Article

"It Was . . . the Word 'Scrotum' on the First Page": Educators' Perspectives of Controversial Literature

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Abstract

Preemptive censorship occurs when educators avoid particular books because they dislike the ideas or values the books contain or fear the controversy the books may evoke. Although not as blatant as other forms of censorship, preemptive censorship has the unfortunate consequence of restricting children's access to ideas and information. Moreover, preemptive censorship violates students' intellectual freedom and right to read. In this study, we employ critical discourse analysis to examine discussions by preservice teachers and school librarians as they responded to a controversial children's book. Our analysis of the discussions revealed that many preservice educators maintain a protective view of children, fear the negative reactions of parents, and would choose to engage in preemptive censorship rather than create controversy in their classrooms and schools. We conclude by recommending ways that teacher educators can support preservice teachers and school librarians in their efforts to promote the professional value of intellectual freedom.

Keywords

discourse analysis, teacher beliefs, preservice teacher education

A children's book rarely receives widespread media attention, but that is exactly what happened in 2007, just weeks after the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association (ALA), announced *The Higher Power of Lucky* (Patron, 2006) as its pick for the prestigious Newbery Medal. While some news outlets give brief reports about each year's Newbery winner, *The Higher Power of Lucky* landed on the front page of the *New York Times* on February 18, 2007, because of the controversy it incited among school librarians participating in an online listserv discussion (see Bosman, 2007). Although the book addresses topics such as addiction and abandonment, the main source of the controversy was the appearance of "scrotum" on the book's first page. The protagonist, 10-year-old Lucky, overhears a story about a dog bit on the scrotum by a rattlesnake. Curiosity about the word nags Lucky until the novel's conclusion when, in a moment of trust-seeking and vulnerability, she asks her guardian about its meaning. Although *The Higher Power of Lucky* has not appeared on ALA's list of most frequently banned books for any given year since it was published, ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom reports that it has been challenged for "offensive language" and being "unsuitable to age group" (S. Pickett, personal communication, December 14, 2015). The controversy surrounding *The Higher Power of Lucky* is notable in the attention it drew to the issues of censorship and intellectual freedom.

Indeed, freedom of speech is a long-held tenet in the United States, including in the realm of public education. Related to the idea of freedom of speech are intellectual freedom and the "right to read," which the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE; 2009) defines as "the right of any individual not just to read but to read whatever he or she wants to read." NCTE and other organizations such as ALA are strong proponents of permitting children and young adults access to the literature they want to read, including the literature that may be considered controversial. Proponents of the right to read insist that it is a right "basic to a democratic society" (NCTE, 2009). Support for students' right to read has been codified in documents like ALA's (1980) *Library Bill of Rights*.

Yet, the democratic ideal of the right to read has often been contested, and nowhere is this more visible than in the school library and English classroom. Books of all varieties have long been the objects of censorship because of controversy surrounding their content or authors' ideologies (Jenkins,

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2008). According to ALA's (2017) Office of Intellectual Freedom, the top three reasons for book challenges are "sexually explicit" material, "offensive language," and content "unsuited to any age group." Whatever the reason, censorship has resulted in restricted access to particular books or the outright banning of books in classrooms and libraries. Such censorship has the effect of violating students' intellectual freedom and right to read, and it is a manifestation of the power teachers and others exercise over young readers (Knox, 2014a). Unfortunately, the very books that are censored are often the ones young people want, and even need, to read (Alexie, 2011).

Banning books and restricting access to books are highly visible forms of censorship, yet one form of censorship receiving less attention and publicity is what Fanetti (2012) terms "preemptive censorship" (p. 8). According to Fanetti, preemptive censorship is the self-censorship that teachers and librarians engage in when they avoid including books in the curriculum or library collection to prevent controversy and challenges from parents and community members. For instance, preemptive censorship occurred when *The Higher Power of Lucky* incited controversy, and consequently many librarians refused to order the book for their collections (Bosman, 2007). Other terms have been used to describe preemptive censorship, such as "stealth censorship" (Roser, 2004) and "censorproofing" (Schrader, 1996). Regardless of the terminology used, Fanetti (2012) insists that this form of censorship is the "most insidious" because it happens without the knowledge of readers or the community (p. 8), and Roser (2004) contends that it "results in a book collection that misrepresents or underrepresents particular people, ideas, and lives" (p. 204). There is evidence that preemptive censorship is widespread. Cerra's (1994) work suggests that some educators who support students' First Amendment rights would still censor books, and a survey by *School Library Journal* (*SLJ*; 2016) found that more than 90% of elementary and middle school librarians and 73% of high school librarians reported engaging in preemptive censorship (p. 2). Librarians in the *SLJ* study cited sexually explicit content; lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender (LGBQT) themes; offensive language; violence; suicide; and drugs among other topics as reasons for preemptively censoring materials.

Preemptive censorship and other forms of censorship occurring in schools and libraries have the unfortunate consequence of restricting the information and ideas accessible to young readers (Dresang, 2003; Fanetti, 2012). Martinson (2008) suggests that self-censorship is part of a hidden curriculum in schools interfering with students' right to information on a variety of topics and viewpoints, and Boyd and Bailey (2009) believe that censorship removes opportunities for students to understand social injustices and examine privileges. Moreover, Dresang (1999) argues that when adults restrict access to the materials children want to read, books will become irrelevant to youth, "relics on the trash heap" (p. xvii). When educators engage in preemptive censorship out of fears of challenging social norms and experiencing reprisal, there is no need for blatant and highly visible forms of censorship such as banning books. Yet, the results of preemptive censorship are no less damaging to democratic ideals of engagement with critical questioning and vigorous debate.

Purpose of the Study: Examining Perceptions of Controversial Books

Teacher and library educators are in special positions to educate future teachers and librarians about the democratic ideals of intellectual freedom and the right to read and to counter tendencies toward preemptive censorship. Therefore, it is imperative for teacher and library educators to understand the perceptions that preservice teachers (PSTs) and school librarians have toward including potentially controversial literature in school settings. Knowing how future teachers and librarians feel about using controversial literature—literature that has been challenged or banned because of its content or language—can help teacher and library educators support new educators in promoting intellectual freedom and the right to read in their classrooms and libraries.

Thus, in this study, we explore the perceptions PSTs and school librarians have toward using challenged and banned books with K-12 readers. We seek to understand how preservice educators think about what children should read, who decides what children should read, and in particular, how decisions are made about including controversial literature in the classroom. Our study examined the following question: What meanings do PSTs and school librarians construct about controversial children's literature, and what implications do these meanings have for students' right to read?

A number of articles and book chapters (e.g., Fanetti, 2012; Jenkins, 2008; Roser, 2004) have addressed the dangers of censorship, and some studies have examined the attitudes that PSTs and inservice teachers have toward controversial books and books addressing critical social issues (e.g., Cerra, 1994; Schmidt, Armstrong, & Everett, 2007; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). However, these studies are becoming dated even as censorship persists in schools (Boyd & Bailey, 2009), and there is limited contemporary research regarding teachers' and librarians' perceptions of utilizing controversial children's books in school settings. The available current research suggests that teachers fear addressing controversial topics in school (Malins, 2016), and school librarians are practicing preemptive censorship at an increasing rate (Jacobson, 2016). Given these trends, especially as a new generation of educators enters classrooms and school libraries, it is important to understand what PSTs and librarians believe about sharing controversial literature with students. Without studies like this one, teacher and library educators lack the information they need to challenge attitudes contrary to the professional values of intellectual freedom

and the right to read. It is critical to know what future teachers and librarians believe if teacher educators wish to uphold these values and consequently support children's freedom to read what they wish. Our findings yield insights that may support teacher educators in this endeavor.

Theoretical Perspectives

Our work is informed by several theoretical perspectives: James Gee's views of language, Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, and Eliza Dresang's theory of radical change. Like Gee (2014), we believe that language is always political and never neutral, and "We use language to build things in the world, to engage in world building, and to keep the social world going" (p. 31). According to Gee, people use language within the social world for seven different purposes, which he called "building tasks":

- Building significance, or using language to make something seem more or less significant,
- Building practices, or using language to participate in an activity or culturally recognized practice,
- Building identities, or using language to construct an identity for ourselves or others,
- Building relationships, or using language to facilitate relationships with other people,
- Building politics, or using language to distribute or withhold social goods,
- Building connections, or using language to make connections between ideas, and
- Building sign systems and knowledge, or using language to privilege or marginalize particular ways of communicating and ways of knowing.

A writer or a speaker uses language to engage in one of these building tasks, or in other words, uses language to accomplish a certain purpose. Language is always meaningful, and is used to build, sustain, or withhold the power of an individual or a group of people (Gee, 2012).

Although a writer or a speaker may have a particular intention in mind when communicating, we follow Rosenblatt (2013) in our understanding that a text—whether written or spoken—does not have an inherent meaning. Rather, the construction of meaning is a transaction between the reader and the text, with the reader's interpretations informed by his or her life experiences and purposes for reading. According to Rosenblatt (2013), "Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context" (p. 929). Applied to our work here, we recognize that different readers will construct varying interpretations of the same text despite the author's intentions. For example, the word "scrotum" appearing in a children's book like *The Higher Power of Lucky* may be seen as unremarkable to one reader and highly offensive to another regardless of the author's purpose for including the word in the text.

However, we believe that the professional obligation to promote intellectual freedom and the right to read should take precedence over teachers' and librarians' interpretations of and personal feelings toward a text. We align ourselves with Dresang's (1999, 2003) theory of radical change, particularly her concept of *access*. Dresang argues that today's youth—natives of the digital age—have greater access to information than ever before, and efforts by adults to shield children from information are futile. Adult efforts to withhold information from children or censor their literature stem from their conceptions of childhood. According to Dresang (2003), there are three common assumptions that adults have about children: (a) children are innocent and require the protection of adults, (b) children are depraved and require redemption, and (c) children are capable, wise, and seek connections with texts and other people. Those who would censor books may hold the first two assumptions as Knox's (2014b) work suggests, yet Dresang believes the third assumption of children-as-capable most accurately describes contemporary youth, and it should be the role of adults to educate children about challenging or controversial topics rather than protect them through actions such as censorship and restricting access to information. Given that adult beliefs about children and childhood inform decisions to provide or restrict access to books, it is important to understand what teachers and school librarians believe regarding what is appropriate (or not) for children to read.

Method

To learn what PSTs and school librarians think about what children should read and who should make those decisions, we analyzed written discussions that occurred in the context of an online graduate course, Children's Literature Across the Curriculum (CLATC), taught at a public university in the mid-Atlantic United States. CLATC was taught in summer 2014 and 2015 in four sections with 80 total students. Both PSTs and preservice school librarians were enrolled in the course as it was required for students in the elementary education and school library programs. Course goals included familiarizing students with the selection and evaluation of quality literature for children. Students read a variety of assigned and self-selected children's titles and independently engaged in various modules, including a lecture and reading assignments (viz., ALA, 1980; NCTE, 2009) about censorship and intellectual freedom. However, due to the online, asynchronous nature of the course, we could not be certain of students' level of engagement with the modules.

One required title was *The Higher Power of Lucky*, which students read and discussed in literature circles, small groups engaged in conversation around a common text (Daniels, 2002; Forest & Kimmel, 2016). *The Higher Power of Lucky* was selected for CLATC because it is a recent representation

of realistic fiction, a genre studied in the course, and it received the 2007 Newbery Medal, a prestigious children's book award having a major impact on book sales (Horning, 2010). Because introducing students to quality children's literature was a goal of CLATC, *The Higher Power of Lucky* was a fitting choice.

Literature circle discussions in CLATC occurred within the chat function of the Blackboard learning management system. Discussions occurred synchronously; groups of four or five students met in the chat room at an agreed-upon time. The chats produced written, time-stamped transcripts of discussions, and the 19 resulting transcripts (one from each group) were the primary data source for this study. After final grades were submitted at the end of each semester, students were contacted about our interest in using their chat transcripts for this study and were given the opportunity to "opt out." None declined participation, and data analysis commenced.

Students' literature circle discussions were centered on topics and questions they raised themselves; discussions were not prescribed or directed by the instructor, though past experiences with teaching this course indicate many discussions about *The Higher Power of Lucky's* controversial nature arise organically. The researchers read through each of the 19 transcripts and marked sections where participants explicitly discussed why the book was controversial. In three chats, at least one person spoke about being "shocked" by the book or questioned the age appropriateness of the difficult topics included in the book but did not address the book as controversial. Four of the 19 chats entirely avoided the issue. These chats were eliminated from this particular study, and the remaining 12 chats served as our focus. Forty-eight students participated in these 12 chats; 11 were preservice school librarians (PSLs), and the remaining 37 were PSTs. The PSLs were all inservice teachers pursuing additional licensure to become school librarians.

Discourse Analysis

Power relations are inherent in censorship and in decisions about what to include (or not) in the school curriculum and classroom practice. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), an analytical tool grounded in sociocultural and critical theories (Rogers & Schaenen, 2014), is particularly concerned with issues of power. As Gee (2014) suggests, "Language is always 'political'" as it deals with the distribution of social goods (p. 8). An "ideal discourse analysis" according to Gee could include consideration of seven kinds of building tasks accomplished in the talk: building significance, building activities, building identities, building relationships, building politics, building connections, and building significance for sign systems and knowledge (pp. 110-112). For our purposes, CDA seemed fitting not only because of the power relations involved censorship issues, but the choice of a word ("scrotum") was also the source of controversy about *The Higher Power of Lucky*, and CDA is concerned with how language is used. Gee's inclusion of "building politics" also drew us because of the clearly political nature of censorship. When we use language, we construct and reconstruct certain meanings, and often these establish or reproduce power relations in curriculum or materials chosen for classrooms and libraries. The use of building tools afforded us an analytical lens to consider how these meanings are built through everyday language. In addition, we selected Gee's approach because recent reviews of CDA in education (Rogers & Schaenen, 2014; Rogers et al., 2016) found that it is a favored tradition in education research.

Each of the 12 chat transcripts was first read, and parts of the transcript that discussed the controversial nature of *The Higher Power of Lucky* were highlighted for further analysis much as Gee (2005) suggests that a discourse analysis should "map topics" (p. 151). Most chats lasted an hour (as students were assigned), and the discussions about the book's controversy averaged 6.25 min ranging from 2 to 16 min. In total, there were 75 min of chat about the controversy. These parts of the transcript became the focus of a more detailed analysis. Given the small set of data, CDA provided us with the tools to take a nuanced look at speaker choices for how to situate themselves, the book, and the issue of censorship.

Because these were online chats where participants typed their responses, the analysis focused on the situated meanings conveyed not only in individual turns at typing but also in the context of the turn: What was typed before and after by the individual as well as by classmates. Each turn was a unit of analysis; in the chat, participants hit "return" or "enter" to create a turn. In this sense, the units of meanings were determined by the participants. Sometimes, a turn was not taken up, and so one turn represented the entire topic unit. Other discussions went on for several lines and turns in a "topic chain" where writers added information to the discussion and connected their turns to previous turns. Each researcher independently read through the chats asking about each turn, what meanings were being built in this turn, and how a turn related to other turns. The first round of coding focused on the ways participants were building meanings of censorship, reasons for censoring, identities of censors, and the place of controversial books in school classrooms and libraries.

We then met to compare and discuss each chat turn by turn. We analyzed everything a student typed in a turn, including punctuation marks such as ellipses. Gee (2014) contends that "judgements of relevance" about what to analyze in a transcript should be "based on the analyst's theories of how language, contexts, and interactions work" (p. 136). Our belief that writers make intentional choices about arranging words or employing grammar in a sentence to communicate meaning, consistent with Gee's (2012) view of all language having meaning, guided our decision to analyze everything students typed pertaining to our study's focus.

We offer a statement from Rachel (PSL) to illustrate the nature of our analytical discussions. When she said "there

Table 1. Example of Coding.

Speaker	Utterance	Coding for what meaning is built	Gee's building task
Rachel (PSL)	There were a lot of adult themes	Adult themes	Building identities—The child reader
	which is perhaps why it has been challenged	Challenged (passive voice)	Building politics—Who decides
Lucy (PSL)	I agree		
Jane (PST)	Well this book is a banned book	Banned book	Building politics—Who decided to ban?
Larissa (PST)	I felt the vocabulary was a little too advanced as well though	Vocabulary advanced	Building identities—The child reader
Jane (PST)	Do you think it's	It's = censorship	Building politics—Unnamed censors
	because of the inappropriate stories	Inappropriate content	Building identities—The child reader
Rachel (PSL)	Yes I think the inappropriate stories had something to do	Inappropriate content	Building identities—The child reader
	with it	It = censorship	Building politics—Unnamed censors

Note. PSL = preservice school librarian; PST = preservice teacher.

were a lot of adult themes which is perhaps why it has been challenged," Rachel made several decisions about the subject of the sentence. Given our interest in why educators self-censor, this first part of this turn was coded as "reasons for censoring" and the second as who censors, or "identities of censors." In her sentence, "it" refers to the book, *The Higher Power of Lucky*, and is embedded in a clause. The sentence begins with and gives prominence to the adult themes that were "there" in the book. The phrase "adult themes" carries particular weight and power in a sentence about a children's book. While "It has been challenged" implies that someone has challenged the book, the use of the passive voice and placement in a clause that begins with "perhaps" gives anonymity to the censor. Although Rachel has clearly made an assertion about the adult nature of themes in the book, she does not directly challenge or suggest the book should be censored.

The two researchers met multiple times and thoroughly discussed each line of text using a similar analysis. Gee's (2005, 2014) seven building tasks of language provided a framework for thinking about the findings particularly as they related to the research question and focused on the meanings students constructed. In this analysis, building politics, building identities, and building relationships were clearly the most salient. Finally, we returned to the data to code for each of these building tasks and discussed the patterns we found for each of these three building tasks. Returning to the example of Rachel's statement, by mentioning "adult themes," Rachel implied as taken for granted that some themes are for adults and not appropriate for children. This part of her line was coded "building identities." Her mention of challenge is clearly an example of efforts to withhold some social good, in this case, a book, from a group of readers. This part of the line was coded "building politics." In other parts of the chats, participants discussed how teachers might relate to students and parents in choosing to use (or not to use) controversial literature in the classroom, and these were coded for "building relationships."

Table 1 places Rachel's utterance in the context of the chat, and provides an example of how the researchers coded and developed the themes. In each chat, every student participated in a substantial way to at least one of the segments coded about the controversy. While Lucy (PSL) only expresses agreement in the segment shown in Table 1, she later contributes to the discussion about word choice: "I thought [scrotum] was the proper term though. I'd rather see that than a slang term."

Findings

In our CDA of *The Higher Power of Lucky* chats, we found three of Gee's (2005, 2014) building tasks—building politics, building identities, and building relationships—corresponded to our interest in learning what PSTs and school librarians think about who decides what children should read, what is appropriate for children to read, and what influences educators' decisions about including controversial books in the classroom and school library.

Building Politics: Who Decides What Children Should Read

According to Gee (2014), building politics occurs when people use language to deny or distribute social goods, which are "anything some people in a society want and value" (p. 6). Discussion in seven of the chats centered on deciding what children should read and who makes these decisions. The social goods at stake are children's autonomy to make their own choices and access to information. A conversation between Anna (PSL) and her peers is a good example of how

children in Anna's classroom would be denied these social goods. Speaking about the mention of "scrotum" in *The Higher Power of Lucky*, Anna said, "This would be a good read aloud to a class, but I would edit that part out as I read to them." She continued by saying, "I just wouldn't want to deal with it in school!" Here, Anna positions herself as a censor, and potentially, she has the power to deny children information about the male body because of her presumed discomfort with addressing this topic.

Students also built politics when they talked about the power dynamic between parents and teachers, the social good being the power to affect children's reading experiences. In six of the seven chats that addressed who should decide what children read, participants talked about the backlash they could experience if they chose to include *The Higher Power of Lucky* in their classrooms or libraries, and upset parents took offense to the book's content. Jessica (PST) said, "I would not want angry parents coming to me about what their child heard," and Stacy (PST) remarked, "I can see people not wanting their child to read it [because] of a few words." These comments suggest that fear of parents' anger would influence students' decisions to share the book with children in their classrooms or libraries. One student, Zoe (PST), said, "This is a book that needs parents' permission," suggesting that teachers relinquish their decision-making power to parents. Chelsea (PST) said that she would talk with parents first about the appearance of "scrotum" in the book, and Lakyn (PST) and Elizabeth (PST) expressed their intention of giving parents a "heads up" about reading the book with students, but they did not discuss how they would do so. Although students in this course were taught that advocating for students' intellectual freedom is an educator's professional obligation, none of the students talked explicitly about their own power as teachers and librarians to support children's right to read. In fact, Evelyn (PST) was the only student who alluded to the notion of children's intellectual freedom and access to books: "It is not up to me to judge what books should be available because of my hang-ups." While Evelyn does not portray herself as an advocate of intellectual freedom here, she understands that her personal opinions of a book should not deny her students the social goods of choice and autonomy.

Building Identities: What Is Appropriate for Children to Read

Gee (2014) contends that people use language to build identities for themselves and others. In their discussions of *The Higher Power of Lucky*, students considered what is appropriate (or not) for children's literature, and thereby constructed meanings of childhood and children. Here, we frame our findings of how students built children's identities using Dresang's (2003) ideologies of childhood.

In 10 of the 12 chats, students' comments about *The Higher Power of Lucky's* appropriateness suggest that they viewed children as "innocent-and-in-need-of-protection" (Dresang, 2003, p. 21). As Lakyn (PST) stated, "Some of the themes might be inappropriate for the [book's target] age group," although her remark implies that these themes might be acceptable for older children. One of these themes was sexuality; students felt that the word "scrotum" was not appropriate for a children's book, that the presence of this word somehow violated their presumptions about the innocence of children when it comes to sex even though "scrotum" is not used in a sexual context in *The Higher Power of Lucky*. Savanna (PST) said, "The entire first page totally threw me off for a children's story!" and her inclusion of an exclamation point suggests her surprise at seeing "scrotum" on the book's first page. Jack (PSL) said, "The whole reason why this thing was banned was because of the scrotum section and I don't see what value it gave to the book." Jack's statement indicates that he does not feel "scrotum sections" are appropriate for children's literature, and by implication, for children. His reference to the book as a "thing" and his comment about value are attempts to discredit the book's merit because of the word "scrotum." Although Pattie (PST) did not believe that the inclusion of "scrotum" is a "reason to challenge" the book, she noted, "I can see that it could be that crossing boundaries into 'Adulthood' the sex talk etc." Here, Pattie built identities through her mention of "boundaries," which indicates her belief that childhood and adulthood are two distinct phases of life, and sexuality is the exclusive domain of adults. Her use of "Adulthood" as a proper noun underscores this constructed boundary between children and adults.

Rarely did students speak favorably of the use of "scrotum" in the book with only two chats expressing some degree of support for its inclusion. Larissa (PST) said, "I guess for upper elementary schoolers the vocabulary could be a good thing though . . ." Indeed, "scrotum" is an accurate word for describing that particular appendage. However, Larissa's use of "I guess" and the ellipsis she places at the end of her turn suggest her reluctance to endorse the appearance of "scrotum" in the book, and her mention of "upper elementary schoolers" implies that the book may be inappropriate for younger readers. In the same chat, Lucy (PSL) remarked, "I thought [scrotum] was the proper term though. I'd rather see that than a slang term" to which Rachel (PSL) replied, "Me too." Jane (PST) concurred, noting "I don't think there is a better word" and "scrotum" is better than "an alternative colloquial term." Another group discussed the inclusion of "scrotum" at length, and Frank (PST) made the most assertive statement among this group: "I think it's silly. It isn't a bad word, and it also isn't used in a way that is inappropriate or could encourage students to use it inappropriately." While neither of these groups lauded the word, they did not condemn it as other groups did.

In eight of the chats, students felt that the book included other "unhealthy topics" inappropriate for children, as Cassie (PST) observed. Julie (PST) said, "Alcohol and drug

(cigarettes/gambling) problems are intense subjects," and Kristen (PST) said that there were some "grown up situations in the book," again suggesting a boundary between what is acceptable for adults and what is acceptable for children. Students felt that such topics do not belong to the domain of childhood. For instance, Felicity (PST) said, "There were definitely some subjects in the book that most children do not have much exposure about." Students' comments about the word "scrotum" and topics such as alcohol abuse point to their belief that children are innocent and do not know about such things, a limited and simplistic perspective that could potentially inform the book choices they make for their own students.

In two instances, students appeared to think children are "depraved" (Dresang, 2003, p. 22); they seemingly assumed that *The Higher Power of Lucky* would give children bad ideas, such as running away from home. Tamara (PST) remarked, "It may also encourage running away to see who loves you." Meanwhile, Rachel (PSL) said, "I could see how some parents/adults wouldn't like the freedom that the kids had," as if children would make poor choices merely by reading about characters with the freedom to roam the community visiting neighbors.

Yet, students in five chats did build identities of children as "capable" (Dresang, 2003, p. 22). Although William (PSL) remarked that *The Higher Power of Lucky* included "adult issues like addiction and abandonment," he also recognized that "a lot of kids are exposed to those things in real life." Zoe (PST) felt that it was a "great book" for children facing the adoption process like the protagonist Lucky. Some students were moving toward building capable identities for children but were held back by presumptions of children's innocence. Megan (PST) said, "As an adult, I found it hard to believe these things were in a children's book," but she continued by stating, "It is interesting to think of what children would think about it," recognizing children may have different interpretations of the book than adults. Like William, Anna (PSL) observed that "adult themes, alcohol, drugs, etc." are "real world issues that a lot of kids face," but she admitted that she would censor the book by omitting potentially controversial parts if she was to share this book in her classroom. In sum, the students' remarks about *The Higher Power of Lucky* suggested that they hold different ideologies about what children should be allowed to know, though statements supporting a perspective of children as innocent were coded in the chats more frequently than other perspectives.

Building Relationships: Influences on Teachers' Decisions to Discuss Controversial Topics

Gee (2005) says that building relationships is closely related to building identities because our identities are often tied up in the relationships we have with other people and institutions. But the two are distinct as "identities set up parameters for a relationship" (p. 121). In five chats, participants spoke of themselves as teachers and the relationships teachers have in that position with students and parents. When Anna (PSL) said, "I just wouldn't want to deal with it in school!" she is clearly referencing the relationships established by her identity as a teacher. When she went on to say, "I just know kids would ask what [a scrotum] is, and I wouldn't want to explain it to a group of boys and girls!!!" she is acknowledging her relationship to students in several key ways: First, as a teacher she expects students to ask her questions and they expect explanations from her as a group. Second, the mention of "boys and girls" suggests that the sexual nature of the question is uncomfortable for her as a teacher in front of mixed genders. Erica (PST) also acknowledged that her relationship to children as a teacher is different from her relationship as a parent when she says, "Maybe it's not a school book. But I wouldn't keep it from my personal children." The choice of the word "personal" in this case sets her private life apart from her professional relationships.

Participants saw the teacher in a relationship with students in which students asked questions and teachers provided explanations. As Lakyn (PST) said, "But [the mention of scrotum] might present uncomfortable questions that students have and would want to ask if the book was read aloud in class." Jane (PST) expressed her discomfort, "I could totally see kids asking what it means," and Rachel (PSL) responded, "Yeah, and as a teacher I wouldn't want to answer that," and Lucy (PSL) chimed in, "Yep I wouldn't want to answer it either." Anna (PSL) made the strongest statement: "Then you'd have to explain what sperm are—I wouldn't touch that with a 10-foot pole in the classroom setting in today's age!" Clearly, participants saw teachers in a relationship with students where they were expected to know the answers to questions and provide them when asked. As Chelsea (PST) said, "I think it's important to be upfront and honest when kids ask questions." The following exchange about the word "scrotum" in *The Higher Power of Lucky* was probably meant to be humorous. Participants indicated laughter with "hee hee" and "LOL." It also demonstrates the relationship today's students have with information through the Internet. In one sense, this might be considered an opportunity for teachers to give students power. However, in the context of the chat where teachers were clearly uncomfortable with the topic, it has the dangerous sense of teachers relinquishing their power to the Internet and playing a passive role in students' information seeking.

> Jasmine (PST): How about we tell the kids . . . let's go hunting word in the dictionary!
> Anna (PSL): "Go research that yourself, kids, and let me know what you find out!" hee hee!
> Evelyn (PST): LOL.
> Jasmine (PST): "Just google that."

The power in the relationship between teachers and their students and families has also shifted in other ways as Anna's

(PSL) mention of "the classroom setting in today's age" suggests. In another chat, Chelsea (PST) extended this to different kinds of families: "But that's when it becomes important to understand the different cultures and family beliefs before teaching something or doing something a certain way in school. It's so easy to offend parents." Participants were concerned about their relationship with parents, and perceived that parents wield a great deal of power over the choices and actions of teachers. Elizabeth (PST) suggested the need to inform parents of potentially controversial topics in children's books when she said, "As long as everyone is aware and parents can't come back at you for it." In a different chat, Kayla (PST) elaborated, "If children are reading [*The Higher Power of Lucky*] in a classroom and then come home and ask questions a parent might be offended or bothered their child is reading about AA meetings and scrotums." While these comments relate to power dynamics, or building politics, they also underscore students' perceived importance of maintaining a contention-free relationship with parents.

In two chats, a few participants saw teachers as important adults in the lives of children. For example, Julie (PST) said, "Agreed that some of the topics are a little ehh for me. But sometimes the teacher is the only one that will talk about it with the students." Erica (PST) picked up this idea but expressed the tension it creates in her relationship with parents: "Or maybe, it is a book that the teacher gives the child if they know there are drinking issues at home. But then, you have lines you cross there." In one chat, the role of adults to answer student questions was addressed. Frank (PST) summed it up:

> Being open and honest about things can go a long way. Most of the time when kids get into trouble and make poor choices it's just because they are curious. When we keep things from them or are dishonest, we wind up pushing them toward things that are not age appropriate. Better to explain things to children in an appropriate way, and to explain that there are certain things that they are not ready for, and explain why. When you tell a child "You're too young for that" their response will likely be "Why?" We should tell them why, or they will explore inappropriate things in order to learn for themselves.

As participants' comments suggest, two major reasons would influence their decision to share controversial content with students, and these relate to their relationships with students and parents: (a) their perceived obligation to respond to students' questions and their own discomfort with addressing particular questions, and (b) their fear of offending parents who may not want their children exposed to controversial content.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that many preservice educators would be very uncomfortable with using *The Higher Power of Lucky* in a public school setting. Presumably, some of these students would exercise preemptive censorship with this book, excluding it from their classroom or library collections because of the controversy that could arise over the word "scrotum" or "adult themes" such as alcoholism. Anna (PSL) even made her intention to censor the book explicit. These findings underscore a need for teacher educators to support PSTs and school librarians in their efforts to understand and enact practices promoting intellectual freedom and students' right to read. This is especially true in the present, a time when censorship at the highest level of government is receiving attention and critique. For instance, President Trump's decision to prevent the Environmental Protection Agency from speaking to the public (Johnston, 2017) and his attacks of media outlets giving him unfavorable coverage (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2017; Rutenberg, 2017) can be interpreted as censorship. Tesar (2014) defines "post-totalitarian censorship" as when citizens know and avoid "what would be considered 'crossing the boundaries' or 'getting into trouble'" (p. 866), and therefore become "self-censoring, docile bodies" (p. 866).

We wonder if these forms of censorship will foster a sociopolitical climate in which restricting access to information is tolerated, and recent events have made this fear well-founded. Indeed, Rutenberg (2017) speculates whether the "press-bullying president" will provoke journalists—watchdogs of the government and guardians of free speech—to engage in self-censorship. Just as worrisome is the possibility that such a climate will permeate public education in the United States and influence the curricular decisions of educators. If suppression of information becomes commonplace and accepted in the public sphere, then we envision dire consequences for children's intellectual freedom and right to read. It is worth noting that our data were collected prior to the 2016 election, and some of our participants' remarks suggest intentions to self-censor. We speculate that in the coming years, preservice educators may feel more justified in self-censoring if the trend of censorship by the current presidential administration continues. This potential increase in preemptive censorship would not only violate students' right to read, but as Dresang (1999) warns, it would also make books less relevant to youth. The books holding the greatest appeal to young people (see Alexie, 2011) would be more difficult to obtain or unavailable in some classrooms and libraries. If the children of today are not reading and thinking about a variety of ideas and perspectives, then we picture a passive and uncritical society of tomorrow.

Furthermore, as Marian Wright Edelman noted in her keynote address at the 2014 NCTE convention, books are "lifelines" for young people. Indeed, books can be lifelines quite literally; for instance, reader comments in the front pages of Asher's (2007) challenged young adult novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* suggest the book has been life-saving to teens contemplating suicide. It would be devastating if young people lost access to controversial, challenged, and banned books, the very sort of books that could be lifelines.

Themes in Censorship Research

Some of our findings relate to previous research on the topic of schools, libraries, and censorship, and these represent critical issues for teacher educators to address. We noticed some participants expressed the need to protect children's innocence by shielding them from controversial topics. Likewise, teachers in other studies cited protecting innocence as a reason for avoiding controversy when teaching with literature (Schmidt et al., 2007; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Schmidt and colleagues (2007) asserted "the idea that teachers are responsible for protecting innocent children is inherent in their thinking" (p. 53). In her study about the discourse of book challengers, Knox (2014b) found that protecting children's innocence is a primary reason why people bring book challenges forward in schools and libraries. We are disturbed that some participants in our study, who are or will be working directly with children, share the same sentiments as book challengers despite their awareness of the right to read. Although only two participants in our study made statements implying a depraved view of children (Dresang, 2003), both Knox (2014b) and Schmidt et al. (2007) found evidence of this perspective in their research. While we do not know how widespread the perspectives of children-as-innocent and children-as-depraved (Dresang, 2003) are among educators and librarians in the contemporary United States, the corroboration of our findings with those of other researchers suggests that these views may not be outliers.

Students in our study talked about their fears of offending parents by making controversial book choices. Their feelings have been expressed by other educators and librarians. The *SLJ* (2016) study found that "possible reaction from parents" influenced book-making decisions of 44% of elementary school librarians, 43% of middle school librarians, and 30% of high school librarians surveyed (p. 6). Schmidt et al. (2007) reported that lack of parental support would influence teachers to avoid discussions of controversial topics in the literature, and Malins (2016) observed that pleasing parents was a priority for teachers, thereby influencing them to evade classroom topics that could be upsetting. Of the elementary-level respondents in the *SLJ* (2016) study who said they directly experienced a book challenge, 92% reported that challenges originated from parents. Middle school and high school librarians reported 86% and 80% of challenges from parents, respectively. These studies suggest that parents have a great deal of power when it comes to what is read and discussed in school, and we found this to be true in our work.

Our research, along with the findings of others who have studied interactions with controversial books, suggests that PSTs and librarians construct "figured worlds" (Gee, 2012, p. 99) where children must be protected and parents must be mollified. Given the stress and worry that book challenges evoke, we empathize with the fear some teachers and librarians have of offending parents. However, it is worth noting that teachers and librarians are professionals who have been trained to select quality literature for their students. They are beholden to their students and their students' rights, including the right to read, above anything else. Fear of offending a parent should not cloud an educator's professional judgment, especially when this fear violates students' access to information. Rather, book choices for classrooms and libraries should be founded on selection principles such as literary merit, appeal to children, and curricular value as we discuss shortly.

We understand that reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 2013) suggests that people will always have varying opinions of books and will take offense to something in a book, but our goal as teacher and library educators is to promote the value of intellectual freedom regardless of our own personal feelings about a book. How do we promote this value? How might teacher and library educators counter tendencies toward preemptive censorship? We suggest teacher and library educators take a fourfold approach toward addressing issues of censorship and intellectual freedom in their classrooms: (a) encouraging caring relationships between preservice educators and their students, (b) showing preservice educators how children respond to controversial books, (c) teaching preservice educators how to defend themselves in the event of a book challenge, and (d) helping preservice educators view themselves as part of a professional community.

Encouraging Caring Relationships

In our study, many of the PSTs and librarians perceived themselves in a relationship in which their students asked questions and they provided answers. Freire (1970/2012) refers to this as the "banking concept of education" in which teachers "deposit" knowledge into students (p. 72), and he warns this transmission model squelches creativity and critical thinking. Although the education of the oppressed was Freire's (1970/2012) chief concern, in his discussion of the transmission model, he asserted that it can occur "at any level, inside or outside the school" (p. 71). We find the transmission model to be dangerous because it prompts teachers to avoid difficult questions, and consequently controversial literature that could evoke difficult questions from students. While avoiding controversial literature is problematic for the reasons we have outlined earlier, it is also the type of literature that often elicits critical thinking from students (Pavonetti, 2011). Avoiding literature that raises tough topics and difficult questions does a disservice to children growing up in a democratic, pluralistic society where dialogue, questioning, and perspective-taking are essential to an informed citizenry.

Given the problems of the transmission model, we believe that it is worth reminding teacher educators that teachers and school librarians are not purveyors of knowledge but teachers of *children*. This means that teachers and school librarians

must prioritize the development of caring, honest, and trusting relationships with students, relationships in which dialogue is open and welcome regardless of how difficult or uncomfortable the topic is. It also means viewing children as capable and wise (Dresang, 2003). We advise teacher educators to encourage PSTs and school librarians to view difficult questions from children not as moments of discomfort but as opportunities to develop honesty and trust. For example, a child reading *The Higher Power of Lucky* might indeed ask about the meaning of "scrotum" as some of our participants feared. Instead of avoiding the question, a teacher might frankly explain the word's meaning, and use it as an opportunity to consider and discuss the author's choice of the word and the author's defense of the word after it created controversy. The question might also be used as a teachable moment to understand the author's craft, how Lucky's curiosity over the word "scrotum" helps develop her character. Encouraging dialogue about controversial books instead of avoiding difficult questions and tough topics may "go a long way," as Frank said, with creating trusting relationships between teachers and students. Importantly, caring teacher/student relationships have a positive impact on student learning and school success (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016).

Showing How Children Respond to Text

Although exposing PSTs and school librarians to a variety of children's books is an important undertaking in teacher education courses, it is not enough to simply raise their awareness of texts outside of mainstream norms and values if the goal is to promote the value of intellectual freedom (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Rather, Wollman-Bonilla (1998) suggests showing preservice educators how children would actually respond to controversial books. She argues that observing children's responses and reactions to these books may surprise educators and undermine their rationale for avoiding books with controversial content. Children are not corrupted by reading controversial books; indeed, recent research suggests that reading banned books is positively correlated to prosocial behavior and not associated with criminal activity (Ferguson, 2014). Although reading and discussing controversial books with K-12 students in a face-to-face setting might not be feasible in some teacher education courses, teacher educators could capitalize on the opportunity for interaction afforded by the Internet. For instance, teacher educators might partner with classroom teachers and create online discussion groups of both PSTs and K-12 students, asking the adult learners and children to read and engage in dialogue with each other about a controversial children's book. Platforms such as Edmodo make asynchronous discussion between PSTs and K-12 students possible.

Alternatively, teacher educators might ask PSTs and school librarians to recall their own childhood reading experiences and their interactions with controversial books. Teacher educators might ask students in their classes to write a "reader's autobiography" in which they consider their favorite books from childhood, and the impact these books had on them as readers and as individuals. Many students would likely identify books that have been controversial, and teacher educators might use this as an opportunity to question students about whether these books have "damaged" them or could potentially "damage" their own students. Students might recognize that they could handle such books as children, and by extension, they might recognize their own students' ability to deal with difficult topics in the literature. They may realize that children are not in need of adult protection, and are instead wise and capable (Dresang, 2003). Having students consider their own relationships with controversial literature could reshape their views toward using controversial literature in their classrooms.

Preparing Preservice Educators for Book Challenges

Roser (2004) speculates that teachers might need help responding to book challenges and following procedures for handling challenges, and this lack of knowledge could lead to preemptive censorship. Similarly, Cerra (1994) believes that teachers may not know about selection principles such as literary quality and curricular connections, and as a result, their decisions to reject books could be based on their fear of inciting controversy rather than a book's overall merit. Selection and censorship are two distinct actions on the part of teachers and librarians. Roser (2004) explains the difference well:

> Selection . . . is an inclusive term, an attempt to include a book in a collection based on its literary qualities. Censorship, by contrast, is an excluding term, an attempt to impose one's beliefs on others by proscribing access to a book based on objectionable content. (p. 201)

Arming PSTs and school librarians with information about selection principles might assuage their fears of dealing with a book challenge, particularly if they are taught to refer to their school district's selection policy when they make choices for their curriculum or collection. For instance, teacher educators could demonstrate how to connect children's books to learning standards as a defense against censorship (Pavonetti, 2011). They could also show students how to locate book reviews from quality sources such as *SLJ* and *The Horn Book*, and explain that favorable professional reviews as well as book awards can support them if a book in their collection is challenged. Moreover, teacher educators might model how to locate a school district's challenge policy, so students are aware of what happens if a complaint or challenge is filed against a book. While such practices may be routine in programs for future public and school librarians, we contend that they are important for teacher candidates as well.

Being Part of a Professional Community

It is also important for teacher educators to remind PSTs and school librarians that they are professionals and in positions to make informed decisions about book selections. Roser's (2004) concept of "distance" suggests that teachers and school librarians should feel empowered to select books for children. Roser explains that those closest to children (i.e., teachers) are best suited to make selections, whereas those with greater distance from children, such as principals, school boards, and community organizations, are less suited to make decisions about which books will be interesting to and developmentally appropriate for children. Of course, the concept of distance implies that parents are well-positioned to make book choices for children. While it is a parent's right to decide what his or her own child should read, preservice educators should be mindful that parents do not have the prerogative to mandate other children's right to read.

In addition, we urge teacher educators to encourage students to become involved with professional organizations advocating for intellectual freedom such as NCTE and ALA. These organizations offer support and advice to teachers and librarians in the events of a complaint or formal book challenge. PSTs and school librarians should be aware of the resources offered by these groups, and may feel empowered to belong to a community of like-minded professionals.

Conclusion

As long as there are books, there will be censorship. Our study suggests that contemporary PSTs and school librarians have a tendency toward preemptive censorship, a stealthy and particularly dangerous form of censorship that can restrict children's access to unpopular or controversial ideas. Although we recognize students in teacher education and school library programs have their own values, beliefs, and assumptions that inform their personal reactions to children's books, we believe that it is critical for these students to develop a professional identity as ardent defenders of the right to read. Indeed, we do not wish to become censors ourselves by suppressing students' personal feelings toward books (as much as we might disagree with their views) or indoctrinate students with our own values. However, we do believe that it is imperative for students to learn to separate their "personal selves" from their "professional selves," which means making book choices not out of fear (censorship) but from principles such as literary merit, relevance to learning standards and the curriculum, and potential to engage children in reading (selection). More studies like ours are needed to understand how teachers and school librarians make book choices and why they avoid particular titles, especially as a new generation of university graduates fills classrooms and school libraries in an era where censorship is becoming more visible. Such studies might yield additional insights about what teacher and library educators can do to counter proclivities toward preemptive censorship, and ultimately, make sure young people have access to a wide range of ideas and worldviews, however controversial they may be.

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