenges in 113 schools in our overall sample; 70.5 percent of the challenges were initiated by parents. Open-ended survey responses and interviews reinforced the regulatory power exercised by parents not just over what their child read, but options for all children in specific classrooms, grade levels, or schools. Most typically, if parents or colleagues questioned materials, the materials were frequently deemed controversial and removed.

Defining controversial materials is both simple and difficult at the same time. While rationales for challenges can be primarily organized by several clear categories, for example, sexually explicit and profane language, reasons for challenges do vary widely, as demonstrated with perceived “anti-police” sentiment in South Carolina related to the young adult novels *The Hate U Give* (Thomas 2017) and *All American Boys* (Reynolds 2015). Nevertheless, for educators, defining controversial materials is typically quite easy: if the text might elicit a parent phone call, then it is considered “controversial.”

Age Appropriateness and Suitability

One of the major reasons that educators cited for the exclusion of potentially controversial materials from school curricula or libraries was concern about age appropriateness. While teachers and librarians discussed using education-related lists to assist with text selection, educators also relied heavily upon their professional judgment about the readiness of students to read or watch controversial texts. Nancy, a library/media specialist (FF) for a junior high school in a wealthy, conservative suburban district, highlighted how she determined the

readiness, or emotional suitability, especially for her highly advanced readers. She stated,

. . . We certainly have many students who are reading far above grade level, and that’s always the challenge of trying to find things that are emotionally suitable for them as well as challenging for their reading level. And so I find, I will . . . carefully read through the reviews on the books to see which ones [are suitable] . . .

Nancy acknowledged the difficulties of searching for texts that she would feel comfortable with her youngest sixth graders, as well as her oldest eighth graders, reading. Given budget constraints, she limited her purchases for the school library based upon the appropriateness of her more emotionally and socially immature sixth graders.

I have to feel comfortable about having it on the shelf if anyone, if a first quarter 6th grader is going to pull a book off and select it, because I don’t . . . keep things behind the counter, I don’t have special shelves or special stickers. I know some librarians do things like have a YA (Young Adult) stickers on certain books and then prevent, as a way of not having younger students check them out, and I don’t differentiate that way. I basically make the decision that if I purchase something, any of the students have access to it . . . You know, that if, I order almost like warranties that I’d be making that I don’t want to take the responsibility for.

A central aspect of Nancy’s role as library/media specialist thus is protecting the socio-emotional welfare of her youngest students through potential exposure to texts and content for which she deems the students unprepared.

Similarly, Maureen, a middle-grade ELA teacher (OSR), described the dilemma of setting up thematic-based literature circles in which small groups of students read different texts, but which are all related to the same central theme. For instance, one theme might be “identity”; then she would need six different books that would “best meet every kid’s needs.” In doing so, she considered texts that would potentially both inspire enthusiasm and excitement about the book and students’

ability to effectively engage with the text—both in terms of students’ maturational levels and reading abilities. “Am I comfortable that they can handle that book?” she would ask herself.

At one K-8 suburban school, a parent challenged the use of the young adult historical novel *Fallen Angels* (Myers 1988), because the parent felt the book was inappropriate for middle-grade students due to some explicit language and representation of violence. Although the principal, Bob (FF), did not remove the text, he instructed the English teacher to provide an alternative assignment for the student and removed the book from the curriculum thereafter. Bob explained his decision based upon increased emphases by state and federal governments surrounding young people’s social and emotional development:

... as the federal government comes up with more and more mandates, social and emotional promotional development, schools have now become responsible for much more than academic development . . . So if society now believes whether it’s a direct part of the curriculum or a hidden part of the curriculum, you’re responsible for the emotional and social development of my kids, I then got to make decisions on their emotional well-being. And so, if I see something that is not in concert with their emotional development, I have to act on that.

As school principal, Bob understood one of his key responsibilities was to respond and intervene in any school condition that could undermine either the academic or socio-emotional development of students in his building. Thus, when questioned by a parent about some of the content in *Fallen Angels* (Myers 1988), he directed the removal of the text.

Darren, a white male English teacher (FF) at a liberal, affluent suburban high school who himself placed little emphasis upon parental concerns around potentially controversial materials and intentionally taught a variety of potentially controversial books, described a professional debate around the inclusion of the text *My Bloody Life* (Sanchez 2000). The focus of the debate centered not on inclusion or

exclusion of the text per se but upon grade level for which the text would be considered most appropriate.

... the story about the gang bangers, *My Bloody Life* (Sanchez 2000), starts with a rape scene at the beginning, so. Actually, I think that was a book that they decided not to even try and push for the approval, kind of have the kids read it on their own in project form instead of having an entire class read it because they just were, and the reason why it was controversial was not because of what was going on in the book. It was because the people who wanted to teach it were wanting to teach it to younger kids. *So it wasn’t that the book itself was controversial, it was that we weren’t certain that we wanted to defend teaching it to freshman per se . . .* (emphasis added)

In each of these situations, school personnel struggled with both intrinsic and mandated concerns around appropriateness and suitability of texts for students at different grade levels. They monitored and regulated that suitability, pulling texts from specific grade-level curricula or from school-wide libraries. In each case, educators referenced protectionist discourses that compelled their judgment and practice.

Educators as Public Servants

Although educators framed the issue of controversial materials largely around determinations of suitability based upon age and grade levels, some educators also discussed their inclusion or exclusion of texts based upon a personal sense of their role as public servants. In some cases, educators discussed their roles in relation to the parents and community by upholding community values. In other cases, educators viewed their role in relation to their students and the diversity of ideas and people that students faced presently or in the future.

Commiserate with Beth’s earlier comments about controversial materials entailing “anything that’s going to get us a parent’s phone call. Or something that is going to be, that is not quite in the conservative Christian line.” Dirk, a middle school teacher from another rural

district, explained his sense of responsibility to the community and upheld community values:

I'm one to be a little more conservative as far as what I choose. So dealing with the subject, I can tell you right now that I take more of a conservative approach rather than taking risks. I probably do that not so much because I am afraid of exposing kids to anything out of the ordinary, but I think of it as more of my responsibility as a public educator where I am held accountable for what I am teaching. And I certainly try not to step on too many toes, do anything wrong . . . [or] use any material that might upset people.

Dirk noted that he often considered text selection from a parent's perspective, and if he thought the text would not align with their values, he would avoid using such a text. He would opt for more accepted canonical texts instead. Likewise, when explaining his rationale for removing *Fallen Angels* (Myers 1988) from the eighth-grade curriculum, Bob, the middle school principal, commented,

I still believe that parents have the main responsibility in the development of their kids referenced to values. But . . . I personally believe that our society has become a little too loose with print and media and technology, exposing things to kids at this age . . . And unfortunately, I'm the decision-maker and I have to go with convictions that I think are in the best interest of kids.

Both Bob and Dirk described their educational practices as driven both by their own moral compass and an understanding of community value systems. As educators in public schools, they perceived their roles as upholders of these value systems. As a principal, Bob particularly appeared to conceive his role as *in loco parentis*, acting in place of the parent, so he aligned his professional judgments in accordance to presumptions of the will of the parents in his school community.

However, a few other educators characterized their sense of their role as educators as public servants differently. Rather than attending to community or parental values, they based their textual decisions on their perceptions of student needs as Maureen described

with text selection for her literature circles. Beth, for instance, taught in a rural high school without a library or local newspaper. Because of their community's rurality and limited diversity, she reported how the ELA faculty would often intentionally assign more controversial materials to expose their students to cultures and beliefs different from those found in that small, close-knit community. One year, the rural high school produced the Laramie Project, a play about the death of Matthew Shepard, a gay man who was murdered as a part of a hate crime. Beth explained that they often assigned and taught controversial materials, stating, "We try to use a multiethnic theme because our students do not have access to a multiethnic background . . . We will intentionally push the button a little bit because we know our students haven't had that experience." While the English teacher discussed the Laramie Project as a multiethnic theme (which it is not), she emphasized that through reading materials she can provide a critical exposure of a variety of diverse populations to these adolescents. Unlike the vast majority of her peers, Beth did not characterize the "parent phone call" as a threat, but rather an opportunity to educate the parents in her rural community. She also understood that she had the full support of her administration, which was critical.

William, a white English teacher at an affluent suburban school, often exposed his students to themes of racial relations and sexualities to promote discussions and critical thinking on controversial themes. William taught a senior elective ELA course that investigated underlying messages in varied media, including hip-hop and rap, advertisements, and film. William discussed showing the moving *Full Metal Jacket*, which would indeed be considered controversial. However, he defended the film, stating, "So I think at this stage in their lives as seniors, getting ready to graduate, they're gonna become voters, potentially could be in the military at some point, that they need to have that experience." For both William and Beth, they understood school and their roles as educators to help students become more critically aware of diversity ideas, people, and messages in society.

Discussion

Durkheim ([1925] 1973) first asserted a rational, non-religious basis for moral regulation as a means to stymie adverse effects prompted by dramatic cultural and economic shifts in the late nineteenth century. Morality was constituted through social agreements around proper and improper behavior, and moral regulation served to maintain social order. However, social agreement around proper and improper behavior is increasingly contested, leading to moral panic studies. Such studies have highlighted the role of moral regulators—variously described as crusaders (Sternheimer 2015), provocateurs (Rodwell 2018), or entrepreneurs (Becker 1973)—who are appalled at purported threats to moral fabrics of society, and thus call for increased legislation and regulation of specific groups and/or practices (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994b). While moral panics may still arise, moral regulation exerts a more pervasive influence in contemporary society. Modern moralization accentuates ways in which common, everyday activities are imbued with dialectical moral judgments about right/wrong, good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, and safe/unsafe (Crichter 2008; Hier 2011; Hunt 2011). As such, understanding moralization involves both insight into ways in which harm is attributed to specific people or groups and how the self and other are constructed, represented, and acted upon (Hier 2008).

Given the establishment of public schools as important moralizing agents and proponents of social cohesion, educators inhabit unique spaces of contemporary processes of moralization. They employ instructional practices that influence young people's attitudes and motivational interests. They regularly sanction proper and improper behavior through what is commonly described as "positive behavioral interventions and supports" (PBIS), which involves the "use of universal systems to support prosocial student behaviors and decrease disruptive behaviors" (Reinke, Herman, and Stormont 2013:39). Educators also importantly determine curriculum and the incorporation of curricular materials in school libraries and classroom settings for independent reading,

small and whole group instruction, or summer reading programs.

In defining controversial materials, educators recognized that what is considered "controversial" could be any text (print, film, Web site) that parents might consider inappropriate for young people to read or to be exposed to. In the 112 schools represented in this study, educators reported a combined 248 experiences of curricular challenges. Beth succinctly summed up educators' perceptions of controversial texts as "anything that's going to get us a parent's phone call." Given that the vast majority of challenges were initiated by individual parents, the association is highly notable. Depending upon context, school and district leadership, educators might withstand such challenges, but as noted by the NCAC (2016), over half of the challenges reported annually typically result in the removal of a text without following established procedures. As a result, we argue that educators must constantly negotiate the specter of the "parent phone call." Some teachers follow Dirk's model by keeping to a more conservative approach in which he avoids incorporating "any material that might upset people," while the rare teacher like Beth may push boundaries of social appropriateness typically expressed within her school's rural community to include texts that include LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer [or questioning]) individuals and other racial/ethnic groups. Regardless, these educators demonstrated the need for educators at different levels to negotiate the complex social terrain within school communities amid the shadow of the potential "parent phone call."

As emphasized by Hier (2011), a significant element of contemporary moralization is assessment and management of risk. In this case, risk most notably manifests in the form of the proverbial parent phone call. Hier (2008:183) contended, "To be 'at risk' in everyday life is to possess the information and the capacity to reduce the possibility of harm through responsible action." Both risk avoidance and responsible action for many educators in this study circulated around concern for

suitability of texts to specific age groups. Bob believed that eighth graders were too young to read a young adult novel about the Vietnam conflict. Teachers at Darren's school were concerned about freshman high school students reading depictions of gang activity and sexual assault. Nancy avoided purchasing texts for her school library that might be suitable for her more mature eighth graders but potentially not for younger sixth-grade students. She commented, "You know, that if, I order almost like warranties that I'd be making that I don't want to take the responsibility for." In all these cases, educators analyzed risk, both the potential risk of harm to students and the implicit risk of the parent phone call.

Knowing that they may or may not receive support from their administration, teachers gambled a great deal when they chose to engage in teaching practices that contravened the dominant discourse that essentially sanctioned limiting the rights of others to read certain literary texts. (Grieg and Holloway 2016:407)

As such, teachers and librarians acknowledged the need for judicious action proactively and reactively, including self-censoring texts in advance and censoring after a challenge, to account for a "warranty" serving public interests.

McClelland and Hunter (2013), however, contended that such concerns around "age appropriate" texts in fact mask socially defined deviants, for students, teachers, and schooling. Assertions around age appropriateness indicate "who or what has become out of order, thereby making the person or behavior as both un-ordered and un-natural" (McClelland and Hunter 2013:59). Although notions of "age appropriate" are constantly in flux and determined by the speaker, "[a]ppeals to appropriateness hold within them not only judgments, but also an implicit message that the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate is real, sturdy, and—most importantly—often beyond the scope of critique" (McClelland and Hunter 2013:61). Thus, appeals to protection of youth and age appropriateness elide dominant ideological

interests and manipulations of power (Rohloff et al. 2013).

Intense pressure is placed upon educators regarding the protection of children's well-being, generated from modern constructions of children and childhood, which have normalized perceptions of young people as immature, not fully developed, and innocent (Stockton 2009). This conception constitutes childhood as purer, more natural-like, and yet untainted by adult learning and experience. "The hegemonic discourse of childhood is intimately linked with the concept of innocence, which is equated with purity, naivety, selflessness, irrationality, and a state of unknowingness, or being less worldly—all of which characterizes the child as vulnerable" (Robinson 2013:42). Thus, perceived harm to the innocence of children serves as a persistent social trigger and can be easily magnified (Young 2009).

Within this framework, it becomes the adult's responsibility to protect and preserve this natural state for as long as possible. From the time of Puritans, constructions of childhood have been rife with adult anxieties about sexuality, human frailty, sin, and social order (Stockton 2009). Sensational and inflammatory discourses from media, politicians, and other sources can swiftly trigger underlying social anxieties. Occasionally, these social anxieties erupt into temporally short-lived volatility in the routine processes of moralization. In calling for censoring *The Hate U Give* and *All American Boys* by John Blackmon, the president of a local police union in South Carolina, Blackmon proclaimed desire to maintain a presumed innocence among ninth-grade students, in this case an innocence from police interactions. *The Hate U Give* ended up being the fourth most challenged book in 2018 with a main rationale characterizing the novel as "anti-cop" (American Library Association 2019).

Compelled by protectionist and age-appropriate discourses around young people, educators are frequently found at the intersection of competing interests to maintain, regulate, and challenge ongoing social norms (Rodwell 2018). Rodwell (2018) studied a number of wide-ranging education-related moral panics: from illicit drug use of 1980s and 1990s, sex education, open schooling plans, and whole

language, to more current debates around standardized testing. Not surprisingly, in reviewing these moral panics, he noted deeply intertwining connections between educational policy and competing political interests. “School education needs to be considered as a series of issues emerging amongst competing groups of all sizes and kinds, and where moral panics often result from these competing interests” (Rodwell 2018:185).

However, there is little research about how educators—individually or collectively—negotiate these contested spaces with competing interests. Educators themselves are moral actors and enact particular moral beliefs that may align with the competing political interests. Within their respective roles as teachers, librarian/media specialists, or administrators, these educators also consciously or unconsciously recognize latent social anxieties around different kinds of curricula and texts. In their decision making around controversial texts, we can see how educators may be acted upon or engage with these competing political agendas.

Furthermore, book challenges most often derive from individual acting as moral entrepreneurs determining what is and is not appropriate for all young people within particular age groups to read. Educators then must determine their response. As such, we include a few important recommendations for K-12 teachers, librarians, and administrators:

1. *Make sure there are district policies around book challenges. Then, make sure all educators know these district policies.* It is critical for districts to have clear procedures for book challenges (see National Coalition on Censorship, American Library Association, or National Council of Teachers of English for recommended guidelines). In our same sample of teachers, librarians, and administrators, nearly 30 percent of teachers and less than 50 percent of librarians were unaware of district and school policies around book selection and/or challenges (Koss, Wickens, and Walther 2010).
2. *Have clear rationales for including texts, especially those that might be considered controversial.* Written rationales are particularly important for K-12 teachers to defend a given text based upon its literary merit and connections to educational objectives and standards. Equally important as having a written rationale to preventing challenges is sharing the rationale with parents in advance (Town 2014).
3. *Follow established procedures and policies.* While this statement may appear unduly obvious, most book removals resulted from school administrators not following their own district policies (NCAC 2016). Following established policies will assist educators from capitulating to external social pressures, especially during times of moral panics.

Conclusion

Moral panic theory has illuminated the social construction of deviance. In these circumstances, deviant behaviors, individuals, or groups are framed as deviant because other individuals or groups with enough power and authority have thus labeled the behavior or person as a serious threat to society. We argue that ideologies around childhood innocence are frequently deployed by moral entrepreneurs to effect change in educational practices and policies. Indeed, educators are implicitly and explicitly threatened with attributions of deviance for introducing harmful texts to young people, as regularly communicated through the ominous “parent phone call.” Thus, the actions of educators are acted upon by moral entrepreneurs outside of schooling through forces of moralization. At the same time, educators themselves frequently act as moral entrepreneurs within schools, regulating texts that are included in course lists, classroom, and school libraries.

More research is needed, however, on the perceptions of educators regarding their roles and responsibilities as well as how those responsibilities are influenced by social and

political forces. In future research, we intend to replicate this study increasing the sample size and extending the sample population to multiple geographical regions across the United States. We also want to explore educators' conceptions of children and childhood to more explicitly understand implicit associations between educators' perceived responsibilities and ongoing moralizing discourses. In this study, we examined individual educators' individual decision making and practices as it relates to potentially controversial materials; future research should investigate intersections of moralization, ideology, and bans to broad-based curriculum, for example, the "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum in New York (Ressler 2001) and the Ethnic Studies programs in Arizona (Banks 2012). In conclusion, we recognize the significant role educators exert as moral agents in schools and the implication of moralization in the daily practices and discourses of schooling. Moreover, we underscore how educators come to first regulate themselves based upon personal, professional, and administrative influences, and then young people through the kinds of texts that are maintained in schools.

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