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Teaching with Controversial Texts in Rural School Settings

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The study examines data from surveys and interviews with educators in rural school settings in the Midwest and their use of texts that are deemed controversial for middle and high school students. Qualitative research was conducted with research participants to document how they defined controversial literature, how they used the literature in their school settings, and how they navigated opportunities and challenges for themselves and their students. Extensive quotations from the research participants are used to demonstrate how they define controversial texts, how they use strong pedagogical processes to assist students in learning about specific topics, and why they continue to teach using controversial literature. In the process of conducting the research, the investigators learned about how voice and choice are used with students for book selection and research topics to assist students in examining topics that can be viewed as controversial. While acknowledging that some texts could not be used for direct instruction in their setting, each of the research participants believed it was their responsibility to continue using most of the titles of texts cited, assisting students as they researched thought-provoking topics, and discussing the content in order for students to learn the most possible about races, cultures, ethnicities, and other sometimes controversial topics. The educators' thinking about the research topic and its importance for "growing good humans" is a critical construct stemming from the study.

***Keywords*: rural education, controversial literature, English language arts, inclusive pedagogy**

Impetus for the Research

Our story is not *why* teachers should teach literature that has been deemed controversial by some individuals; our story is that teachers in small school districts in rural areas, without the benefit of language arts department chairs or district-provided staff development focusing on strategies for teaching texts that are at times controversial,

do teach such texts. Teachers make the choice of how they will teach these texts, and many times in rural districts, they select the literature their students will read, discuss, and react to.

As readers of applications for Regional Teacher of the Year, we noted those individual English teachers from rural districts who were engaged in teaching controversial literature and helping their students learn about cultural differences. Our search was to find other teachers in a three-state area who also made the decision to teach such literature to study why they taught such literature, what training they did or did not receive in teaching such literature, what instructional strategies they used, and what support they did or did not receive from their communities and administration. English language arts teachers were studied as compared to other content area teachers because they are expected to use literature on a daily basis with their students.

Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest that "discussions or controversial issues develops both intellectual and civic virtues" (p. 59). Others suggest that democracies require its members to be able to engage others in discussions where there are varying viewpoints (Gallagher et al., 2021). Discussion of controversial issues helps students develop an array of skills. The teachers in this study teach literature that has been labeled by some as banned or controversial. They do not teach it as an "open" controversy. They teach it as opportunity for students to learn beyond themselves and their communities. As one of our participants stated, "students need to understand the past so history does not repeat itself."

Important Role of Teachers

Teachers make hundreds of decisions each day; they determine strategies they will use in instruction, materials they will use in meeting district-identified objectives, and methodology to support the individual students in their classrooms. As professionals, teachers are tasked with "preparing all students for equitable participation in a democratic society" (Bransford et al, 2005, p. 11). Freire wrote of the importance of education where students have opportunities to question and think critically. In the introduction to Freire's text, Giroux uses the phrase "lived realities of various societies" to capture Freire's intent (Freire, 1985, p. xiii). Similarly, Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) write of educators in Southwest Texas rural schools who are in roles to "influence the political and social change we want" (p. 91). Allowing students in primarily white schools to learn of practices that are different than their own creates an environment where new understanding can grow. The effect of rural teachers on their students' education is magnified because low student enrollment necessitates the teacher frequently teaching the same students for multiple years. A 1950 study of American Schools indicated the community's faith in its teachers was considered the linchpin to success in teaching controversial topics (Corbett, 1950). In rural districts where there may be English departments with one to two teachers responsible for 6th through 8th grade students or 9th through 12th grade students,

community “faith” in those teachers makes a difference in how much they safely can venture into helping their students understand controversial topics.

Some Background about the Use of Controversial Literature in Rural Settings

The research focused on using controversial literature in the instruction of middle and high school students in rural school settings. Controversial is an interesting word to define properly. For the purpose of this research the authors deemed controversial literature to be any text (book or otherwise) that raised concerns by families, students, administration, boards of education, or was a concern for the teachers using the text with students. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017b) acknowledge that teachers have been “barred from assigning *The Catcher in the Rye, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* or other so-called banned books” (p. 12), and teachers have taught literature and concepts that have at times been deemed controversial. In fact, Zimmerman and Robertson (2017b) assert educators may “overestimate the constraints on addressing controversial topics in their classrooms” (p. 13).

The literature is clear that defining rural and rural education is complicated because every rural setting is unique, made so by the history of the people who settled there as well as mobility, poverty, politics, proximity to larger cities, how the land is used, and who resides there now (Kettler et al., 2016). Because the sampling for this research was purposeful, the rural school settings discussed crossed three midwestern states, some near metropolitan areas, some not.

The Current Study

The research included surveying 11 participants and conducting follow-up interviews with six of those individuals. Each was a practicing secondary (middle school and high school) educator. Additionally, two administrators, at the building level, were surveyed. All participants were asked about their experiences teaching public school students using literature that could be considered controversial in content related to race, ethnicity, gender, or any other topic identified by the teachers surveyed. The focus of the study was middle and high school educators teaching in rural settings in Missouri, Iowa, and Kansas. The administrators in those settings were surveyed to better understand how support was provided to literacy educators for using texts labeled as controversial in content when concerns were raised by the public. The researchers believe it is vital that issues related to teaching about these topics be examined related to narrowing curriculum, potential book banning, and educators who feel safe teaching in their school setting to use literature to meet the needs of all students. Their sense of urgency about this topic was confirmed by one participant who emailed prior to her interview saying, “I am glad someone is willing to measure this difficult and controversial topic. This is not light work, I am sure. Thank you again for your research and willingness to listen.”

Literature Review

Defining The Term Controversial

What is controversial may be a bit like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's threshold test for obscenity, "I know it when I see it" (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964), because it is based on perspectives of individuals and the collective mind of a community. Gladwell (2000) writes of tipping points when a significant number in a society accept a concept as reality—no longer one with multiple viewpoints, no longer something to be debated. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest controversial subjects are topics on which there is disagreement, individuals who are "fairly" competent with knowledge of the subject are in disagreement, a reasonable case can be made for more than one side of the argument, and there is an emotional investment in the subject that are matters of public concern. Hess applies the concept to controversial topics where concepts are open to more than one perspective and noncontroversial topics are closed to more than one perspective while controversial topics are those for which there are multiple viewpoints (Camicia, 2008; Gallagher et al., 2021).

Gallagher et al. (2021) define open controversy as an issue that has multiple and competing viewpoints in the public's eye. The curriculum reflects these tipping points by the degree to which students are encouraged to express varying perspectives. When there is agreement, without varying perspectives, the issues are closed and "are tipped" to being non-controversial while issues in which individuals en masse hold varying perspectives "are tipped" toward being controversial or open to multiple perspectives (Camicia, 2008). When society reaches a tipping point with an issue, curriculum follows with the inclusion of specific issues as closed (non-controversial) or as open (controversial). The researchers believe that when it comes to texts used in educational settings, there are many stakeholders' views that are often shared in public ways influencing whether the text is viewed as non-controversial or controversial.

In addition, topics that may have been viewed as closed in other times and locations may now be considered open. An episode of *This American Life*, which aired January 7, 2022 and was hosted by Emanuele Berry, tells of Dr. Whitfield, a new high school principal, who sent an email to parents and teachers in his district in reaction to the murder of George Floyd expressing his optimism in the national renouncement of racism (Berry, 2022). At that time Dr. Whitfield received support from parents and teachers only to have the same email used as a reason to remove him from his principalship ten months later. What was earlier viewed as closed, non-controversial with one accepted perspective, in the community was opened as controversial, with multiple perspectives, later in the year. In another example, a Florida social studies teacher who believed slavery in the United States was a closed issue found some of her students believed slavery is an open issue to be debated and viewed many of her students as racists (Washington & Humphries, 2011). It appears the distinction between closed issues

and open issues (therefore controversial) is dependent on time and place. What may be a closed issue in one location may be an open issue in another; what may be closed at one time may be an open issue in an earlier or a later time.

The decisions teachers make regarding instructional materials and the stating of their viewpoint is not without peril. In a 2010 survey of social studies teachers, 95% indicated they did teach controversial topics, and 47% indicated they taught such topics weekly. However, 33% of those surveyed also indicated they had come under pressure from administrators and parents to lessen conversations on controversial topics such as sex, gay rights, and religion (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017a).

After the federal appeals court refused to review the case *Mayer v. Monroe* (2007) regarding a teacher's dismissal because she informed her students that she did not support the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, an attorney for the National Education Association warned that the courts have not guaranteed academic freedom for K-12 teachers. "The First Amendment does not entitle primary and secondary teachers, when conducting the education of captive audiences to cover topics, or advocate viewpoints, that depart from the curriculum adopted by the school system" (Walsh, 2007, para. 11).

Marriott (2022), an attorney for a Midwest school district, describes in detail what is occurring in classrooms, schools, and districts across the country and notes what is recommended for teachers dealing with situations where texts are challenged:

> Over the past couple of years, there has been an increase in issues related to teachers either using controversial terms or racial slurs or epithets. Those issues have received increased media coverage and coincide with a push from interest groups and parent groups actively lobbying against diversity, equity, and inclusion work in schools. This friction has resulted in many districts across the state, both rural and metropolitan, receiving numerous and broad open records requests for instructional materials, specific staff member information, lesson plans, communications, and in some instances leading to public attacks on individual educators. Out of this dynamic, there are specific instances such as teachers reading *Of Mice and Men*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, all of which have racial slurs, being accused of discrimination or harassment. Our recommendation to districts has been for building principals to proactively talk to teachers and express that if their lessons or texts go near issues of race, gender, or controversial issues in general, that the teachers should talk to their principal in advance to come up with a game plan. Educators need to understand this hypersensitive environment and develop an approach in advance (personal communication, November 2, 2022).

In a recent publication, the Brookings Institution discussed a study of over 3,700 Americans regarding controversial topics (Saavedra et al., 2022). The majority of those participating in the study want K-12 students to have exposure to controversial topics from

multiple points of view to hone critical thinking skills and assist students in understanding how to be involved in civics. The authors' concluding statement is this one:

> Though there will be disagreements about how to teach controversial topics, outright bans like those considered and required through current legislation seem misaligned with the public's desires. We need good civic education to preserve and strengthen democracy, and the American people recognize this (Saavedra et al., 2022, para. 16).

Rural Spaces

Rural locations are unique, geographically isolated from large population bases, and "often associated with country life, small communities, and restricted access to resources" (Kettler et al., 2016, p. 247). The United States Department of Education (USDE) defines rural in three categories: fringe, distant, and remote (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Fringe is considered to be rural spaces that are five miles or less from an urban area. Distant spaces are more than five to 25 miles from an urban setting "as well as rural territory." Remote is considered to be more than 25 miles from an urban area or more than ten miles from an urban cluster. Both the categories of distant and remote use the census to assist in defining those spaces. A summary definition might be that rural locations are unique from community to community (Walker, 2021).

Related to education, specifically, the literature that informs defining rural tackles the issues of rural poverty and equity in educational spaces. There is less access to materials and individuals who wish to teach in those settings (Gallagher et al., 2021). Equity in education has been a growing concern in rural communities for some time. "The conditions of inequity result in areas too poor to shoulder the heavy burden of providing a first-class education to their children. Rural taxpayers, in impoverished areas, are required to dig deeper to maintain a semblance of modern education" (p. 4) asserts Rinehart (2016) in a study of rural education. Strange (2011) addresses the dispersion of students in rural school settings and notes, "Dispersion and poverty are two of the most virile enemies of political power, and where they coincide, they leave in their wake some of the most meagerly funded schools in America" (para. 8). Strange (2011) notes the difficulties in attracting teachers to rural areas when those small rural towns may be viewed as a "low-wealth rural community with limited amenities, poor housing, and few college-educated peers, and keeping that teacher beyond the first beckoning from a better situation district, is daunting" (para. 34). While many times rural communities are seen as "less than" in terms of economic vitality, cultural experiences, and social diversity (Corbett & Donehower, 2017), rural communities do have strengths and assets. Heller (2021) acknowledges many rural educators have ties to the communities and teach because of a commitment to education as well as knowing that teaching positions are stable jobs with a contracted pay and benefits. Many times, the teaching force in rural

settings includes individuals who have invested in the community for a number of years. Rinehart (2016) views this differently. He notes

> The flight of top teaching talent to the suburbs certainly affects rural schools, as anyone who has been an administrator in such a school can attest. This phenomenon is tantamount to a rural community losing the town doctor, pharmacist, or veterinarian. Sometimes talented people simply cannot be replaced once they leave. Teachers are often replaced physically, if their talents are possibly unrealized by less gifted successors (p. 13).

In school settings across the country, the "student population has become increasingly segregated" (Hambacher & Ginn, 2021, p. 300) as political initiatives have failed to integrate schools, and the teaching force, even for students of color, is dominated by white teachers. This is further compounded in rural school districts where not only the teacher workforce is dominated by white individuals, but the students attending those schools are also largely white. While rural districts may not have a great deal of diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, or culture, there are commonalities in the schools that students attend. All the students in the rural community likely attend class in the same elementary, middle school, and high school. Because of the size of the communities, students and their families know each other, and there likely are more personal interactions with individuals with differing viewpoints. Many times, families have lived in the community for multiple generations resulting in long-term relationships. In Heller's (2021) interview with Sky Marietta, she notes that in rural communities, the people in those communities talk to one another even when they may have varying viewpoints and opinions about politically charged issues. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest teachers use their knowledge of their students in the determination of which materials are too controversial to be taught in the setting. Teachers' "knowledge of their students and communities . . . [to] identify which maximally controversial issues would be most fruitful to explore" (Kuntzman, 2018, p. 4) with their students, values teacher judgment.

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy

Researchers Hambacher and Ginn (2021) noted "the necessity and particular complexities of preparing white teachers to address race and racism in predominantly white school communities remains largely unstudied" (p. 338). Thus, it would be logical and reflective of our experiences and views that there appears to be a lack of preparation for teachers to be able to facilitate conversations on topics that are controversial (Washington & Humphries, 2011; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017a), leaving teachers to make the choices of topics to include in classroom discussion. Those choices can be difficult as educators consider job security and the roles they may play in the communities where they live (Gallagher et al., 2021). The issue surrounding pedagogical practices are further compounded by classroom educators concerned about social justice issues who maintain "that teacher education and professional development programs that ignore the

role of whiteness in the maintenance of oppressive systems perpetuate unjust practices that harm students of color while elevating white identities in the curriculum and within school communities" (Hambacher & Ginn, 2021, p. 329).

Consideration of types of classroom discussions that include information seeking, persuasion, negotiation, inquiry, deliberation, and dialogue to air grievances are supported by Gregory (2014) while Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest that teachers model debate in ways that are not polarizing. In addition, teachers who self-identified as critical thinkers are more likely to address controversial topics in their classrooms than those who do not consider themselves critical thinkers (Sari, 2019).

Kelly-Howard (2021) writes, "The numerous cultural experiences in a single teacher's classroom present the teacher with the responsibility of implementing pedagogical practices that celebrate and amplify students' unique cultural experiences" (p. 51). Often in small rural communities, the cultural experiences represented by the students in the classroom are largely limited to the history of the place. However, some industrial endeavors often near these areas, that is, meatpacking plants, have changed the landscape of these communities. When that is true, it becomes the language arts educators' (and other educators as well) responsibility to teach with literature representing the population living in the area and the students. More importantly, the students in rural communities need and deserve to learn about cultures other than their own. Kelly-Howard (2021) reported on a study conducted by the International Literacy Association relative to elementary school settings that demonstrates "the need for providing students with access to diverse texts in order to evaluate representations of diversity, culture, and injustices through culturally sustaining pedagogies" (p. 51). Additionally, literacy educators need "to make visible the best practices in using diverse and multicultural literature" (Kelly-Howard, 2021, p. 51).

Controversial Literature

We know that, every day, students in classrooms across our country are exposed to news stories about controversial issues surrounding social justice from politically charged news sources often reflecting the values of families and community. As a result, classroom texts are being challenged by members of the public regarding their suitability for students in areas such as race, ethnicity, and gender identification. Those challenges have led to administration and school board involvement in making decisions about the literature available to students in literacy classes and in school libraries; in addition, there has been pushback by families and students. In a recent news post from Ankeny, Iowa, high school students expressed their concern at a school board meeting as they "voice[d] their support for literature that represents diverse identities and viewpoints that have come under fire from conservative activists in recent months" (Hytrek, 2021, para. 1). Students are using their voices via social media, school board meetings, and news sources to express themselves when it comes to equity and inclusion.

Prior to agreeing to be a part of this research study, and completing the survey and interview for the study, one research participant was interviewed by a reporter from a local newspaper about her attempt to add culturally responsive literature to what she teaches in her high school English classes. The school district is adjacent to a Native American reservation, so many of the students attending the school district are residents on the reservation. The district has worked with tribal leaders to make certain that Native culture is a part of the school's curriculum. However, this teacher was puzzled by the lack of literature being used to teach about Native culture. She developed a specific curriculum that encompassed literature featuring Native Americans from the United States but also from New Zealand, Canada, and other countries. She developed a final project that students completed on a topic they chose "related to indigenous culture and history" (Bahl & Garcia, 2022, para. 59). This teacher is now wondering if what has been constructed and implemented will impact the Native American students' views of themselves and then whether factors such as graduation rates and attendance for Native students will be impacted by the content of the class.

Theoretical Frameworks

Educator Agency and Self-Efficacy

The self-efficacy of teachers is a theoretical underpinning of this research. According to Johnston (2004), central to developing a sense of self-efficacy is agency. Agency is a fundamental human desire resulting in intentional acts using will, drive, and determination (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2008). While Bandura (2000) discusses how the environment impacts performance outcomes, Karnopp (2022) found the self-efficacy of rural educators to be of significance. Karnopp examined the behaviors of teachers in a rural school who were faced with new instructional practices as a result of a district initiative. Generally, rural districts do not have the depth of support for professional development that larger districts have, nor do they have instructional coaches or defined curriculum guides specifying the texts to be used across grade levels. For example, in many rural districts there may be one teacher who is responsible for teaching every section of American literature. In short, there are challenges providing resources and expertise to support instructor learning (Karnopp, 2022). Indeed, Karnopp's research revealed that when limited in-district support systems were in place, the agency of the individual educator enabled learning of skills because personal interest motivated the teacher's learning. As a result, teachers invested their personal time so as to increase the knowledge base for and the planning of instruction. Guthrie and Knowles (2001) describe self-efficacy as the "belief that 'I can do it'" (p. 163), and these rural teachers did just that.

Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy defined in Ladson-Billings' (1995) work includes a focus on each student to attain academic success and empathy for diversity in social justice pedagogy. Educators consider each student's learning style as a foundation for

instruction as well as the language spoken in the students' home and the emotional needs of the student (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When Ladson-Billings (1995) writes of "good teaching," there is a focus on academic success, cultural integrity, and critical consciousness for each student. With an emphasis on skills necessary to participate in a democracy (i.e., literacy, numeracy, technology, social, and political), students have the foundation for success. Culturally relevant teaching is founded in the culture of the students as the "vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Music, art, and technology that students are familiar with can be used in teaching academic concepts. Ladson-Billings (1995) asks, "If school is about preparing students for active citizenship, what better citizenship tool than the ability to critically analyze the society?" (p. 162). Critical consciousness creates opportunities to question inequities and to take action to make changes given culturally relevant pedagogy. Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) describe intentional classroom communities where teachers and leaders found classroom decisions on inclusivity, equity, and empathy. Those decisions result in actions meaning "an educator cannot simply identify as a social justice advocate but must be willing to fulfill this role through actions" (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021, p. 89).

Researcher Positionality

As authors, both researchers have taught and served as building leaders in rural school districts in the states where the study is focused. One served as an elementary teacher (including teaching sixth grade) and one as a secondary English teacher. One researcher has served as a building leader and school district superintendent in two of the states. The other researcher was an instructional coach for five years in four elementary schools and consulted at the middle and high school for the district. The initial concept for the study sprung from serving as Regional Teacher of the Year selection team members. The work the teachers were doing in rural schools was gutsy in the current political climate. In addition, one of the researchers' children are students of color in a predominately white student body in the small rural school district where they attended and graduated.

Methodology

The researchers were aware of how critical it would be to describe the context of the research in great detail and provide readers with reasoning for any implications and assertions made about rural school settings, teaching in rural schools, and how literature that is described as controversial was used in those settings (Coladarci, 2007). Defining what rural encompasses is difficult, not just for educators and educational researchers, but also complicated because of variances in how rural is defined and described by federal and state agencies (Swain & Baker, 2021). Swain and Baker (2021) note, "All these factors challenge the ways rural educational scholars articulate, ignore, or address race in rural education" (p. 17). The researchers determined it was critical to understand the settings of each of the educators in the study while also protecting their anonymity in

the writing. For these reasons, a qualitative case study approach was utilized by the researchers, an appropriate one as noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), “when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices” (p. 45).

In addition to examining how literacy educators were using controversial literature, research interview questions (see Appendix B) asked educators about their pre-service teacher preparation training, professional development, and personal professional learning regarding teaching controversial topics in their predominantly white rural schools. Interview questions were designed to find out about the challenges faced in regard to teaching literature that involved controversial topics in predominantly white rural settings, and the strategies the teachers found effective in such instruction. The teachers’ view of the support received from school administrators was also examined.

The role of school administrators in supporting these teachers was considered to be a critical element of the research. School and district level administrators were asked to participate in the research for their views on how they or the school district provided administrative support to the educators and how professional development was provided to the literacy teachers. Only two administrators who were approached to be a part of the research responded to the request to complete a survey, and those administrators elected to not participate in follow-up interviews.

The researchers believe that examining the rich collection of data resulted in a qualitative case study addressing a critical education topic that is politically and educationally important at this time. Individually the researchers reviewed the transcribed interviews, identified relevant data to the purpose of the study, and determined themes gleaned from the data. The coded data were then placed in a document with the direct quotations identified based on the code themes.

Research Participants

Research participants were recruited using connections to professional teaching organizations and the researchers’ relationships with rural school educators in three midwestern states. The recruitment was completed through an email that contained a consent form for those that agreed to participate in the study. Ten classroom teachers and an instructional coach responded and completed the consent form; two administrators responded and completed the consent form. In mid-February 2022, an online survey (see Appendix A) using Google survey tools was sent to these participants. Of those 13 participants, six agreed to be individually interviewed for the research. The follow-up interviews were conducted one-on-one with the researchers; each researcher completed three individual interviews. The interviews were conducted using Zoom during March 2022. Of those interviewed individually, one was a former English teacher [now serving as an instructional coach in the district where they had taught], and others were English–Language Arts teachers in high school settings from three midwestern states.

Data Sources

Survey

An initial survey was sent to 49 rural educators; 11 responded to the survey. This survey allowed research participants to identify any text used in their classrooms that had the potential to be viewed as controversial or texts that raised concerns by others inside and outside the school setting. Ten administrators were asked to complete a survey; two responded. Thirteen educators completed the initial survey including classroom teachers, one instructional coach, and two administrators.

Appendix C lists the texts and other resources participants have used deemed controversial that were noted by the survey completers. The number next to the text shows how many times the text was cited. A question asked about who, specifically, had registered concerns about texts being taught; the responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Survey Responses: Who Is Concerned about Texts

Students - 3
Building Administrator(s) - 1
Parents/Caregivers - 4
Paraeducator - 1
Teachers - 1
None - 2

Participant Interviews

As part of the initial survey, those completing the survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. All of those that agreed (that is, six participants) completed individual interviews with the researchers. The interviews were conducted using Zoom as participants were located in rural areas across three states. The follow-up interviews consisted of asking the participants 17 questions about how they define terms, their experiences using literature deemed to be controversial, teacher preparation and professional learning related to the controversial training, support received by administrators, and community and student responses. Interviews were 30 to 45 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

The researchers used qualitative methods to examine how rural educators used texts often deemed as controversial in their school settings. Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that case study design is used when researchers want to "chronicle events" (p. 44), and for this study, the researchers were concerned with accurately documenting how educators teach using specific kinds of texts in rural schools. Creswell and Poth (2018) write that case study design can be used to understand research issues as the researchers discover themes and then make assertions based on the themes found in the data.

The researchers analyzed and coded the survey results and interview transcripts separately and repeatedly, each discovering themes. Coding results were then compared and discussed, resulting in identified themes supported by the words of the research participants. Extensive quotations from the educators were used to illustrate the themes that were discovered.

Findings

Note: All names used are pseudonyms.

Defining Controversial Topics

When asked to define the term "controversial topics," one research participant, Ella, captured the three themes that emerged in the other participants' responses: (a) different viewpoints on a topic, (b) the topics divide people, and (c) individuals respond emotionally to the topic.

Lori discussed that what she has often not considered controversial ends up being controversial and framed that within the context of teaching in a rural location. She noted, topics become controversial when "students . . . think I am advocating a different view than they hold." Clay was specific about the issues that he has considered to be controversial including something that is sexual, race or gender issues, and "sometimes political issues."

Suzanne recognized that controversy can occur around lots of topics, not just the focus of this research, including sports. However, she noted that controversy can be "big" such as "social justice and other societal norm issues." She further explains her personal view as "just anytime it pushes a viewpoint to a boundary."

Related to emotions that surface when teaching with controversial texts or topics, Amelia defined controversial topics "as anything that would stir up emotional responses in any of the people involved, particularly topics that are heavily covered and/or other media outlets and social media."

Defining Rural

The research participants defined rural through four themes in their responses: (a) distance of the rural location from a city, (b) agricultural terms, (c) the population of the area, and (d) characteristics of the people living in a rural area. While the responses varied related to using geographical distance terms, this was the most common way for participants to define rural. This certainly speaks to each participant's own experiences of where their school setting is located and even where a person is living. "Ten miles outside of a city," "two hours from anywhere," "an hour and a half from any major city," and "have to drive 30 minutes to get to a Walmart" are a sampling of responses that referred to distances from city, suburban, or urban areas.

Using agricultural terms to define rural appeared in four of the six participants' responses. One statement was tongue in cheek, saying, "If you can hear cows outside the building, you know you're in a rural school." Two responses directly referred to farming as a descriptor for living in a rural setting.

The population of the rural setting was also discussed by the participants. They noted that the rural areas where they teach do not have a large population. One participant said that the population was "less dense." Conversely, Karla, who has lived in a suburb of a large southern city noted that even though the suburb where she grew up was largely rural as a setting, the population there was increasing. She noted, "you can be living in a rural area, but still not be living a rural life." This was *not* how the other participants described midwestern rural settings.

Finally, the participants used descriptors of the people living in the settings to describe rural. They noted that experiences were limited for the people living in rural settings and one person was explicit stating, "a lack of opportunity, a lack of difference, a lack of experiences." Another noted that there were fewer families of color. Karla noted, "for [the] middle and high [schools], there was zero diversity in that school system" and that the elementary school was more diverse because of foster families in their school district. One participant used very specific language about their setting noting that the "demographics gear toward the WASP or Catholic" residents of the area. This comment reminded the researchers of how many rural communities still mirror the population that originally settled the area.

Connection to Social Studies

Recently, a post by an elementary teacher on social media highlighted how difficult teaching certain topics has become, especially themes related to the history of European influences in the United States, white settlers on the land of indigenous people, and slavery. This teacher was requesting that families discuss these topics at home because they were not comfortable discussing them in the classroom, saying that the students had lots of questions for which answers were "tricky."

This social media post demonstrated the importance of a theme that surfaced while coding the data: how often the English/Language Arts teachers were also social studies teachers. All of the participants, without explicitly stating it, are teaching social studies topics through American literature. Because of the texts and other resources used, social studies topics were woven into nearly every controversial topic that was discussed. This was discussed again and again as participants cited texts they used and how they support students' understanding of an era, or laws, or people and cultures, specific to American history. To assist students in further understanding controversy related to these topics, the teachers had the students conduct guided research on topics such as the Ku Klux Klan, Billie Holiday, or the Harlem Renaissance, for example. Outside resources used (beyond the texts themselves) included TED Talks, websites such as history.com and biography.com, interviews from the National Archives, news outlets, and primary sources. When discussing how they approach teaching about Native American literature, Suzannah noted, "I personally cannot dive into colonialism and to the settlers without really naming the elephant in the room . . . so I start off saying I recognize that the history in America can be very ugly and it's really important that we read these things."

Controversial Texts

As discussed, texts deemed controversial by some are at the heart of this research. As Suzannah remarks, "American literature *is* controversial." Not surprisingly, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1885) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) are mentioned often in the interviews. While written long ago, the content of these texts is still marked as having content that some do not agree with, especially when used in school settings, because they include topics like race, class, poverty, and, to a lesser degree, sex. Other historic literature that research participants discussed included Langston Hughes poetry, *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937), *Inherit the Wind* (Lawrence & Lee, 1955), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925), and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976).

With the exception of one interview, the topic of literature focused on LGBTQIA+ content was brought up by the researchers. Prior to asking about the use of literature on these topics, the participants only discussed literature related to race, ethnicity, and culture. However, contemporary literature about this content was then discussed in detail by the teachers. These are topics that the participants clearly were hesitant about teaching, and in two of the interviews, the participants said they could not bring these topics up in their classrooms. *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), *All Boys Aren't Blue* (Johnson, 2020), and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) are discussed specifically. *The Hate U Give* is described by the American Library Association (2021) as having been banned and/or challenged "for profanity, violence, and because it was thought to promote an anti-police message and indoctrination of a social agenda" (para. 3). Suzannah uses this text with her AP English students but does not start the

reading of the text with any specific discussion about it other than telling them about the overall topic of the text. Amelia was prepared to use the text with her students, had ordered a literature set, and wrote lesson plans to use the book. “Then something happened in a different classroom that shouldn’t have happened . . . It was right after the insurrection . . . I was basically told [by her administrator], ‘I wouldn’t do that novel if I were you, because I don't know if I can back you up.’” Amelia accommodated by showing the movie and having students read the text and then compared the two. It was a safer alternative but did not allow for examining the text in a deep way.

All Boys Aren’t Blue (Johnson, 2020) garnered a very specific reaction from Amelia, as well. The American Library Association (2021) describes this book as being banned and/or challenged “for LGBTQIA+ content, profanity, and because it was considered to be sexually explicit” (para. 3). Amelia stated, “I think I’ve also been pleasantly surprised in certain situations where I had assumed that kids would think one way or another, but I know that I couldn’t address *All Boys Aren’t Blue* (Johnson, 2020). In fact, I chose not to put that book in my classroom library” because the book had been challenged in a nearby city (not a rural community). She continues, “even just having it in my classroom library is a concern” and ends her discussion of the book by saying, “Yeah, there’s no way.”

Teaching Can Be Scary

One of the interview questions asked participants to respond to a question, “Have you experienced any threatening behaviors related to challenged literature in your setting?” While all of the participants said that they had not, they did discuss their feelings about fears they may have had prior to this question being asked. In direct response to this interview question, Karla said she has had no direct threats, but “I feel here I’m just always walking around with a target on my back.” Amelia noted, “I have had students, parents who have accused me of giving them bad grades on things, on argumentative essays and things just because I disagreed with them when it wasn’t even really the case,” even though Amelia was preparing students for a specific curricular standard. She has also recently avoided a topic related to civil disobedience saying, “I didn’t feel comfortable doing that last year, so I just didn’t. I just didn’t.” Later in the interview, Amelia shared that she is moving to a larger district. When she told her principal she was leaving, she said to him, “I am scared to death every day that I’m going to say something or teaching something in my classroom that’s going to get me fired because it’s the wrong thing.” She believes that she will have added support in a larger district, “a little bit more protection,” and noted, “I’d actually even considered getting out of education all together.”

Clay’s interview responses discussed the advantage of experience when it comes to teaching controversial topics through literature. Because he has been in the district a number of years, is well known in the town and district, and is a respected teacher, he does not get as much pushback from parents as early educators do. He discussed a “new

to this community" science teacher who received complaints about science topics she was teaching that were possibly "contrary to religious beliefs." He said, "I think more of it stems from being new to this community." He discussed this again later sharing that all of the English teachers have many years of experience noting, "that gives us an advantage that other communities, where the English teachers may be unknown and new" whereas someone new coming to the community "nobody knows you or your family, and therefore you're more suspect from the beginning."

Suzanne discussed that she has experienced the difficulties she has had with white students versus students of color. She said that she feels like she has to "walk on eggshells with some of my, to be honest, more with my white students than I do with any of the students of color" and followed up saying she worries about saying the wrong thing to those students that would cause a problem for her.

A topic that some of the interviewees felt would receive the most pushback from students and parents was using literature about topics related to LGBTQIA+. Ella said that while the community was generally supportive when she teaches about race, "I also think if I were to teach something about the LGBT community, that would get a lot more pushback from this particular community, because they're very Christian in their religion."

Administrative Support

Having administrative support at the building and district levels is critical for teachers, no matter the setting of the school. It is probably safe to say that every teacher relies on that support at some point in their educational career. While feeling supported at the building level, the participants' principals knew there was a limit to how much support they could actually provide. When teaching topics or using literature that may be controversial, Amelia lets her administrator know what she is doing in the classroom in an effort to "try to head it off before it happens." Karla used the old adage, "I'm all about ask for forgiveness, not permission." However, as noted earlier, Karla is leaving the current rural district where she taught to teach in a larger nearby city where she feels she would have more support.

Pedagogical Shields

The classroom teachers use best pedagogical practices to get their students to dig deeper into controversial issues. In that way, the students are discovering what the issues are and how society has responded to those issues. While analyzing the interviews, the researchers found that participants consistently noted three ways that they use best practices when teaching with controversial texts: 1) letting the literature speak to the students; 2) having students conduct research about topics presented in the texts; and 3) using discussion strategies that allow for civil discourse.

The research participants, while committed to continuing using literature having controversy at their core, facilitated reading of the texts so that students discovered the

meaning within those texts as a result. Amelia said that she will use outside resources to help support reading the texts with her students rather than develop her own materials, calling that a “safety net.” She also noted that texts that are deemed to be canonical, she does not have to “worry about . . . it’s accepted.” Lori lets her students determine when a book is right for them saying, “I always tell my students if you're 30 pages into a book and you've already decided that this is not for you, you have 59 other choices. Nobody is making you read this book. This is certainly your choice.” Voice and choice about texts to be read and student-conducted research topics was discussed by three participants.

Student Research

Having students conduct research about topics related to the literature was a strategy the teachers used to avoid explicitly teaching the topics, but, at the same time, allowing students the opportunity to learn more about a given topic. Karla said she gives her students a few topics and a five-minute Google search on the topics to see what they can find out in a short amount of time. This pedagogical strategy allows the students to list what they are discovering so students then spend a lengthier time doing a deeper dive into a topic. She recently framed this within teaching students how to find important or interesting facts using an article about the Ku Klux Klan from history.com. The students “read with a partner, identify important facts using highlighting, and things like that. What they thought was most important or what they had never known, and they really didn’t know much at all.”

Discussion Strategies

Amelia said that she uses philosophical chairs and Socratic circles in her classroom, preferring philosophical chairs because “it’s more open-minded and you can change sides and there’s less judgment.” She also encourages her students to “play devil’s advocate” so that they can argue a point even if their beliefs do not align with the point. She has also utilized electronic discussion boards while teaching using *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) so that student responses are “in writing,” another way to protect herself.

Karla uses direct questioning when a student asks, “Why are we studying this?” She responds to her students by asking, “Well, why do you think we are studying this?” or “What do you think?” so that the students have to think about the content and why they are learning about a particular topic.

Being Good Humans

One of the most interesting findings for the researchers is a prevalent theme in each of the interviews that provided insight into why the teachers risk controversy, face challenges, and weather difficulties: they are committed to growing good human beings. Karla said that teaching middle level grades, for her, is about curating nice people, “I just want them to learn how to be nice people and then be nice to themselves.” When

discussing sharing her own personal views about the topics she teaches about, Suzannah said that she is becoming more comfortable with doing that in order to teach her students about being "good people" and "we have a shared humanity." She expanded on this idea later in the interview when talking about a rural community's perceptions of controversial literature. Suzannah states, "I just really think that the more you're around someone, the more you're willing to understand them." Lori discussed this topic in a very similar way stating, "If you don't listen to the voices that you don't often hear, how will you know that there are other voices?" and "There are all kinds of boxes, and books are the way to show us other people's voices and other people's boxes."

Ella discussed this in more detail when asked why she teaches literature that may be regarded as controversial. She said:

> Well, I think it's really important, especially as an educator, I think part of my job is to help students look at different sides and be able to form a good argument for whatever they believe. Also, some of our more personal belief[s], but some of our controversial topics are basic. How do you treat people well? I mean we talk about racism, for example, it's all about how do you treat people well?

She follows up later in the interview, noting that students do not have to accept others' ideas, but they do need to be "aware of them and you need to know how to be respectful of them and others' viewpoints."

Summary

A summary table is helpful in viewing overall responses to the in-depth interview questions. Table 2 addresses critical elements of the interviews and the research participants' responses.

Table 2

Summary Table of Research Participants' Responses

NDA = Not Directly Addressed

Research Participants (Pseudonyms)	Received professional development for teaching controversial topics	Seeks out professional learning on their own	Uses texts with content about race and/or cultures	Uses texts with content about religion	Uses texts with sexual content	Uses texts with LBGTQIA+ content	Received pushback/questions from students	Received pushback/questions from the community	Received pushback/questions from families	Feels supported by administrator	Avoids sharing personal views on controversial topics
Amelia	No	Yes	Yes	NDA	NDA	No	NDA	No	Yes	Yes[1]	Yes
Karla	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes[2]
Suzannah	Yes	Yes	Yes	NDA	NDA	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No[3]
Lori	No	Yes	Yes	NDA	Yes	NDA	NDA	No	Yes	Yes	No
Clay	NDA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Ella	No	Yes	Yes	NDA	NDA	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

1 – Administrator indicated very limited support for using *The Hate U Give*.

2 – "I don't really have to particularly state directly what my view is. I just live my view."

3 – Shares in "superficial" ways.

Discussion

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Agency for Professional Learning

Just as in Karnopp's (2022) research, each of the participants sought out professional learning opportunities. One enrolled in a graduate program, another attended workshops and coursework to support teaching methodologies to be used with controversial literature, and each became members of state, national, and international organizations to increase their knowledge about and support for teaching with texts deemed to be controversial. For example, each teacher was independent in their instructional decisions, not teaming with other teachers in their district on the content to be taught or instructional methods to be used because they were often the only educator teaching American literature.

Using Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy is evident in the work of each participant. Critical consciousness is visible through the desire of the participants to “create good people” and to help their students understand the past to lessen the likelihood of repeating the actions of the Jim Crow era. Classroom instruction provided opportunities for students to examine their own perspectives, to give voice to their learnings, and to create safe spaces to have discussions about controversial topics using specific strategies.

The research participants had created classroom communities where students felt safe to read, write, and discuss topics even when those same students may have families that do not agree with the literature that is being used within the walls of the school. The teachers in the study had built safe spaces for their students and modeled, each day, what they expected from their students. Wilson (2023) notes, "When our actions, speech, and policies are informed by a framework of kindness, then we can change a generation of students” (p. ix). Through their own actions, the educators in this study were advocating for and giving voice to their students.

Further Research

The findings from this research are certainly important to informing our work with rural students and educators, especially in the rural school settings in the Midwest. The researchers believe it is critical that this research continue and broaden to other states with rural areas that are different from those highlighted here. As noted at the beginning of the manuscript, rural communities are defined by the people who settled there and their history related to proximity to larger cities. Many small towns suffer from a dwindling population, and this fact also impacts who remains living in those areas. We believe expanding the research to other states and rural settings within those states would be an important step for further study. As noted earlier, Karla had lived in a rural southern setting, and her experiences there did not mirror the experiences of the other participants. Finding out other rural educators’ experiences is critical to this research topic.

The interviews conducted for this research included six educators. Expanding the number of research participants could better inform and assist those concerned with how rural students are being educated and provide a step toward understanding the challenges, the opportunities, and the impact on those students’ futures as well as their preparation for post-high school education and employment. Retaining talented teachers committed to teaching in rural settings is critical, especially while confronting the current teacher shortage crisis. Teachers need to feel supported and free to include teaching with controversial texts in their classrooms. Further research on this topic can enlighten other stakeholders on the importance of doing so.

Conclusion

Each of the research participants confirmed what Wilson (2023) purports, and that is that teachers "have a responsibility to the diverse populations that we serve, and the wider society, to portray narratives different from our own and those that give a more complete picture of our society" (p. 97). The researchers assert that each of the participants had, at some points in their career and sometimes very recently, felt uncomfortable using a particular piece of literature, examining students' (and their families') beliefs about topics being discussed in the classroom, or because they were concerned about possible repercussions. However, each believed it was their responsibility to continue using the titles they cited, researching about the topics, and discussing the content in order for students to learn the most possible about race, cultures, ethnicities, LGBTQIA+, and other sometimes controversial topics. But, more importantly, they believed in their capabilities to create good humans in the process. Even when their students or families may not have agreed with them, having civil discourse within their classrooms was a critical component of their discussions with the researchers. Wilson's (2023) words echo the research participants in this study:

> Because public schools are open for all children (maybe one of the greatest institutions in our world), we have the radical charge to educate all students and support families from all backgrounds. This means that sometimes our personal values may not align with the families of our students. In our increasingly politically divided society, this can create conflict over how to best educate our students. As educators, we have to tread these lines carefully, honoring and respecting the family's personal views while also providing high-quality education. For the most part, we can approach conflicts in values with kindness and respect, agreeing to disagree on topics. (p. 94)

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Appendix A

Initial Survey Administered through Google Forms

Question 1:

In the space below, identify literature that you have used in your classroom that may be viewed as controversial or has been challenged by the community in which you teach. Please note that literature refers to not only books, but specific poems, news articles, speeches, etc. Do not limit your answers to "books." Include title of the text and author. Note if the text was challenged within your school and the reason for the challenge.

Question 2:

Has anyone in your school challenged the literature that has been used in the setting? Who has challenged literature in your school setting (check all that apply):

Students

Parents/Caregivers

Fellow Teachers

Building Administrator(s)

District Administrator(s)

School Board Members

Question 3:

How often has literature that you teach been challenged. If so, when did that occur?

Question 4:

What is your school district's process when a concerned party challenges the content of literature that is being used to teach in the classroom?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Individual Interviews

How do you define controversial topics?

Why have you decided to teach literature that some have regarded as controversial?

Describe the preparation you have had in addressing controversial issues in your classroom. This could be in your teacher preparation program, professional development, or personal professional reading.

When discussing controversial topics, do you disclose your personal views on the topic? Why or why not?

Describe the preparation you do in your classroom with your students to prepare them for literature studies and classroom discussions that may be controversial.

How do you prepare your administrator that potentially controversial topics will be discussed in your classroom?

Do you notify families of the potentially controversial topics you will be reading and discussing in class? If so, how?

Describe the lesson planning that you do for the instruction of potentially controversial literature.

How is your planning different for potentially controversial literature than other pieces of literature?

When literature has been challenged, how have you been contacted about the challenge?

Describe a concern that has been presented to you about a specific piece of literature.

How supported do you feel when these concerns arise? Who supports you and how?

What has been the result of challenged literature in your setting, i.e. have you continued teaching with the text?

Have you experienced any threatening behaviors related to challenged literature in your setting? Please describe.

Appendix C

Literature, Texts, and Other Resources Cited by Research Participants

(Numbers in brackets indicate how many participants referenced the source.]

Texts

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