

The Reader Speaks Out:

Adolescent Reflections about Controversial Young Adult Literature

"Are we going to read aloud today?" Kevin¹ asks immediately upon entering the classroom. "Of course," I answer, but his impish grin warrants suspicion. Kevin's outward enthusiasm for reading has been a recent development since we began the book. I've even seen him with the book outside of class, flipping pages to read ahead of the class. Then it dawns on me. Quickly, I recall what occurs in today's chapter: the teenage protagonist describes his first kiss. Many adults would think that Kevin's interest in reading aloud stems from this risqué description. However, while the passage piques curiosity because it uses the word *breast*, it doesn't offer much sensual description beyond one four-sentence paragraph. In fact, it is the only paragraph in the entire 220-page novel detailing any physical intimacy between characters. Kevin's class merely blushes and giggles at the word, then continues on with the story.

The passage is from Robert Cormier's (1977) *I am the Cheese*, a young adult (YA) novel that has won multiple awards, including a *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year and a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. Cormier won the 1982 ALAN award for his contributions to the field of adolescent literature. Students herald the book for its suspenseful, plot-twisting account of a fourteen-year old boy's search for his father, his past, and his true identity. The account of the kiss is a fleeting memory that leads the main character to unearth a major clue about these mysteries. Yet despite its nominal presence and the book's high interest level among adolescent readers, the novel is banned in school districts across

America because it speculates about government corruption and has a depressing ending rather than because it describes a first kiss (Karolides, 2005; Young Adult Library Services Association, 1996).

Virtually silent in the debates about controversial YA literature are the voices of those for whom these books are intended. It is not difficult to find arguments written by educators and writers of YA literature concerning the use of controversial texts in schools (e.g., Broz, 2002; Cormier, 1992; Crutcher, 1999; Glanzer, 2004; Swiderek, 1996). Some of those educators and writers offer their reflections on the controversial books they read when they were younger (e.g., Cart, 1995; Peck, 1990; Stoehr, 1997). Yet, few studies have considered adolescents as critical evaluators of their own learning and the information they gain from YA novels (e.g., Freedman & Johnson, 2000/2001; Keeling, 1999; Mertzman, 2002). Instead, adult powers, whether national governments or individual parents, have taken evaluative stances on children's literature. In Canada, Estonia, South Africa, and Australia, for example, adults have continued to examine controversy in children's literature throughout the past decade (Marsden, 1994; Monpetit, 1992; Naidoo, 1995; Tungal, 1997). In fact, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) reports that overwhelmingly, adults—primarily parents—initiate challenges to children's literature (American Library Association [ALA], 2005b; ALA, 2000). Thus, in many countries producing literature for younger audiences, adolescent views about the controversies surrounding such texts are hardly reported.

I often wondered how adolescent students feel about reading YA novels that some adults have judged inappropriate. Moreover, how does the presence of controversial topics influence their decision to read certain texts? In this article, I sought to provide an arena for their voices. First, I describe the unique characteristics of the body of literature written for the young adult reader and experience, reviewing several reasons for challenge and controversy among adults. Next, I present the responses of adolescents to controversial topics in literature and how their thoughts measure against adult opinions. Finally, I evaluate the results, arguing for the need to value student voices in the debate about controversy and censorship in YA literature.

The challenge and controversy of young adult literature

Unlike other genres of literature, YA literature is not so easy to identify or categorize. Children's picture books and large-print chapter books are familiar enough to distinguish, and adult books unquestionably deal with adult content and situations, but YA literature "extends and applies the spare language, the focused story, and the sharply etched conflicts of fiction for younger readers to the multilayered, often ambiguous situations of the dawning adult world" (Aronson, 1997, p. 1418). Such ambiguity is precisely what fuels adults to challenge students' exposure to YA literature. Aronson continues, "Although we sense in these books a passion and intensity unequalled in any other category of fiction, we can't, as adults, decide exactly what coming-of-age literature is" (p. 1418). In fact, the YA novel has evolved so much in the last three decades that topics ranging from drug addiction to sexual orientation can be found in any contemporary adolescent novel (Cart, 2001; Glasgow, 2001; Mikulecky, 1998; Salvner, 1998; St. Clair, 1995).

Contention among educators and parents stems from questions about what students gain from

reading about these topics in depth. Critics of controversial YA literature claim that these novels either mirror the adolescent experience, assuring teenagers that they are not alone in their experiences, or they offer entry into and understanding of a way of life that differs from theirs. Proponents argue that students will be educated in either case; opponents fear such books condone immoral activities or teach topics that students are not yet mature enough to handle (Graff, 1992; Reid, 1999). As a result, "too often teachers choose not to use certain books for fear that these texts will create controversies leading to confrontations with parents, the members of the wider community, or school administrators" (Freedman & Johnson, 2000/2001, p. 357). Who decides what students should read and why becomes a matter of significance to adults rather than students. Since adult opinions can prevent students from reading worthwhile texts, studying what students themselves say about reading controversial YA literature in the classrooms presents an opportunity to better assess the significance of teaching it.

Description of the students, texts, and data collection

Even with evidence of the success of student-centered pedagogy and teacher research, (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Kutz & Roskelly, 1991) the notable absence of adolescent voices in deciding YA reading material seems alarming. Because adolescents are the ones most affected by exposure to these texts, it is helpful to understand their definitions of controversy, the topics they consider inappropriate for the school setting, how much exposure they feel is too much, and their appreciation of literature in general.

With that aim, I gathered data in four public middle school literature classes. Two of the classes served as enrichment courses for reluctant or average readers; the other two classes catered to the interests of avid and advanced

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readers. Each class met five days a week for forty-five minute sessions and consisted of no more than 25 students. The seventy students involved, all between the ages of 11 and 13, were of varying ethnic backgrounds and hailed from a fairly affluent suburban school district. The community consisted primarily of college-educated, professional parents, many of whom were actively involved in home-school associations. Any book under consideration for approval on the district's booklist undergoes careful evaluation process. Books pass through several reviews by content area teachers, district evaluators, and administrators before they may be used in the classroom. Approval on the booklist, however, does not guarantee curriculum approval; rather, it allows permission for the books to be discussed at a teacher's discretion. Among those YA novels already on the approved booklist were Lois Lowry's (1993) *The Giver*, Robert Cormier's (1974) *The Chocolate War*, and J. K. Rowling's (1998) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

I collected student responses over two weeks, in response to Banned Book Week, which honors the principle of intellectual freedom (ALA, 2001a). While there was no school-wide observance of Banned Book Week, prior student-initiated interest about censorship led me to address open-ended questions with students surrounding issues of controversial literature, focusing on YA novels because of their inclusion throughout the district's middle and high school curriculum. Four questions—"What makes a book controversial?", "Why are books censored?", "How do adolescents perceive inappropriate topics?", and "What makes a book worth reading?"—were used to promote examination because they address the areas adults often consider when exploring the same issue (Huck, Kiefer, Helper, & Hickman, 2004). Moreover, I hoped these questions would address state curriculum content standards for promoting critical thinking. Each question served as a focus topic for discussion, in-class writing, and homework assignments.

To triangulate data and to provide students with varying means of expression to voice their thoughts, data collection methods included double-entry journal writing between students and teacher and audiotape recordings of whole class discussions. The journal entries alternated as classwork and homework exercises, and the discussions were taped to clarify

student statements. During this study, students twice exchanged their journals with me. Discussions occurred during every class session. Processing the data involved both qualitative and simple quantitative analyses. Finally, I searched and broadly compared discussion recordings and journal entries for recurring threads of student opinion.

Student voices and considerations about YA literature

What makes a book controversial?

By middle school, students are quite conscious of what they should and should not do in a school setting. This first question immediately led to discussions about topics considered taboo in public schools. Students readily identified on their own and agreed upon which topics evoke controversy: drug use, profanity, racism, violence, religion, and sexual content. Moreover, they cited several reasons why these topics were forbidden to explore in school. Some students observed practical consequences, as did Karl regarding the use of profanity: "Curse words could find you a spot in detention." However, most students considered the social impact of these topics. They identified matters of religion, for example, in their journal entries:

- Some things that are taboo to read in school is the Bible because people are different religions. (Chris)
- Talking about other people's religion is forbidden because talking about other people's differences is wrong. (Drew)
- In some schools, *Harry Potter* is taboo because people's churches don't approve of witchcraft. (Elon)

During class discussions, most students agreed that racism is a topic of contention:

Elon: You can't say anything that's like racial remarks 'cause you'll offend people.

Lara: Yeah, you definitely can't be racist at school.

Drew: That's an easy one.

Likewise, all seventy students agreed upon another controversial topic, though they seemed reluctant to name it:

Casey: You know, stories about Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie and things like that.

Me: Are what?

Siobahn: Inappropriate adult matters.

Eventually, and more in writing than during discussion, they clearly labeled the controversy:

“Reading books of sexual affairs between people—my parents don’t want me to” (Morgan).

Overall, the teenagers viewed these topics as problematic in many school districts. As did Elon, they referred to peers in other school districts across the country who were not allowed to read books such as J.D. Salinger’s (1951) *Catcher in the Rye* or Laurie Halse Anderson’s (1999) *Speak*. Furthermore, the topics they identified matched what Huck, Kiefer, Helper, & Hickman (2004) identify as “targets of the censor”:

profanity of any kind; sex, sexuality, nudity, obscenity; the ‘isms,’ including sexism, racism, ageism; and the portrayal of witchcraft, magic, religion, and drugs (p. 635).

Further comparison of their responses to studies conducted by the OIF indicates more correlation between adolescent and adult responses (ALA, 2005a). Both populations, then, acknowledge that certain topics are too contentious to be readily accepted into the school curriculum.

Why are books censored?

Most students also easily comprehended why adults raise concern about what is read in school, readily citing why the topics mentioned in the previous section are often censored. Regarding profanity, Elon understood that “books with lots of curse words [were prohibited] because the principal and the [guidance] counselors would not want them repeated in the classrooms and halls.” Tracy agreed, adding, “If we aren’t allowed to say [profanity], why read it?” During discussion, students also perceived concern about literature that depicts drug use:

Matt: Drugs are taboo, too, because we are trying to keep drugs away from kids, and we don’t want to influence it.

Maria: Yeah. They don’t want us to curse, and they don’t want us to think it’s okay to take drugs.

Furthermore, prior understanding that violence in literature was considered controversial seemed more urgent in the wake of school shootings, bomb threats, and September 11. Journal entries reverberated adult consternation about violence:

- I believe that talking about terrorism would be frowned upon because it is a touchy and bad subject with most. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. hurt and touched many people. It may bring back many memories. (Den-nis)
- Endless killings and books with weapons in them can give students ideas of revenge through kills or evil. (Morgan)
- Your Language Arts teacher wouldn’t let you do a book report on a book that is about a serial killer. Now, that would be taboo! I think that we are not supposed to read about this stuff because we are taught that violence doesn’t solve anything. (Kyla)
- We also probably can’t read about murder, suicide, or blood and gore. We don’t want to get any ideas. We also can’t read about guns or weapons because of shootings and killings that happen at school. (Maria)

Regarding the complexity of discrimination, from racial to religious, students echoed public concerns:

- Anything talking about people of other races in a bad way teaches bad things to children. (Maria)
- Also, studying about religions as if that certain one was the best belief is also taboo because if everyone has free will, why choose it for them?” (Tracy)

Of all the reasons for banning books, students automatically explained why sexual content was a questionable topic:

A.J.: Anything about sex is not allowed in school because kids are considered not old and mature enough for it.

Jack: Yeah, some parents don’t want their kids to learn about that stuff at their age.

Drew: I think certain topics like those are taboo because we are too young or they are just wrong. And it’s forbidden to read about sex and drugs

because this is a reading class, not a sexual education class.

Dennis: Sex and romance is considered above us for various reasons. Books with them are thought of as adult books.

With further discussion, it became clear that students compared YA literature to other media that are subject to censorship for their age group:

Sean: Some of the [Play Station 2] games I play are more violent than what we read in that book [*The Giver*].

Rajani: I know, but my mom hates those games and [violent] movies, so I'm sure she wouldn't want us to read bad things like that.

Altogether, students' responses resonated with adult perspectives. These adolescents not only knew which topics adults considered problematic, but also the arguments against them.

How do adolescents perceive inappropriate topics?

Reassuring as it may be that many teenagers acknowledge controversy in YA literature, the question remains about how much exposure to such issues is too much. If adults differ so greatly on this point, would adolescents? One student summarized popular teenage opinion:

- These [topics] are not allowed to be read because people (teachers) don't want us to be aware about all of this. Personally, I think we should be allowed because people in our grade already know about everything like that. (Siobahn)

However, such responses energize adult censors who believe therein lies the reason for censorship: adolescents *shouldn't* know about these topics yet.

In reality, most of these students actually placed limits on reading books with controversial content. As with adults, personal values determined their positions:

- The topic that I think is taboo is racial discrimination. It is not fair to those people who are being picked on. (Matt)
- Celebrity affairs are kinda disgusting, and it is very inappropriate. (Jack)

- I don't think students should read about actual murders because it's just way too violent. (A.J.) Student censorship also reflected a variety of possible repercussions, coinciding with adult views. Some students predicted a negative influence on vulnerable peers:

- I think books with drugs in it should be taboo. If you do talk about drugs, some children or teenagers might start taking certain drugs and skip school. (Denise)
- I think bad words are bad to read about and can set a bad influence. (Lynnette)
- Things about sex might put some unpleasant thoughts into people's heads. Even in health class, we shouldn't be reading about it because we're only 12 and 13. (Mika)

Others believed exposure to these topics may strike a nerve in some students, causing anxiety or flashbacks to psychological trauma:

- Some kids might be offended because they might know someone this [murder or drugs] happened to. It also might make kids scared that this might happen to them. (Tanisha)
- Weapons [are inappropriate] because it could be taken the wrong way. (Lara)
- [G]uns and weapons . . . could be translated into threats. (Elon)

Most notably, some students even perceived the value of adult guidance. To them, certain topics warrant more mature handling to help shed light on complex or troubling issues:

- I think that learning about murder or drugs is not an appropriate thing for school. We should learn about these things from our parents." (Tanisha)
- We are not allowed to read about sex or if we get talking about it, we can get in trouble which is only fair. Sex is not a good school subject because it's just not a 'school subject'! (Elizabeth)
- Only in health class should you talk about drugs. Maybe some children will learn not to take drugs there. (Denise)

Just as some adults draw the line at the mere mention of a hot topic, some students believed there are issues to be avoided in the classroom. Of the seventy students responding, seven censored profanity, nine drug use, eight religion, thirteen violence, and twelve racism, sexism, and ageism. Only eight banned books with sexual content, despite consensus among all that

it is the most controversial of YA topics.

Some students, however, qualified their reading of YA novels and tolerated controversial topics under certain conditions:

- I think violence in books is okay as long as the story is not based on actual events. Students need to know if they're reading something truthful or nontruthful. (Carli)
- It depends what the books say and what the children's interests are in reading it. (Julie)
- I think it's okay to talk about but not read about because kids might try it and take drugs because they heard it was okay. (Kathleen)
- Maybe in health class we are allowed to learn about these things [drugs and sex], but we shouldn't even think about bringing information on them into a different class. (Kyla)

While some censored contentious topics immediately, most students kept an open, albeit cautious, mind. Overall, student responses implied dependence on certain supports, whether provided by their own developing maturity or the experience and wisdom of adults.

What makes a controversial book worth reading?

To determine their interest in reading books that detailed situations and topics they considered controversial, I read aloud the Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com plot summaries of ten award-winning YA books and asked students if they would want to read the book. These novels were Avi's (1990) *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, Robert Cormier's (1977) *The Chocolate War*, Chris Crutcher's (1993) *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, Bette Greene's (1973) *Summer of My German Soldier*, S. E. Hinton's (1967) *The Outsiders*, Lois Lowry's (1993) *The Giver*, Walter Dean Myers' (1988) *Fallen Angels*, J.D. Salinger's (1951) *The Catcher in the Rye*, Sonya Sones' (2001) *What My Mother Doesn't Know*, and Terry Trueman's (2000) *Stuck in Neutral*. Initially, I did not tell students that seven of those novels are among the most frequently challenged books since 1990 (ALA, 2001b; ALA, 2005a). Moreover, the plot summaries contained no indication that any of the aforementioned hot topics were involved. Immediately after reading the summaries, I asked students if they would still read those books that interested them if controversial topics were included in the novels.

Seventy percent of the students admitted that if a book's plot description sounded appealing enough, they would read it regardless of the amount of profanity, violence, sexual content, or discriminatory remarks:

- I would still read all of them that I said I would read. I don't think that it matters. (Kyla)
- [Curses and sex] doesn't add anything. If it's a good and interesting book, it doesn't change anything. (Karen)
- The words someone uses does not change the story. (Elon)
- I'd still read it if [the plot] was cool. (A.J.)

Ten students out of seventy said they would change their minds. However, their decision to read a book that initially sounded engaging seemed influenced by personal preference rather than inappropriate content:

- Curses on like every three pages? No, because I don't like curses. (Rachel)
- Bloody violence is too gruesome for me to read about. (Casey)

On the other hand, when asked if controversial passages would make a text they considered unappealing more interesting, all seventy students said no. Controversy, therefore, did not seem to sway student opinion if the plot of the story was not attractive in the first place.

Discussion

Adolescence is and always has been a time of curiosity and experimentation. This article shows many adolescents to be well aware that certain topics in literature generate controversy regarding their appropriateness in a school curriculum. Throughout our exploration of controversial YA literature, students showed insight regarding the grounds for censorship. Young adult author Shelley Stoehr (1997) explained, "[T]he issues for contemporary young adults are not so different now than they have always been for young people—the main concerns still being sex, drugs, and rock and roll. What's changed more than the issues themselves is how they are dealt with by the media and the arts, including literature" (p. 3). Judy Blume argued that students may be "inexperienced, but not innocent, and their pain and unhappiness do not come from books. They come from *life* [author's emphasis]" (Swiderek, 1996, p. 592).

Because many YA novels now contain more controversial content, their inclusion in a school curriculum raises concern among both adults and teenagers.

Based on their criteria for judging what makes a book worth reading, the students I spoke with certainly appreciated the importance of context. Considering that many teenagers prefer plot-driven texts, it makes sense that what ends up mattering to most of them is the story itself. Yet their sensitivity to adult expectations, peer reactions, and individual interest enhances their perspective about controversial topics, enabling them to evaluate YA literature in profound ways.

This research, then, indicates that adolescent student voice can provide insight for making decisions about curriculum. Many censors believe if students were not exposed to these topics, then they would not engage in any unwanted behavior associated with them. Yet, many of these adolescents expressed some level of hesitation to read YA novels with controversial content. Of particular interest is the realization that more adults would ban profanity and sexual content in books, but more students would ban violence, indicating that they employ evaluative faculties when thinking about books. In other words, they are not passive receptors who simply model their behavior after a few intriguing YA characters. The finding that none of them found a novel compelling simply because its content was debatable underlines this argument. Furthermore, since adolescence is inherently a time for testing limits and developing individual identity, including student voices when evaluating YA novels promotes the critical thinking skills necessary to facilitate students' transition to adulthood.

Further considerations are needed, however, when soliciting student responses about curriculum. Many students in this study observed the need for adult guidance when dealing with controversial subjects. Fortunately, their school district provided many means through which students could find this support, such as health education classes, guidance counselors, social workers, periodic teacher in-services about student development, and significant communication between parents and educators. Communities without such support may find relying too heavily on student judgment or interest rather risky. Huck, Kiefer, Helper, and Hickman (2004) echoed the caution: "We should

not deliberately shock or frighten children before they have developed the maturity and inner strength to face the tragedies of life" (p. 634). In that respect, nor should educators promote examination of contentious topics without ensuring appropriate adult assistance. A school's ability to provide a helpful and healthy arena for exploring difficult subject matter should be considered along with student voice.

To that end, further research about the benefits of utilizing school and community support systems in connection with controversial YA literature would provide more specific information for making censorship decisions. When reading YA literature in the classroom, "nobody wants to turn the curriculum into a shouting match" (Graff, 1992, p. 12). However, because parents, educators, librarians, and public figures are so invested in the academic and character development of students, the literature adolescents read often falls under scrutiny and into contention. If adults take the time to listen to the reader's voice, they may realize that controversial literature is not a question of exposing adolescents to something adults want them sheltered from, but a question of in what context, with what approach, and with what aim. John Marsden (1994) affirmed, "If we accept that children are not automatically innocent and angelic, that they are complex, subtle humans who are trying to overcome their ignorance, trying to acquire knowledge so that they can move to the positions of strength that the knowing adults seemingly occupy, then we can get a clearer idea of the role of fiction in their lives" (p. 103). With that perspective and actual adolescent viewpoints, we can approach students' encounters with YA literature as a truly valuable interaction.

¹ All student names have been changed.

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