

2019

Does ALA Ban Books? Examining the Discourse of Challenged Books

Sue C. Kimmel
Old Dominion University

Danielle E. Hartsfield

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/stemps_fac_pubs



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Kimmel, S. C., & Hartsfield, D. E. (2019). Does ALA ban books? Examining the discourse of challenged books. *Library Quarterly*, 89(3), 217-231. doi:10.1086/703469

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the STEM Education & Professional Studies at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in STEMPS Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

Does ALA Ban Books? Examining the Discourse of Challenged Books

Sue C. Kimmel and Danielle E. Hartsfield

ABSTRACT

The question “Does ALA [American Library Association] ban books?” was found on the ALA’s “Frequently Asked Questions” page for Banned Books Week. A critical review of the meanings students were ascribing to the lists of frequently challenged books published by ALA was prompted by the suggestions of two students that the Office of Intellectual Freedom bans books. Was it possible others thought ALA was banning books? This study employed a discourse analysis to closely examine how students talked about the lists and how ALA presents and markets those lists and Banned Books Week. Findings suggest the complexities inherent in the way ALA markets itself and how the public perceives the role of librarians in selecting and providing access to information and ideas.

Does ALA [American Library Association] ban books?” We became concerned about this question through our analysis of student responses to an assignment to read and discuss a “banned book” for a children’s literature course. The assignment was an attempt to raise awareness of censorship and encourage students to think critically about the use of controversial literature in school classrooms and libraries. We were alarmed when we found a statement by a student suggesting the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) reviewed the content of books and by the response from a second student suggesting that the organization bans books. These postings led us to critically review what these and other students had posted in the discussion to understand the meanings students were ascribing to the lists of frequently challenged books that we were assigning. Was it possible some of our students believed ALA was banning books? What was our responsibility as instructors and, more broadly, what misunderstandings and misconceptions are implied by the discourse of banned books promoted by ALA and OIF? We employed the tools of discourse analysis (Gee 1996, 2005, 2014) to explore these critical questions as we took a closer look at how students talked about the lists of frequently challenged books. We also analyzed how ALA presents and markets those lists and Banned Books Week to help us understand our students’ thinking. The question, “Does ALA ban books?” appears on the “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) page for Banned Books Week (ALA 2019c) and supports a hypothesis that there are some, including our students, who believe this might be the case.

Background: Discourse of Banned Books and Censorship

James Paul Gee (1996, 2005, 2014) distinguishes two kinds of discourse, referenced as big-D “Discourse” and small-d “discourse.” Small-d “discourse” includes the everyday ways we use language to express identities and accomplish activities in the world. A discourse analysis uses these small-d discourses as units of analysis to uncover taken-for-granted larger meanings such as the big-D Discourses that are at play in these uses of language. A big-D Discourse, according to Gee (1996), “is composed of ways of talking, listening, (often, too, reading and writing), acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects, in particular settings at specific times, so as to display and recognize a particular social identity” (128). In other words, a Discourse can be considered a pattern of social interactions that signifies membership in a group or a set of beliefs and values.

Arguably, the OIF and ALA contribute to a Discourse around controversial literature, particularly in the way they promote Banned Books Week. Considered “one of the most successful campaigns of OIF” (Diaz and LaRue 2017, 43), the first Banned Books Week in 1982 was a combined effort by the American Booksellers Association, ALA’s OIF, and the Association of College Stores, and it was an immediate success. The consortium behind the week has grown to 14 members, and Eleanor Diaz and James LaRue (2017) estimate media coverage of the event reaches 2.8 billion readers. They also report that “the Banned Books page (ala.org/bbooks) remains one of the two most popular pages on the ALA website” (44). Visitors to the website at one particular time would find Banned Books Week and readers of controversial literature framed as staunch fighters in the battle to defend the right to unrestricted access to books. In the top left corner of ALA’s 2018 advocacy website for “Banned and Challenged Books,” a logo depicts a small, blue-haired person with his or her face buried in an oversized book, fist raised above his or her head, a gesture of power or accomplishment, saying “Yes!” or “I did it!” The 2016 logo for Banned Books Week featured male and female figures wearing capes standing atop an open book, fists at their hips and chests thrust out as if in defiance. To participate in Banned Books Week, then, is to participate in a Discourse in which readers of controversial literature are righteous and brave defenders of intellectual freedom. As readers of controversial books, we are the heroes in the ongoing battle against the “censor-morons” (Kidd 2009, 205).

This Discourse surrounding Banned Books Week and ALA’s other efforts regarding frequently challenged books have not been without controversy. Kenneth Kidd (2009), for instance, contends that ALA’s compilation of frequently challenged books lists acts as a mechanism for canonizing titles based on their history of inciting controversy. In his article Bob Holley (2012) apologetically asks, “Does the Focus on Banned Books Subtly Undermine Intellectual Freedom?” Among his points, books are more often challenged rather than banned; “banning” suggests the book was purchased for a library and thus draws attention away from preemptive or self-censorship decisions by librarians not to purchase material that might be controversial, and, he asserts, most challenged books are easy to defend. In 2015, the online magazine *Slate.com*

proclaimed “Banned Books Week Is a Crock” because books may be challenged but they are rarely removed from circulation from library shelves (Graham 2015).

More recently, Emily Knox and Shannon Oltmann (2018) explored the tension between the library profession’s positions on intellectual freedom and social justice through investigating the controversy over a 2015 poster for Banned Books Week that featured an image of a woman wearing a niqab that many found culturally insensitive. Many of those upset by the poster and calling for it to be pulled from the advertising campaign expressed this as making a commercial decision (the poster was not having the intended effect), whereas others found calls to pull the poster as asking OIF to engage in censorship. These discussions hinged in part with what Knox (2014) has described as a distinction between narrow government censorship and more broad definitions inclusive of any entity that might have the power or interest to restrict materials. Interviews with the library community in the Knox and Oltmann (2018) study revealed discontent among participants with ALA and OIF; in particular, one participant was quoted as saying, “But it’s really difficult for me to support Banned Books Week with all my heart because I feel like we could be having a more genuine conversation about challenges” (12). This speaker problematizes Banned Books Week as superficial and suggests the controversy over its advertising misses the deeper conversation needed in the profession about threats to freedom to read and access ideas and information.

Knox (2014) found those who sought to challenge a book or books did not view themselves as censors but drew on a narrow definition of censorship. Challengers were asking for books to be labeled and/or moved to another section of the library. The challengers did not view this as censorship, which they defined as the outright banning of the book or its removal entirely from the library. The ALA, according to Knox, operates from a broader definition of censorship that includes restricted access such as labeling and reshelving. The ALA’s use of the terminology “banned,” however, would seem to perpetuate the narrower definition of censorship. Although ALA does address the difference between banned and challenged books on its website, the fact that ALA includes the question, “Does ALA ban books?” on its FAQ page suggests this confusion is problematic (and frequent). In 2010, an article in the *AARP Bulletin* about Banned Books Week reportedly led many readers to believe that libraries, schools, and even ALA banned books (American Libraries 2010).

Matthew Bunn (2015) also wrestles with these varying definitions of censorship for the discipline of history, describing a “liberal” conception of censorship as “external, coercive, and repressive” (29) contrasting with “New Censorship Theory,” which stresses a multiplicity of forms, including self-censorship, and of which state censorship is a narrow subset. Bunn echoes Marek Tesar’s (2014) troubling analysis of post-totalitarian censorship where the state does not need to exercise censorship or ban materials if fearful citizens simply choose to censor themselves. Several studies have suggested that librarians and educators may be practicing this preemptive censorship because of fear of controversy (e.g., Wollman-Bonilla 1998; Freedman

and Johnson 2000/2001; Fanetti 2012; Jacobson 2016; Kimmel and Hartsfield 2018). Concerned with problems such as self-censorship by educators and librarians, we developed an assignment in our children's literature course for preservice teachers and librarians to read and discuss challenged books. As we examined student discussion posts as researchers, not just instructors, we became troubled by possible misunderstandings implied in some of the student posts and undertook the analysis reported in this article.

Meanings of "Banned Books": A Problem?

In keeping with course outcomes and professional values related to intellectual freedom and the "right to read" (ALA 1980; NCTE 2009), our assignment was meant to raise awareness of censorship and encourage students to think critically about the use of controversial literature in school libraries and classrooms. Students were asked to select a challenged or banned book and research the reasons that book has been controversial. They were directed to the ALA's lists of "Frequently Challenged Books" (ALA 2019d), "Top Ten Most Challenged Books" (ALA 2019g), and "Banned and Challenged Classics" (ALA 2019b) to help them select a title appropriate for the assignment. Then students were required to share their research and explain why they thought the challenge or ban was (or was not) justifiable and whether they would place the book in their school library or classroom. As this was an online class, students posted their assignments to the course discussion board and were encouraged to interact with each other about their thinking. The assignment instructions given to students appear in the appendix.

The discussion was lively and, from our stance as proponents of intellectual freedom, we were pleased that many students said they would refuse to self-censor books such as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling 1997) and *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* (Pilkey 1997), believing their literary merit and appeal to children outweighed the content that others found controversial. At first glance, the assignment was a success. However, we became alarmed when we noticed this statement by a student: "The Office for Intellectual Freedom for the past couple of years have [*sic*] been concerned with the content of *The Hunger Games*." A classmate responded, "I can see why this might have been banned by an organization." These statements indicated the students believed the OIF, an arm of ALA, was responsible for banning books. In the context of a course advocating for intellectual freedom and supporting children's right to read and as members of ALA, we found this misunderstanding troubling. As reflective instructors, we asked ourselves if the assignment and accompanying online lecture appropriately framed ALA as a defender of intellectual freedom and unrestricted access to books. Although we cannot be sure of the source of the students' misunderstanding, this incident prompted us to wonder whether the Discourse (Gee 1996, 2005, 2014) of controversial literature, largely perpetuated by ALA and its promotion of Banned Books Week, could contribute to problematic understandings of the issues surrounding censorship and intellectual freedom. What meanings were students ascribing to the lists of frequently challenged books that we were assigning? Did they think ALA was

banning books? In this exploratory study, we apply a discourse analysis to incidents in an online discussion board about challenged books where students reference ALA's Frequently Challenged Books lists and we explore their perceptions and our practices as instructors and as a profession. We were guided by the following research question: What meanings of ALA's lists of frequently challenged books are present in discussions of books from ALA's Frequently Challenged Books lists among preservice teachers and school librarians?

Method

We chose a discourse analysis because, as Gee (2005, 6) states, it is both a theory and a method. According to Gee (2005), "Language-in-use is everywhere and always 'political'" (1), meaning it is concerned with the distribution of social goods such as power or status. Given that censorship is about power and that our interest in this study was in language, a discourse analysis was an appropriate and useful tool. Gee (2014) suggests several discourse analysis tools, and for this analysis, we selected the "figured worlds" tool. According to Gee (2014), we use language based on figured worlds or models in our minds about what is "normal" or "natural" (156). We were particularly interested in what figured worlds students ascribed to the lists published by ALA of challenged books and to ALA as the "author" of those lists. According to Gee (2014), "The best way to get at what figured worlds a speaker is assuming in a given context is to ask the following question: 'What must this speaker assume about the world—take to be typical or normal—in order to have spoken this way, to have said things in the way they were said?'" (178). This tool for analysis allowed us to hypothesize the possible assumptions held by these participants about why books are on the lists and the possible implied meanings of the lists. According to Gee (2005), "The discourse analyst looks for patterns and links within and across utterances in order to form hypotheses about how meaning is being constructed and organized" (118). Discourse analysis thus offered us a novel approach to explore possible, taken-for-granted assumptions about ALA's role in book challenges. We do not claim that every person who views ALA's or OIF's website will construct the same meanings that we hypothesize here; rather, we are analyzing the possible interpretations and assumptions of a particular group of students at one moment in time.

Two sections of the course were taught online and asynchronously in 2015 with a total of 40 students. Students in this course were a mixture of preservice teachers and preservice school librarians: 28 were studying elementary education, 2 were studying middle grades education, 7 were studying school librarianship, and 3 were nondegree students. Most of the preservice school librarians were current classroom teachers. Students had an assignment to "read, research, and discuss a children's book that has been challenged or banned" and were directed to a folder of links to locate "some banned book choices." They were expected to post on a discussion board about the book, their research about why the book was challenged or banned, and their own reactions to the book. They were also expected to return to the dis-

cussion board and reply to at least three classmates. In one section, there were 88 posts and in the other were 68 posts. Book choices included *Walter the Farting Dog* (Kotzwinkle and Murray 2001), *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell 2005), *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold 2002), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee 1960/2002).

We selected any sentences that included references to a list of banned or challenged books for this analysis. A search for the word “list” in the transcripts found 32, and a close reading through the transcripts uncovered another 3 references. One was “American Library Association’s one hundred most frequently challenged books: 1990–1999” and the other two used the word “chart.” A total of 35 sentences were closely analyzed. We should note that the discourse analysis we applied does not attempt to uncover what is in an individual’s mind when the individual speaks or writes but considers language as socially constructed and contextually situated. We were concerned with the possible meanings present in the context of this course. Our analysis also examined the context of the possible meanings promoted by the ALA-OIF website. What an individual or organization intends to communicate may be different from the meanings taken up by readers or listeners.

As researchers, for each sentence included in the analysis, we asked, “What might this speaker assume about the world of banned or challenged books to have responded this way?” We both coded all posts and met to discuss our findings. Often a sentence was parsed to consider verb choice, use of articles such as the definitive “the,” clauses, and adjectives. For example, in the following statement, “I agree that *Captain Underpants* should not be on the banned list,” we noted the use of “the” as determinative implying there is a singular list of banned books. Furthermore, the use of “banned” is a stronger modifier than “challenged.” The student is expressing agreement with a previous student’s post. The verb choice “should” fails to recognize the quantitative criteria that determine a book’s placement on a list of challenged books and instead implies an assumption that it is a matter of opinion whether or not a book is on the list. A possible interpretation of this sentence is that there is a singular list of books that are banned from schools and libraries and *Captain Underpants* is on that list. The speaker believes that it should not be on the list and should not be banned. Furthermore, it is a matter of opinion whether the book is on the list and, therefore, it could be decided to remove it. Employing a discourse analysis, this is one possible hypothesis about what was meant in this posting. Other readers, including other students in the class, may have come away with a similar interpretation. We share our findings regarding the hypothetical meanings of ALA’s lists of challenged books that we might possibly form from the student discussions. We follow that with an analysis of how ALA’s presentations of the lists may promote these understandings.

Findings

We examined how students named the lists of frequently challenged books that the assignment told them to consult. Following our examination of the 35 references to the list in stu-

dent posts, our analysis established two major themes. We identify the first finding as “greatest hits” for the way the list was referenced as an accomplishment, much as on the Top 40 music hits or a best-seller list. Our second finding was that students’ responses implied there were qualitative reasons or criteria used to put a book on the list. We also examined the recent Banned and Challenged Books website (ALA 2019a) for echoes of these findings from the student posts. These findings are presented in more detail in this section.

How the Lists Were Named

There were 13 references to a “banned book list,” 13 references to a “challenged list,” and 6 references to a combined “banned or challenged list.” The remaining references were to a “chart,” a “list of controversial titles,” and a “list of foul language” that resulted in a challenge. Of the 35 references, 16 attributed the list or lists to ALA. Other lists mentioned in students’ posts included *Horn Book*, the Radcliffe list, and lists created by cities for their public schools. Often lists were not directly attributed; there were seven references (20% of total) definitively to “the” banned book list.

“Topping the Charts,” or Greatest Hits

Phrases such as “top ten list of frequently banned and challenged books of 2014” or “according to the American Library Association, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has been on the top ten frequently challenged books list each year since its publication in 2011,” and references to ranking were part of 21 references to the list. This choice of language echoed the way we might speak of top sellers in books or music in a given year or decade. We can almost hear the radio announcer playing a countdown of top challenged books in students’ sentences, such as “This book was published in 2005, and is [sic] remained at the top of the most frequent [sic] challenged books for five years, with a brief stay at number two slot in 2009.” Two different students in one of the sections referenced a book as “topping the charts.” Several students used the language of accomplishment for a book’s appearance on the list with the use of the verb “made” as in “Dav Pilkey’s *Captain Underpants* (series) has made it to the banned book list for a number of reasons.” References to the list often suggested a book’s notoriety and that there is a scale of “badness.” For example, one student said, “Yes, there is profanity, and other issues to why it made the banned list, but it is not as bad as some other books out there.” This leads to our next finding: the statements of many students seemed to suggest that there were qualitative criteria for a book’s placement on the list.

“For These Reasons,” or Criteria for the Lists

There were 13 posts that attributed qualitative reasons for a book being on the list. “As of ALA, the reasons for placing the entire Harry Potter series as a whole in the challenged book lists are anti-family, occult or Satanism, religious viewpoint, and violence,” wrote one student. Other

students cited additional reasons why the books discussed in the assignment were challenged or banned, including profanity, racial slurs, homosexuality, and religion. Some students mentioned reasons that were often likely direct citations from the ALA Frequently Challenged Books websites: “Drugs/alcohol/smoking, sexually explicit, suicide, and being unsuited for the age group.” The ALA was often assigned ownership of the list as in the quote above, which suggests the reasons were “as of ALA.” The use of the verbs “considered” or “cited” in the following examples also implicates ALA’s ownership: “There are a number of reasons this book is considered #8 on the American Library Association’s list of frequently banned classics” and “*And Tango Makes Three* has appeared on ALA’s Top Ten list of most frequently challenged books for the past five years. *And Tango Makes Three* is cited for the homosexuality that is displayed in the book.” These examples suggest that students failed to recognize how the lists of challenged books were compiled. Combined with the findings above regarding “greatest hits,” the lists became a scale of notoriety or badness. Other evidence suggested some students did not understand the list, including the occasional suggestions that a book should come off the list: “I believe it should be challenged again and come off the banned list,” or “most other school districts across the United States have kept this book off of the banned/challenged list because it is a great way to introduce and talk about sensitive material to students.”

ALA’s Banned Books Website

A visit to the current (2018) website for Banned Books Week echoes some of these misunderstandings. The website is entitled “Banned and Challenged Books” (ALA 2019a). We note that ALA classifies this as part of advocacy, and the page is also attributed to OIF. Major links on the opening page are to “Explore frequently challenged books,” “Celebrate Banned Books Week,” and “Shop banned books merchandise.” The use of the term “banned” predominates—even the link to “Explore frequently challenged books” is entitled “Explore banned and challenged titles.” Both the terms “challenged” and “banned” are defined on the page, but the reader is left to infer the difference. An additional link is to “A List of the Top Ten Most Challenged Books.”

We took a close look at the “Top Ten Most Challenged Books” from 2016 and did so again when it was superseded by the list from 2017 (ALA 2019g). As in past years, the 2017 list was annotated. The first three titles on this new list identify the reasons for each title’s controversy and generically identify where the title was censored. For example, *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher 2007), the most frequently challenged or banned book of 2017, was “banned in multiple school districts because it *discusses suicide*.” Further down the list, the recently published novel *The Hate U Give* (Thomas 2017) was “challenged and banned in school libraries and curriculums because it was *considered ‘pervasively vulgar’* and because of *drug use, profanity, and offensive language*.” The verb choice “considered” implies qualitative criteria. However, information about where a title was challenged or banned is not included for all books on the list, notably children’s books *George* (Gino 2015), *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell 2005), and *I Am Jazz* (Herthel,

Jennings, and McNicholas 2014). For example, the annotation for *George* states, “Written for elementary-age children, this Lambda Literary Award winner was challenged and banned because it *includes a transgender child*.” We note in these examples that it is not clear who challenged or banned the book, leaving it open and possible for ALA, the author of this web page, to have been the one making the determination. We have retained the emphasis from the source highlighting the reasons why the book was “banned” or challenged; one can see how these reasons for the challenge could easily become conflated with the reasons for the book’s placement on the list. Clearer language might instead say, “Twenty-three challenges of this title were reported to the American Library Association. Reasons cited in various challenges included profanity, drug use, and sexually explicit content.” Although the inclusion of generic sources of censorship (e.g., school libraries, curriculums) is an improvement over simply listing why a book has been challenged or banned, the language ALA uses in the most current annotations is still problematic. For example, the verb choice “considered” appears in the annotation for *The Hate U Give* (Thomas 2017), implying qualitative criteria for the list.

We also see the language of “greatest hits” in the current annotation for *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell 2005), for example, “Returning after a brief hiatus from the Top Ten Most Challenged list.” Reinforcing the “greatest hits” discourse is the presence of top 10 lists for previous years where each title is listed followed by reasons and lists of “top 100 most challenged” by decade (ALA 2019e, 2019f).

Given the language ALA-OIF uses to disseminate information about controversial titles, some of the confusion and misunderstandings that our students encountered are understandable.

Discussion

Kidd (2009) compares censorship to prizing and explores the role of ALA in both prizes and lists of “best” books, particularly for children and young adults, but also through its anticensorship efforts and the creation of multiple lists of frequently challenged or banned books. Kidd observes, “These various lists point toward a canon of banned books, individual titles of which gain importance through challenge. Censorship thus achieves something like canonization” (209). We now see this at play in our assignment in a course about children’s literature to read a book from one of the frequently challenged lists. In effect, the assignment recognized these challenged books as a part of the canon our students should know about, discuss, and consider using in their classrooms and libraries. The assignment raised awareness about the lists, as several students commented that they were surprised to find a book on one of the lists, but it may not have engaged students in a productive discussion about who decides and who should decide what young people read. Instead, many seemed to consider the lists as greatest hits, a badge of recognition and even accomplishment. Kidd also shares examples of authors considering an appearance on the list as an achievement worthy of the company of Ernest Hemingway or Mark Twain, who are also on the lists.

The relationship with prizing also helps to explain the perception that ALA was the author of the list rather than a reporter of statistics. If ALA publishes and promotes lists of prized books that are worthy, then it is not a stretch for outsiders to think it also publishes lists of books that are not recommended or not worthy. Although no student explicitly stated, “The American Library Association has a list of books that libraries and schools consult to determine not to use or acquire a book,” some came really close, and we were troubled in our analysis to find this as a possible figured world or assumption that might be held by individuals or that individuals might take away from the discussion board posts. When a student suggested that it is time for a book to come off the list, we see this as a misunderstanding of how the lists are constructed and by whom. We worry that because these figured worlds were not explicit, they may be especially insidious and difficult for instructors to recognize and counteract. We could take for granted that the student just meant it is time for the challenges that put the book on the list to halt. However, as instructors, if we do not work to recognize and challenge these possible misperceptions, the possibility exists that some students will take up this figured world about censorship and the lists provided by ALA. There may be students who consult the lists in order to choose a book for the assignment but who do not carefully read the ALA website. As instructors, we now see our responsibility to be explicit about how the lists are constructed and what ALA’s position is toward censorship.

Although a limitation of this study is the small data set, a discourse analysis allowed us to hypothesize possible meanings our students and others might make of ALA’s lists of challenged and banned books, including the possibility that ALA determines what titles go on the lists and why. Because ALA lists “Does ALA ban books?” as among the FAQs about the challenged book lists and Banned Books Week, we find this hypothesis to be within reason and have to assume that there are other individuals who do hold this belief. A rebuttal by ALA in the FAQ section is perhaps not a strong enough deterrent to construction of this figured world.

“Words have power” was a theme for Banned Books Week in 2017 and is a primary assumption of a discourse analysis. When students discussed specific reasons and used verbs such as “cited” and “considered,” we interpreted these words to mean there were qualitative criteria that determined a book’s placement on the frequently challenged lists, as if there was a scale of badness that placed some titles on top of the list again and again. Indeed, we found three words—“reasons,” “cited,” and “considered”—were also used by ALA in its annotations for the titles. In addition to the current year, the practice for previous years has been to simply provide lists of reasons. Again, there is the possible misunderstanding that these reasons, citations, and considerations were provided by ALA instead of the reality of the list: that these were the primary reasons why the titles were challenged and that the number of challenges, a quantitative measure, determined the “rank” of the book on the list. We also note that the more casual reference to the lists as “banned” and even “challenged” further muddies these waters;

at least the title “Frequently Challenged” suggests a quantitative measure of frequency. We see our students as “educated” outsiders; they were graduate students preparing to be educators. But what about “outsiders” who come to ALA’s website without instructor direction? What meanings are they taking away?

As we have addressed, the language of challenged and banned books appearing on ALA’s websites can be misleading. We contend that this language—this Discourse—should be reframed to clarify the roles of ALA and OIF regarding issues of book challenges and bans. Although we believe that the reasons for a book challenge should be included on ALA’s (2019g) annual list of the Top Ten Most Challenged Books, we also believe it is important to identify from whom the challenge originated. Currently, the OIF inconsistently identifies generic descriptions of who challenged the book (e.g., schools, libraries). Identifying who challenged a book and where a book has been challenged would appropriately position the OIF as a collector and reporter of statistics, not a decision-making body that bans books. Moreover, equipping visitors to its Top Ten Most Challenged Books site with additional information about the origination of book challenges could allow for greater activism on issues of intellectual freedom. This might be accomplished with generic descriptions that protect the confidentiality of those who report challenges. How are we to advocate for intellectual freedom and for the inclusion of particular books in libraries and classrooms if we do not know who is challenging them or where these challenges are happening? Indeed, this stance is fitting with ALA’s categorization of intellectual freedom as an “advocacy” issue. Furthermore, we believe the OIF should specify the number of challenges a given title has received on its Top Ten Most Challenged Books site. This simple addition to a book’s annotation could do much to avert the misunderstanding that the OIF creates the banned book list based on qualitative criteria. Such reframing would more clearly represent ALA and the OIF as the antithesis of censors and defenders of intellectual freedom.

We agree with the arguments voiced by others that Banned Books Week is problematic because it takes attention away from more pressing issues related to intellectual freedom. We share Holley’s (2012) concern that “the focus on banned books overlooks . . . the tendencies of many librarians to avoid any materials that might cause controversy” (83). Indeed, more attention to issues of self-censorship by librarians and educators would be welcome, especially as self-censorship is on the rise (Jacobson 2016). As we have argued about ALA’s websites about banned books, perhaps the Discourse surrounding Banned Books Week must change. An emphasis on celebrating intellectual freedom rather than the sexiness of banned titles would bring attention to the more significant questions surrounding censorship: What is censorship? Who is a censor? How are we, as library and education professionals, supporting the right to read? Holley (2012) argues, “Banned Books Week makes librarians look good as crusaders for intellectual freedom” (83). But let us not forget that librarians are sometimes the ones who act as censors through evasion of materials that might raise controversy. Perhaps instead of

a celebration of controversial titles, Banned Books Week should be a time of self-reflection, a time when we hold the mirror up to ourselves and consider the ways we are (and are not) supporting our profession's value of intellectual freedom.

Conclusion

Knox (2014), in an analysis of the discourse surrounding a community book challenge asking to label and move LGBT materials, found the people behind the challenge held a very narrow view of censorship as removing the materials or banning them. They did not see themselves as censors and, according to Knox, failed to acknowledge their power in denying access to readers. As instructors who prepare future teachers and librarians, we want our students to recognize their own power as gatekeepers in their choices about what to include or not include in their classrooms and libraries. In this way, we see the hyperbole of "banned books" obscuring that power and responsibility. The Knox and Oltmann (2018) study demonstrates ways that all of us, including the OIF, are faced with decisions to restrict content, whether it is a decision about what books to purchase for the library, what book to read aloud to a class of children or to select for a novel study, or what image to place on a poster. Words and images do have power. In our research (Kimmel and Hartsfield 2018) we have found preservice teachers and librarians willing to censor a book because they feared parental challenge. As faculty who prepare teachers and librarians, we want to invite our students to acknowledge their own power in these decisions and to act from a position of caring for the youth in their classrooms and libraries rather than from a position of fear and preemptive censorship. Based on our findings in this study, we no longer ask students to read a book from one of the lists and instead have chosen to emphasize the power inherent in who decides what to include or not include in classrooms and libraries. A clear limitation of this exploratory study is the small set of data, but we find the possibility for misunderstanding the role of ALA related to censorship troubling. Future directions for research might explore how parents and community members understand challenged materials and library selection policies, perhaps conducting focus group interviews to further understand how these stakeholders and preservice educators and librarians think about selecting and using controversial materials. The field of librarianship as a whole should also acknowledge and continue to interrogate its power. Does ALA ban books? The answer is a resounding "no," but the question suggests the complexities inherent in the way we market ourselves and how the public perceives our role in selecting and providing access to information and ideas.

Appendix

Banned Books Discussion

In this assignment, you will read, research, and discuss a children's book that has been challenged or banned. Your banned book for this assignment can be the same banned book you

read for your Book Blog assignment (but you may not choose *The Higher Power of Lucky*, which we are reading for literature circles; I'd like to see a variety of books chosen).

You can locate some banned book choices by browsing the links provided in this folder. Once you have selected and read your banned book, do some research on the internet and the [university] databases. Why was your book banned or challenged? Who challenged the book? What was the outcome of the book challenge? Does your book choice continue to be controversial? Look for high-quality sources such as articles in *School Library Journal* or *The Horn Book* magazine (if in doubt whether a source is of high quality, please ask the instructor).

Then you will write a post in the Blackboard discussion forum to (1) share the information you learned about your book from your research and (2) provide your personal reaction to the book and why it has been challenged or banned. In your opinion, was the challenge/ban justifiable? Would you place this book in your own classroom or library—why or why not? Should children have access to this book? Your post should be about two paragraphs long, and it must be posted by 11:59 p.m. on July 6.

Finally, you will read the posts made by your classmates and write responses to three different people. Your responses could include something you learned from the post, an expression of agreement/disagreement with the post's author, or your reaction to the information provided in the post. Your three responses must be posted by 11:59 p.m. on July 20.

References

- ALA (American Library Association). 1980. "Library Bill of Rights." <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>.
- ALA (American Library Association). 2019a. "Banned and Challenged Books." <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks>.
- ALA (American Library Association). 2019b. "Banned and Challenged Classics." Banned and Challenged Books. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/classics>.
- ALA (American Library Association). 2019c. "Banned Book FAQ." Banned and Challenged Books. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/banned-books-qa>.
- ALA (American Library Association). 2019d. "Frequently Challenged Books." Banned and Challenged Books. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks>.
- ALA (American Library Association). 2019e. "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 1990–1999." Banned and Challenged Books. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/100-most-frequently-challenged-books-1990%E2%80%991999>.
- ALA (American Library Association). 2019f. "Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000–2009." Banned and Challenged Books. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/top-100-bannedchallenged-books-2000-2009>.
- ALA (American Library Association). 2019g. "Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists." Banned and Challenged Books. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>.
- American Libraries. 2010. "Relax AARP Bulletin Readers, Librarians Do Not Celebrate Book Banning." <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/relax-aarp-bulletin-readers-librarians-do-not-celebrate-book-banning/>.
- Asher, Jay. 2007. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. New York: Razorbill.

- Bunn, Matthew. 2015. "Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After." *History and Theory* 54 (1): 25–44.
- Diaz, Eleanor, and James LaRue. 2017. "50 Years of Intellectual Freedom: The ALA Office Celebrates Its History." *American Libraries* 48 (11/12): 38–44.
- Fanetti, Susan. 2012. "A Case for Cultivating Controversy: Teaching Challenged Books in K–12 Classrooms." *ALAN Review* 40 (1): 6–17.
- Freedman, Lauren, and Holly Johnson. 2000/2001. "Who's Protecting Whom? 'I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This,' A Case in Point in Confronting Self-Censorship in the Choice of Young Adult Literature." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 44 (4): 356–69.
- Gee, James Paul. 1996. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourses*. New York: Routledge.
- Gee, James, Paul. 2005. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Gee, James Paul. 2014. *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*. New York: Routledge.
- Gino, Alex. 2015. *George*. New York: Scholastic.
- Graham, Ruth. 2015. "Banned Books Week Is a Crock." *Slate.com*, September 28. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/09/banned_books_week_no_one_bans_books_anymore_and_censorship_of_books_is_incredibly.html.
- Herthel, Jessica, Jazz Jennings, and Shelagh McNicholas. 2014. *I Am Jazz*. New York: Dial.
- Holley, Bob. 2012. "Random Ramblings: Does the Focus on Banned Books Subtly Undermine Intellectual Freedom?" *Against the Grain* 24 (6): 82–85.
- Jacobson, Linda. 2016. "Unnatural Selection." *School Library Journal* 62 (10): 20–24.
- Kidd, Kenneth. 2009. "Not Censorship but Selection': Censorship and/as Prizing." *Children's Literature in Education* 40 (3): 197–216.
- Kimmel, Sue C., and Danielle E. Hartsfield. 2018. "'It Was . . . the Word 'Scrotum' on the First Page': Educators' Perspectives of Controversial Literature." *Journal of Teacher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117751126>.
- Knox, Emily J. M. 2014. "'The Books Will Still Be in the Library': Narrow Definitions of Censorship in the Discourse of Challengers." *Library Trends* 62 (4): 740–49.
- Knox, Emily J. M., and Shannon M. Oltmann. 2018. "Social Responsibility, Librarianship, and the ALA: The 2015 Banned Books Week Poster Controversy." *Library Quarterly* 88 (1): 5–22.
- Kotzwinkle, William, and Glenn Murray. 2001. *Walter the Farting Dog*. Berkeley: Frog.
- Lee, Harper. (1960) 2002. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: Perennial Classic.
- NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English). 2009. "The Students' Right to Read." <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/righttoreadguideline>.
- Pilkey, Dav. 1997. *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*. New York: Blue Sky/Scholastic.
- Richardson, Justin, and Peter Parnell. 2005. *And Tango Makes Three*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rowling, J. K. 1997. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic.
- Sebold, Alice. 2002. *The Lovely Bones*. New York: Back Bay.
- Tesar, Marek. 2014. "My Feelings: Power, Politics, and Childhood Subjectivities." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46 (8): 860–72.
- Thomas, Angie. 2017. *The Hate U Give*. New York: Balzer & Bray.
- Wollman-Bonilla, Julie E. 1998. "Outrageous Viewpoints: Teachers' Criteria for Rejecting Works of Children's Literature." *Language Arts* 75 (4): 287–95.

Sue C. Kimmel: associate professor at Old Dominion University. Kimmel teaches graduate students in school librarianship, children's literature, and curriculum and instruction. She was a school librarian for more than 15 years and earned National Board Certification in Library Media PreK–12. She has published numerous articles in journals such as *School Library Research*, *School Libraries Worldwide*, *Library Quarterly*, and *Knowledge Quest* and is the author of the AASL publication *Developing Collections to Empower Learners* (2014). Email: skimmel@odu.edu.

Danielle E. Hartsfield: assistant professor in the elementary education program at the University of North Georgia. Hartsfield's research interests include children's literature, intellectual freedom, and self-censorship. Her work has been published in journals such as *Teachers College Record* and the *Journal of Teacher Education*. She has been involved in the Association for Library Service to Children as cochair of the education committee and a member of the 2018 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal committee. Email: Danielle.Hartsfield@ung.edu.