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Is That Controversial or is it Just Me?

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IS THAT CONTROVERSIAL OR IS IT JUST ME?

by

Joseph D. Cochran

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Curriculum and Instruction

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Logan, Utah

2024

ABSTRACT

Is That Controversial or Is It Just Me?

by

Joseph D. Cochran, Doctor of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2024

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Department: School of Teacher Education and Leadership

This dissertation covers the purpose, findings, and implications of a thematic analysis study of charter school principals when faced with making decisions about covering potentially controversial issues. The purposes of this study were to explore the decision-making process behind whether issues were delineated as controversial, identify the risks considered by administrators when faced with potentially controversial issues, and provide recommendations for educators to consider in their own deliberations. The theoretical framework was based upon the concept of contained risk-taking in education. I developed this work through interviews and brief weekly survey responses.

By analyzing the decision-making process shared by the participants as they reflected on their specific experiences with controversial issues during the study, I found that their delineation of an issue as controversial aligned with the three previously established epistemic, political, and politically authentic criteria (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017). Using axial and vivo

coding, I explored the identified potential risks that administrators considered in their decision-making process. Many of the identified risks are similar to the risks identified by teachers and teacher educators, such as parental pushback, alignment with curriculum, hierarchical power dynamics, and community values. Additionally, the participants more frequently avoided controversial issues rather than fully broaching them. Finally, I offer recommendations for teachers and administrators when they are making decisions about potentially controversial issues.

My study has the potential to spark conversations between teachers and administrators about how potentially controversial issues can be approached in schools. Rather than create an aura of fear and uncertainty, increased understanding of the risks faced by each party and their decision-making process can create a feeling of unity and safety for educators. Most importantly, increased conversation and the formation of cocreated policies can produce an educational environment in which controversial issues can be appropriately and effectively addressed. In this study, I also address recommendations for further studies concerning contained risk-taking and approaches to controversial issues.

(181 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Is That Controversial or Is It Just Me?

Joseph D. Cochran

The purposes of this study were to explore the decision-making process behind delineating issues as controversial or not, identify the risks considered by administrators when faced with potentially controversial issues, and provide recommendations for educators to consider in their own deliberations. I interviewed seven charter school principals and used thematic analysis to explore the influence of contained risk-taking on administrator decision-making concerning controversial issues. The findings of this study suggest that administrators generally consider the same risks their teacher counterparts do but often prioritize larger-scale solutions that ensure equity for the entire school. The products of this process emphasize a deliberate and reflective approach to controversial issues that encourages making decisions based on curricular appropriateness, educator and student preparedness, contextual awareness, and potential redirection of issues so they can be addressed in appropriate situations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Though I was not thrilled about it at the time, I am grateful for a challenging administrator with whom I rarely saw eye to eye. I still heartily disagree with that person's decisions concerning controversial issues, but those disagreements led to my desire to create better communication between teachers and administrators. On a happier note, I would be amiss to not thank my many students over the years that have reminded me how much I love being a teacher. You have given me far more than I could ever have hoped to give you.

Finally, I thank my God and His Son, Jesus Christ. My faith constantly inspires me to be a better person and to find ways to serve and love my fellow human beings.

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Chapter I: Introduction

As a teacher and researcher, I've frequently encountered situations that have been interpreted and portrayed in completely different lights despite the fact that the same incident or ideology was described. For example, in one particular situation, I felt I should teach my students that metropolitan school districts sometimes create policies to meet the needs of not just one community but all communities, even when doing so might be viewed as unfair to some. Our district had just announced a policy that removed the required $5 bus fee for field trips, which would subsequently lead to a loss of some field trips for our school. From what my principal had explained to me, the decision reflected the board's desire to remove financial burdens from more impoverished communities within our metropolitan area. This policy and the rationale behind it reflected a perfect example of a specific standard within the AP Human Geography course I taught: "Local and metropolitan forms of governance (e.g., municipalities, school districts, regional planning commissions) are subnational political units that have varying degrees of local control" (College Board, 2015, p. 32).

The students asked reasonable questions; some agreed with the policy change, some disagreed with the decision, and many wanted to learn more about it. Having reached the limit of my knowledge of the subject, I showed my students how to find their local school board member's contact information so they could contact them if they desired. A handful of students walked into the classroom on the following day with enthusiastic stories about receiving email responses and even phone calls from their representatives. They felt heard and empowered. Even upon considering the potential outcome of administrative pushback, I chose to focus on student needs and interests rather than the planned curriculum unit. Considering that I was giving an example of a topic that was explicitly covered in the AP Human Geography curriculum and that I

did not personally judge the new district policy to be controversial, I did not view this to be an issue.

My administrator, upon finding out about the lesson, felt differently about the issue and my coverage of it. Because I chose to discuss the current event on that day, I interrupted my agricultural unit for a political geography current-issue discussion. She viewed the timing of the teaching as an example of exclusive partiality, or sharing my opinion on an issue and then forcing it on the students. She was also frustrated that I would openly teach about a policy that somewhat negatively affected my students without seeking her approval. She heard about the lesson only after school board members contacted her asking why they were hearing from multiple students in her school about the district policy. She was also concerned that I had not followed another district policy regarding teaching about controversial issues that required teachers to submit specific lesson plans to their administrators for approval five days in advance of a lesson's planned delivery. As a result, she pulled students aside to ask them about the lesson and try to ascertain my motivation from the experiences they related (for the purposes of this study, I intended to include a link to said policy, but it was heavily revised in November of 2022 to remove administrative oversight of issue selection).

Perhaps my most important takeaway from this experience was the existence of two quite different conceptions of whether a specific issue was controversial or not. Second, I learned through subsequent discipline that I was accountable to the principal for my curricular decisions. I also recognized that she was accountable to the people in power over her. The autonomy that I previously felt as a teacher suddenly became far more restricted as I more fully perceived the risks I took when deciding what to include and not include in my curriculum and classroom activities.

The contemporary educational landscape is constantly shifting as stakeholders evaluate what, when, and how controversial issues should be addressed in schools. While some applaud the recent Texas SB3 law (2021) as a limiting influence on what topics are appropriate for the classroom (Texas Values, 2022), critics of the bill claim the bill "restricts students' abilities to learn about true events happening around them and censures conversations about issues that affect students, like racial injustice" (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2022, p. 4) while also seeking to limit student political activism (Mizelle, 2021). Florida's "Don't Say Gay Law" (H.B. 1557, 2022) explicitly prohibits the discussion of gender identity and sexual orientation to students between grades K and 3 while allowing those topics to be discussed in later years as deemed developmentally appropriate by the Florida Department of Education. The vague language concerning what exactly is "developmentally appropriate" is argued as unjust as teachers must weigh the risk of losing their credentials if deemed to be out of line (Pendharkar, 2023).

Florida and Texas are not the only states who have prioritized a discussion about teaching controversial issues. In some areas, it has even reached the point that many states and districts are mandating that teachers do not cover some historical topics, despite their explicit mention in state curriculum standards (Will et al., 2021). As of January 2023, 18 states have signed bills addressing controversial issues signed into law, with another 26 states having had a bill introduced, stalled, or vetoed (Schwartz, 2023). Katie Hobbs, the governor of Arizona, decried this movement as "utilizing students and teachers in culture wars based on fearmongering and unfounded accusations" when she vetoed a bill that sought to ban "biased topics" (Valencia, 2023). As states and districts debate, implement, and remove policies concerning the teaching of

controversial issues, educators find themselves in the tenuous position of trying to build civic competency in their students without risking their jobs and careers.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to help educators understand how controversial issues are identified and what risks are taken into consideration when an administrator weighs whether a controversial issue should be addressed in the classroom and school. Even with potential state and district policies that might constrain or prohibit the teaching of controversial issues, the issue of discovering how educators determine what exactly is "controversial" Still exists. Numerous studies have shown that the greatest risk teachers identify is potential backlash from students, parents, and administrators (Dunn et al., 2019; Geller, 2020; Journell, 2012, 2016; Payne & Journell, 2019). It is important to note, however, that many studies have found that teachers respond to internal value systems and ignore potential external repercussions (Cassar et al., 2023; Ho et. al, 2017; Journell, 2018).

Judith Pace's (2019) theory of contained risk-taking plays a key role in my own decision to discover the process behind how administrators delineate whether an issue is controversial or not. Pace's theory acknowledges that educators consider powers and consequences when they choose to (or choose not to) teach an issue. Thus, an educator who views zero risk to their job and well-being will broach any topic or issue they deem fit for their class, while an educator will avoid the same topics if they fear that the potential repercussions are too great. In the middle of the spectrum are educators who practice contained risk-taking wherein they take account of what they are risking and carefully select when and how issues are discussed (Pace, 2019). While Pace's work specifically explored and identified key risks and scenarios that affected teacher

decision-making, it seems likely that administrators would experience a similar delineation process as they respond to potentially controversial issues being broached in their schools.

With that in mind, this study seeks to build on Journell's (2012) call that, concerning the selection and rejection of controversial issues, principals should "make their administrative decisions more transparent" (p. 591). Even after identifying an issue as controversial, all educators, even administrators, must consider the potential risks of addressing that issue in a weighted approach that Pace (2019) described as contained risk-taking. My goal is to help both teachers and administrators better understand how issues are identified as controversial and the process behind that identification to build more trust between the parties.

Design and Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator perspectives on delineating noncontroversial and controversial issues and the internal and external risks that are considered within the process of delineation. Grounded in Pace's (2019) contained risk-taking theory and using a constructivist epistemology, the study was based on a thematic analysis design with the purpose to understand the unique perspectives of administrators from differing backgrounds and within a variety of contextual settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By triangulating data from multiple interviews and weekly check-ins, I sought to describe the factors that influence administrators' decision-making process concerning the controversiality of issues that arise in educational settings.

I selected seven participants who I would meet with three times in an interview setting. The purpose of the primary interview was to understand each participant's background and school setting, identify how they delineate issues as controversial or not, explore the factors

behind that decision-making process, and introduce the weekly check-in aspect of the study. In the second interview, I continued to explore each participant's perspective on controversial issues while reviewing any potential responses from check-ins that addressed potentially controversial issues. The final interview served as a member-checking interview wherein participants could ensure their answers were accurately represented. Any additional insights on the decision-making process given in the second interview were explored as well.

Research Questions

The research questions for this dissertation focus on how administrators decide whether an issue is controversial for their educational setting and the contextual factors they consider in that constructive decision-making process. More specifically:

1. How do administrators determine what makes a potentially controversial issue appropriate or inappropriate for classroom use?

2. How did the charter school principals arrive at a response concerning controversial issues during our month of research?

3. How do administrators expect teachers to respond to anticipated and unanticipated controversial issues?

Chapter II: Literature Review

Controversial Issues and Democratic Education

In education, a long-held concern exists that students are learning to live in a democratic society without learning how to be full participants with the power to act within, challenge, or revolutionize it (Hanna, 1937; Foshay & Burton, 1976; Grant & Vansledright, 1996; Llewellyn et al., 2010). The National Council for the Social Studies (2013), hereafter referred to as the NCSS, echoed this concern in an appeal for schooling to "not merely [be] preparation for citizenship, but citizenship itself; to equip a citizenry with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for active and engaged civic life" (p. 1). This call urges educators to respond to the concern that students know a lot about citizenship but are unprepared to be active citizens in society. Perhaps Popkewitz (2011) best described this fear by saying that education "is busied with the production and prevention of change in human beings" (p. 13) rather than with the promotion of self-worth and democratic ideals. In a recent foreword to a book, Apple followed this vein of thinking by questioning "whether education has a role to play in preparing students to live in a world where conflicts and controversies are ever present, and in helping to produce a more democratic civic culture even more salient" (qtd. in Hess and McAvoy, 2015, xiv).

In response to concerns that schools are not educating with the aim to create active citizens, Hess (2009) called for a move away from the use of and focus on civic education and instead advocated for an emphasis on democratic education. Hess described civic education as teaching students to fit into the "official" perspective or narrative, arguing that traditional civic education gives little to no time for a discussion of contemporary or historical issues. Democratic education, on the other hand, "highlights the dynamic and contest dimensions inherent in a democracy" (p. 15). Using tools such as critical inquiry and counternarratives allows students to

engage with and challenge historical and current narratives while empowering student views. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argued "that schools are, and ought to be, political sites" so that students may deliberate on political questions and learn how to better live with one another (p. 4).

Despite these optimistic views, scholars have long been divided about whether schools have the ability to provide a safe and informed environment wherein students can deliberate and develop their own opinions. Knowles and Clark (2017) explored the many voices that have contributed to contemporary scholarship on deliberative democratic theory. On one end of the spectra, there is optimism that citizens in communities can put aside their own concerns and deliberate for the common good (Rawls, 2020). Habermas (2015) posited that public deliberation can be effective and legitimate when all relevant citizens are included in equal standing with one another. This idealized setting allows citizens to pursue common interests rather than being limited by power structures. By deliberating about complex and controversial issues, communities can cocreate a shared vision of mutually beneficial goals (Michelbach, 2015).

Other scholars have identified factors that question whether this idealized educational and citizenship setting can be achieved. One concern is whether participants have the ability to eliminate their own personal biases. For example, Sanders (1997) found that student deliberations were influenced by preexisting assumptions of self-identity. Similarly, Beck (2013) showed that assumptions about heterosexuality and LGBTQ+ people were a limiting factor in deliberations about discussing same-sex marriage in high school social studies classes. Teachers are not exempt from being influenced by personal biases either. Knowles and Castro (2019) demonstrated that teacher curricular decisions often reflected their personal ideologies. Additionally, Castro (2014) found a similar ideological effect in the how preservice teachers

reacted to antiracist educational practices. It is incredibly difficult for students to create and flesh out their own personal opinions and decisions when they have to overcome barriers of teacher and student attitudes (Apple, 2008; Beck, 2013; Camicia, 2016; Knowles, 2017).

Even so, with a better understanding of these and other barriers, many scholars and teachers are seeking to provide efficacious deliberation opportunities for students. Rather than seeking an idealized solution that is agreeable to all, Bellamy (1999) has called for an increased emphasis on compromises that teach students to find solutions even when disagreement remains. Parker (1996, 2006, 2010) has demonstrated that pedagogical practices such as seminars expand student perspectives while providing problem-solving opportunities wherein students can seek agreement or compromise. Aiming for democratically created compromises that allow for reciprocity (O'Flynn, 2009) allows students to not be stymied by disagreement as they engage in tolerant deliberation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

Tying Controversial Issues to Democratic Education

Large-scale empirical studies illustrate that opportunities to track current events while discussing controversial issues engender high self-efficacy in students along with a greater likelihood of adult civic engagement (Gould et al., 2011; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). Despite fears that broaching controversial issues reflects teacher indoctrination, Pace (2022) argued that "the antithesis of indoctrination [is engaging] students in examining significant questions from multiple viewpoints, weighing evidence from legitimate sources, deliberating on answers to those questions, and forming their own conclusions" (p. 27). Additional benefits identified from controversial issue coverage in the classroom and curriculum include higher levels of engagement (Bolgatz, 2005), improvement of critical thinking (Allen, 2018; Bolgatz, 2005), raised tolerance for diverse perspectives (Rubin, 2018), increased skills in

interpersonal communication (Hess, 2008), increased commitment to democratic values (Hess, 2009), and the ability to engage in civic discourse about issues with legitimately diverse claims and interests (Hess, 2008).

The Inevitability of Controversial Issues in Schools

Social studies education is often at the frontlines of the advocacy for discussing controversial issue in the classroom. The NCSS (2023) exemplified this advocacy through their encouragement that social studies classrooms must "be 'laboratories for democracy' where learners analyze historical and contemporary public issues that affect their lives, and engage in their local community, state, nation, and world" (para 2). The NCSS (2017) also stated that "classroom engagement related to controversial or ethical issues provides opportunities for elementary students to practice critical thinking skills while examining multiple perspectives" (para 17). Scholars have long tied the coverage of controversial issues in social studies education to helping prepare students for active civic engagement in a diverse society (Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2009; Journell, 2012; Pace, 2021; Parker, 2003).

While civic education is traditionally tied to social studies education, educators face the possibility of addressing sensitive topics and potentially controversial issues in nearly every classroom. Both teachers and administrators at all levels need to be aware of the pervasiveness and inevitability of controversial issues arising in a variety of educational settings.

Science. Beyond the traditional argument about teaching evolution in the classroom, there are many scientific issues that require ethical and moral reasoning in students. Topics such as climate change, genetically modified foods, and organ transplantation require students to consider complex problems that often do not have apparent, simple solutions (Chen & Xiao,

2021; Sadler, 2011). These types of potentially controversial issues require students to engage in dialogue and debate, use evidence-based reasoning, and practice moral reasoning as they form personal stances and decisions about these issues (Zeidler, 2014). Scholars have applauded how this process helps students to improve their argumentation skills (Venville & Dawson, 2010) and reflective judgment (Zeidler et al., 2019) while increasing their ethical sensitivity (Fowler et al., 2009).

Language Arts. Despite the fear that today's English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum is now more scripted and controlled than at any time in the past (White, 2020), there has been a push in Language Arts education for students and teachers to explore controversial issues such as sexuality and race. White and Khan (2020) stated, "These issues so directly affect students' lives, we submit that we should not be relegating them to a bevy of sources that may—and often do—present erroneous and harmful information" (305). Language Arts teachers have received outside support in this call, with the American Library Association (2006), the National Council of Teacher of English (2018), and the International Literacy Association (2019) all issuing statements supporting teachers who use potentially controversial materials in the classroom (Duggan & Schultz, 2018). While teachers express a fear of confrontations and challenges by parents, administrators, and community member for using these materials (Page, 2017; White & Khan, 2020), many are lauded for intentionally helping students to analyze the power and privilege that affects their lives and the world around them (Vetter et al., 2021).

Theater. The drama classroom and stage has long been lauded as a place for participants to humanize humanity through an introspective reflection and review of opinions and perceptions (Boal, 1992). Gallagher and Sahni (2019) described the effect of theatrical education on students in more detail:

[Theatrical education] accomplishes this redefinition or new imaginary through a robust

praxis of Freirean-like dialogic education—to name and dismantle structural

inequalities—and then to playfully but honestly embody alternatives in the interest of

producing and inhabiting a different reality. . . Beyond rhetoric, [the students] labour

over the kind of "universe of care" that will nurture citizens with a deep and abiding

commitment to social justice and systemic social change. (p. 640).

Through addressing potentially controversial ideologies, lifestyles, and issues such as sexual

orientation, racial tensions, and societal stereotypes, students can "redress negative societal

stereotypes that limit and oppress" (Tidey & Haupt, 2021, p. 240) while finding healing (Boal,

1985) through the creation of positive identity and interpersonal relationships (Halverson, 2010;

Wernick et al., 2014).

Additional Subjects. Educators and students confront controversial issues in far more

than the aforementioned subjects. Dance teachers must consider the effect and message behind

their music, choreography, and similar choices (Radin, 2022). A foundational skill that business

students must develop is the ability to respect alternative views while building bridges through

negotiation to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders and clients (Fisher et al., 2011; Fukami &

Mayer, 2019). English language teachers that introduce only taboo-free English Language

Learning (ELL) content such as family and travel risk presenting a fake culture to their students

(Banegas, 2011). Medical-based courses will review clinical, legal, and historical knowledge to

help students understand the scenarios behind abortions (Wolf & Broeker, 2022). Health

education stakeholders continuously debate, challenge, and shift what precisely "comprehensive"

sex education should be (Guarb & Lieberman, 2021; Miedema, et al., 2020). To anticipate

controversial issue selection and teaching as only occurring in social studies classrooms is akin

to thinking that reading occurs only in Language Arts. Learning how to listen to diverse ideas, productively negotiate meaning, and build empathy for others is a skill taught in every classroom.

Other School-Related Scenarios. Potentially divisive issues can arise outside of the classroom as well. Sports and club coaches may face decisions about transgender student participation on their teams (Buzuvis, 2021; Flores et al. 2020). Extracurricular organizations, such as school newspapers, may fear censure or removal of their work if administrators push back against the content they share and publish (Bobkowski & Belmas, 2017; Farquhar & Carey, 2019; Nicolini & Filak, 2022). Administrators often mediate between teachers and staff members over competition for school funding and spacing and over disagreements about policies, behaviors, and learning approaches (Lindle, 2020). Pronoun usage—which name to use when a student asks to go by a name different from their legal name—and who can use which bathrooms and locker rooms are additional issues that school leadership could confront on a regular basis (Renley et al. 2012).

Unexpected or Unplanned Controversial Issues

Brookfield (2006) described that even the most prepared educator, committed to a carefully constructed curriculum, still teaches within a classroom of "endemic unpredictability" (p. 8). Wansink et al. (2019) reported that authentic controversial issues often surface in sporadic and unexpected ways that teachers must respond to in real time. Teachers are not the only ones who might encounter unexpected controversial issues, as these issues arise not just in the classroom but also in the hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds, and other areas of the school (Journell, 2012). Indeed, as Journell (2018) signaled, it is often the students who raise these issues of their own volition despite educators' best efforts to remove potentially controversial

issues from the classroom. With greater access to news, digital media, and other venues of information that could lead to exposure to inappropriate or questionable images and content, students might encounter ideas and material that lead to questions (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Some issues are brought to light due to students interacting with one another through inappropriate comments or behavior (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). For example, Wilson et al. (1999) described how teachers were cautious about discussing the impeachment trials of President Bill Clinton due to the sexual nature of the issue, yet students were curious and eager to discover the details of that major national event. Students arrive at school eager to discuss these issues with the knowledge, often incorrect, that they learned from family, social media, and news (Hess & Posselt, 2002).

Unanticipated controversy can place educators in an unenviable position in which they must make "decisions about what is educationally desirable" (Biesta, 2010, p. 501) through determining whether the issues are valid (Journell, 2018). These moments can greatly increase the vulnerability felt by teachers as they internally consider their own potential insecurities about the issue, neutrality, community norms, and ability to address the issue (Cassar et al., 2021) while struggling to "make sense of the events in real time" (Kawashima-Ginsberg et al., 2022, p. 38). Even teachers completely avoiding an issue can viewed as a political stance (Callan, 2011; Reich, 2007). Despite these sporadic and spontaneous issues potentially causing turmoil within the classroom (van Alstein, 2019), discussions about them can be transformed into "unscripted teachable moments" for students (Cassar et al., 2023, p. 256).

Defining "Controversial"

Considering the gatekeeping role that teachers play (Thornton, 1989) in curriculum and classroom content, Journell (2011) wrote the following:

Our job as teachers is to make the best judgments we can about the content of our

courses. It is a challenging task that will be done with more integrity if we make public

our decisions about what questions we present as open or [settled] and the grounds on

which those decisions are based (pp. 121–122).

Not only does Journell advocate for addressing controversial issues, but he also calls for teachers

to explain how they identified and defined said issues as controversial (2011). That delineation

begins with a separation between controversial issues and controversial topics.

Controversial Issues Versus Controversial Topics

Before considering how issues are defined as controversial or uncontroversial, it is

important to distinguish the difference between a topic and an issue. Hess (2009) described a

topic as something "that unto itself does not spark disagreement" (p. 40), such as healthcare. An

issue, however, involves questions that can have competing viewpoints. For example, the issue

of whether healthcare should be free for every citizen of a community sparks disagreement

among populations. Simply broaching a topic like race, economics, and gender is not

controversial in and of itself. Instead, the controversy ensues from the potential policy decisions

that address problems within each topic. Hess (2009) is also careful to avoid conflating current

events with controversial issues so that we do not "think that the question of what is happening is

the same as the question of what we should do about it" (p. 42).

Open Versus Closed Issues

With that in mind, Hess (2009) has defined controversial issues as "questions of public

policy that spark significant disagreement" (p. 37). Some issues are considered open, meaning

they can be deliberated because they entail more than one rational point of view. An apt example

is whether the government should provide free health care. Other issues could be classified as closed because they have a generally accepted answer or point of view. An example of a closed issue is whether the incarceration and genocide of Jews in Europe or the incarceration of Japanese Americans in the United States was justified during World War II. Additionally, Hess (2009) asked whether the issues are "in the tip," meaning they engender various viewpoints within a shared society (p. 124).

In a similar vein, Camicia (2008) wrote that issues can be framed as controversial as long as a segment of a population finds something disagreeable or controversial about the issues. Specifically, within an educational context, Pace (2021) described controversial issues as "issues to which teachers do not have the answers" (p. xviii). Pace (2021) also described how her study participants used the term "controversial" to represent topics that elicited strong reactions due to their ties to violent conflict or the sensitivity of the topic. That finding reflects the very idea of controversiality as a social construct (Pace, 2021).

Categories of Controversial Issues

Hess (2009) organized potentially controversial issues into three categories: constitutional issues, equality and equity issues, and historical issues. Even if an issue does not fall under one of these umbrella topics, educators must prioritize issues that are relevant to and brought up by students (Hess, 2009). For example, when students ask about how a new controversial district policy, such as changing school boundaries, will affect their lives, teachers should consider teaching according to the students' needs and concerns rather than considering only the planned topic. Journell (2017) has argued that teachers should heed Rawl's (1993) advice to distinguish between public and private values and ensure that the issues students deliberate about are questions of public concern, not private concern:

Private values are the varying definitions of the good life held by individuals within

society. As long as private values do not infringe on the public values of society, the state

should not attempt to endorse or define any particular conception of the good life. (p.

342)

For example, the decision to join the military in the United States is a private concern and

should not be publicly debated. In contrast, the question of whether the United States

government should reinstitute the military draft is a public concern that is worthy of deliberation

(Hess, 2009, pp. 34–35).

Constitutional Issues. The first type of controversial issue advocated for is examining

whether laws, executive actions, and other government actions are legal or constitutional (Hess,

2009, p. 46–48). For example, though the Bill of Rights speaks of the right to bear arms, there

are various viewpoints on what that phrase means and whether the government can exercise

control over gun ownership (Hess, 2009, p. 57). Camicia (2008) wrote about comparing the

internment of Japanese Americans during World War II with the laws passed by Congress after

the September 11 attacks to identify when and if it is appropriate for the government to take

away rights from citizens. Pace (2021) described students' desires to discuss other Constitutional

issues such as a woman's right to an abortion, protests, and immigration policies.

Equality and Equity Issues. Another type of controversial issue that often arises in the

literature relates to issues about policies and actions that affect equality and equity. Students can

examine the effect of and opinions about laws such as affirmative action to observe if and how it

is achieving its aims (Hess, 2009). Students can analyze how governmental economic ideologies

and policies such as capitalism positively and negatively affect people differently (Camicia,

2008). Further issues such as gender, educational access, wage gaps, LGBTQ rights, policing,

and Brexit were considered in Pace's (2021) study of how controversial issues were being covered in the United States, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

Historical Issues. The final type of controversial issues t advocated for inclusion in curriculum and instruction are historical issues that, according to Hess (2009), are "clearly appropriate for the curriculum" (p. 38). As stated earlier, Camicia (2008) discussed that students could compare the historical internment of Japanese Americans with contemporary government policies and laws created to combat terrorism. Teachers are also encouraged to engage their students in deliberations about crucial historical decisions, such as the use of the atomic bomb in World War II (Hess, 2009). Multiple scholars have documented the struggles and successes some teachers faced as they confronted the effect the Troubles had historically and currently on their Northern Irish students (Barton & McCulley, 2005; 2012; McCulley & Barton, 2018; Pace, 2019; 2021). Helping students to understand how individuals and societies dealt with complex decisions, events, and circumstances is a powerful exercise that prepares them to do the same with contemporary concerns.

The Relationship Between Power and Controversiality

Apple (2004) described many crucial decisions, policies, and curriculums as conscious efforts to maintain the current hegemony. Camicia (2008) considered how "power relations and ideological stances" are direct influences on whether or not something is characterized as controversial(p. 302). Elaborating on that idea, Camicia (2008) described that the status of whether an issue is considered open or closed is "contingent and subject to a dynamic web of power relations" both in historical and contemporary times" (p. 312). Curriculum creators, textbook authors, and educators do not work in isolation but rather often must respond to these powers to keep their jobs and accomplish their work.

For example, when changes occur in educational settings, they are often implemented in a top-down manner that requires educators to adapt and reform without consultation (Fullan, 2007; Smith & Southerland, 2007). Many teachers can become confused and frustrated with these top-down implementations, resulting in resistance and rejection of the changes in favor of previous practices (Davis, 2003; Smith & Southerland, 2007). However, when the powers that enact change ensure that teachers have ample supportive resources and safe environments to implement changes in practical ways, more successful adaptation to reforms can follow (Janssen et al, 2015).

The Master Narrative's Effect on Controversiality

Social studies textbooks and courses have long promoted a master narrative that promotes the main characters of history as White, of European descent, Christian, and heterosexual (Crowley & King, 2018). For example, America was a land that needed to be discovered by the Spanish, English, and French despite millions of people inhabiting the land before their arrival. Social studies curriculum has equally marginalized and minimized those who are "othered" by the master narrative, such as women, Indigenous Peoples, enslaved Africans, and many others (Crowley & King, 2018). Loewen (2016) described that history textbooks often ignore controversy or contradictions of American ideas and instead focus on facts to be learned. These "neatly packaged master narratives deny students a complex, realistic, and rich understanding of people and events in American history" (Alridge, 2006, p. 662) and paint struggles of the past, such as the civil rights movement, as disconnected from the present. If students are presented only with this master narrative, what type of self-image will be imprinted for those who do not see themselves as part of said narrative?

To understand why the master narrative is so present in curricular materials, one must also question who is behind the creation and promulgation of this narrative. Simply answered, the master narrative reflects the dominant groups who have created a system that supports their own interests (Camicia & Franklin, 2011). Dewey (1916) described this effort as the "subordination of the individual to the institution" (p. 96). Apple (2004) continued that discussion by describing efforts to silence dissent and impose compulsory patriotism within schools. Foucault (1991) warned that this phenomenon is often hidden to members of society and thus has a greater effect than a blatant attempt at control of ideas and history.

Some educational gatekeepers legitimize and delegitimize epistemologies, peoples, and ideas through their use of explicit, implicit, and null curriculums (Eisner, 2002). The master narrative serves as the explicit curriculum wherein those in power are portrayed as the heroes of historical and contemporary movements. For example, the explicit curriculum lauds Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, while the implicit curriculum minimizes the efforts of thousands of others who advocated against slavery and risked their lives to free enslaved peoples. The null curriculum completely dismisses and ignores those who led slave rebellions lest dissent against the law, moral or immoral, be enshrined as a possible or even positive action (Eisner, 2002). Thus, rather than encouraging students to question who determined what truth is or why people and ideologies have been invalidated (Popkewitz, 1997), students can be led to believe that truth is found only in the curriculum and exams they encounter (Eisner, 2002).

Educators as Gatekeepers

Textbook publishers and curricular committees are not the only gatekeepers of knowledge and content in the social studies classroom. Teachers have considerable power over which curricular materials to emphasize and how to present topics or events (Thornton, 1989).

Fukami and Mayer (2019) particularly highlighted how teachers participate in this gatekeeping process through their determination of whether an issue is introduced, analyzed, and resolved in the classroom. These gatekeeping decisions can reflect the personal ideologies of the teacher (Knowles & Castro, 2019), leading to yet another potential power play over what students learn or do in the classroom. Even so, teachers are beholden to administrators, communities, district policies, and other external pressures, which leads to a measured approach, or, as Pace (2019) coined it, contained risk-taking. Additional pressure from hegemonic groups and individuals often leads to teacher decisions to completely avoid conflict in their instructional decisions. Reid (2009) compared these external pressures to child restraints in a car: teachers are merely passengers strapped down in the vehicles of power.

Educators, once aware of the existence and effect of the master narrative, should be incredibly selective about their curricular materials. Alridge (2006) encouraged teachers to move away from textbooks as their primary curricular sources and instead examine historical events through the perspectives of ordinary people. In a similar vein, Ladson-Billings (1998) called for the use of counternarratives wherein history is examined through the eyes of diverse ethnic, sexual, religious, and other backgrounds. Not only do counternarratives provide a more thorough glimpse into historical events, but they allow students of color to find comfort and healing in people that act as mirrors, reflecting their own cultural heritage (Style, 1996).

Educational Critical Consciousness

To challenge hegemonic control and ideals, educators first must experience an awakening of their critical consciousness that allows them to fully see the power relations, hegemonic practices, and social structures embedded in education and the broader world (Freire, 1990). Teachers can examine social practices and institutions that protect privilege and undermine

democracy within both their communities and schools (Shannon, 1993). They can review their own ideologies and discover how they affect their instructional and curricular decisions (Knowles & Castro, 2019). Specifically, Martell (2013) described the powerful effect that White teachers can have when they recognize their own Whiteness and intentionally work against hegemonic systems and practices that further White privilege.

Finally, part of this awakening of critical consciousness is determining whether those decisions truly serve their students or the dominant culture (Foucault, 1980). Ladson-Billings (2012) called on teachers to seek fluency in various cultures beyond their own. This expanded understanding of the lives, cultures, and challenges faced by their students allows teachers to create a curriculum that reflects the students' experience (Kincheloe, 2004). This type of curriculum would then lead to problem-posing educational opportunities wherein students engage in concerns and issues that hold their interest due to their relevancy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1980). In addition, Journell (2011) encouraged administrators to promote ideological diversity and political tolerance as equally valuable for students and learning materials and tests. That level of administrative support is especially vital when teachers might need to broach issues deemed controversial or against the popular ideology of the community (Hess, 2002; Journell, 2012).

Further Influences on Controversiality

The following sections review academic research that explores other actors, contexts, and approaches that may lead to an issue being labeled as controversial or uncontroversial.

Controversial as Determined by Setting. Conflicts between actors within the school and the outside community can occur when the issues addressed in school conflict with the

community's values (Shekitka, 2022). Parker (2003, 2010) has argued that these conflicts are necessary and productive aspects of citizenship education as students can naturally encounter more diverse peoples and viewpoints than they would in their homes. However, many school settings are reflections and products of the community (Foucault, 1991) that often censor, consciously or unconsciously, issues and ideas that do not reflect the beliefs and values of the general community (Journell, 2012). Rather than protect students from outside beliefs, this ideological homogeneity could potentially harbor and foster intolerance (Journell, 2012). Despite the potential positive outcomes that stem from introducing diverse ideas, belief systems, and issues, teachers report that they are less likely to engage in practices like controversial-issue discussion unless they feel ample support from their administrators and within the school setting (Dunn et al., 2019; Geller, 2020; Hess, 2002; Journell, 2012; Pace, 2021; Shekitka, 2022). Establishing a trusting and supportive relationship between teachers and administrators can allow each party to minimize the personal and professional risks as controversial issues are broached in the classroom (Journell, 2022; Pace, 2021).

Controversial as Determined by Student Interaction with the Issue. Moving beyond the broad community context, we must also consider the students' backgrounds and opinions when deciding whether an issue is controversial or not. A study by Washington and Humphries (2011) demonstrated that even though a teacher might find an issue settled or uncontroversial, the students might not agree with that viewpoint. Describing student reactions to racial issues such as interracial marriage, they wrote:

> In such instances, these seemingly uncontroversial issues become "controversial" within
> that particular setting because the students in question (1) openly express racist
> viewpoints, and (2) marginalize or exclude their classmates of color by expressing these

views. A tension may develop between students' rights to say what they think and other

students' rights to feel welcome in the classroom. (Washington & Humphries, 2011, p.

95)

Taking time to help students understand that some issues are open and others are closed in the

classroom decreased the amount of inappropriate or contentious comments from students when

sensitive issues were discussed in class (Washington & Humphries, 2011).

Controversial as Determined by Teacher Disclosure. Another key aspect of teaching

controversial issues is the consideration of whether a teacher should disclose their personal

stances on issues. Kelly's (1986) framework describes four categories that describe teachers in

considering their own opinions. Teachers who completely avoided discussion of all controversial

topics were within the exclusive neutrality group. Exclusive partiality involved teachers who

shared their opinion on an issue and then forced it on the students through projects or stance-

taking assignments. Neutral impartiality occurs when a teacher gives controversial issues a fair

hearing that considers all sides yet does not disclose the teacher's own opinion. Finally,

committed partiality involves a teacher's conscious decision to share their opinion while

ensuring that competing perspectives are equally valued and shared (Kelly, 1986).

Scholars expanded on and even challenged Kelly's (1986) framework, arguing that the

teacher's decision to disclose their stance is not simply an interaction between teachers and

students but "one between teachers, the state, and their constituents" (Journell, 2016). As context

changes and adapts, the decision to disclose becomes far more nuanced than Kelly's original

framework suggests (Geller, 2020; Hess, 2009; Journell, 2016). Niemi and Niemi (2007)

observed that while teachers may not be openly or consciously sharing their opinions, they could

be demonstrating their stances on current events and issues in other ways, such as making sarcastic comments or using derogatory names.

A recent study by Hornbeck and Duncheon (2022) described a school's reaction to the district's cancellation of homecoming due to the election of a non-normative gender candidate as homecoming royalty. Many teachers privately felt outrage over the events but chose not to publicly give their opinions. However, even small jokes and comments about the incident in the classroom sent a message:

> The teachers' discussion about the incident, in which they jokingly proposed hosting a "Big Gay Parade" the following year, demonstrated that these educators not only supported their students' act of resistance, but also felt some level of outrage themselves about what had occurred. Their endorsement of protest, even in jest, showed their recognition that the district's response was unjust. (Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022, p. 13)

Just as the decision to ignore or avoid an issue can be deemed as political action (Callan, 2011; Reich, 2007), the manner in which educators talk about events and ideas could be deemed as teacher disclosure and political action (Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022).

The risks teachers perceive within their school environment greatly affect their disclosure decisions (Pace, 2019), but Washington and Humphries (2011) found that their backgrounds and personal teaching philosophies are probably more influential than risks. Most teachers adopt neutral impartiality, finding it more comfortable to not disclose their opinions to ensure that all sides of an issue receive a fair hearing (Hess, 2004; Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Miller-Lane et al., 2006). These teachers worry that their opinions will influence how the students feel about the issue. While teachers are divided over disclosure, Hess and McAvoy (2009) found that 80% of

students believe it is acceptable for teachers to share their opinion. However, students also expressed their interest in hearing teachers' opinions as long as they do not feel forced to adopt those stances (Hess & McAvoy, 2009; Journell, 2011).

How Do Educators Determine Which Controversial Issues Are Appropriate for the Classroom?

First, educators must determine whether the issue is open or closed (Camicia, 2008). If the issue is determined to be closed, meaning only one rational view exists on the issue, then the teacher should give "directive" instruction that guides students toward agreeing with that rational view (Hand, 2008). Hand (2014) reminded teachers that "where a matter is decisively settled by relevant evidence and argument, teaching it as if it were unsettled to spare the feelings of those in denial about its resolution would be quite unjustified" (p. 82). However, if a teacher decides that the issue is open, they then must determine how open the controversial issue is. Journell (2017) described this next decision as the need for teachers "to thoughtfully evaluate the openness of issues and only present those deemed as open for deliberative consideration in their classrooms" (p. 341). This evaluation will help them decide whether to include the topic in their curricula and determine how it could be framed. Researchers have established three sets of criteria to determine how open a controversial issue is: epistemic, political, and politically authentic (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017).

Epistemic Criterion

When using the epistemic criterion to deem how open or controversial an issue is, teachers identify whether all opinions on the issue represent rational positions based on empirical evidence (Journell, 2017). This epistemic criterion positions rationality as the most powerful

characteristic in determining whether an issue should be broached—even at the risk of

disagreeing with the contemporary political climate or views of the community (Hand, 2008).

Should the teacher frame the issue in such a way that all rational opinions are legitimate, then

students can consider the arguments and personally reach a conclusion about the issue (Journell,

2017).

Political Criterion

The political criterion follows Rawls' (2020) argument that there must be a distinction

between public and private values. Teachers could ask themselves whether any of the positions

on the issue infringe on society's defined public values. By this measure, if private values are not

affecting public values, then no stance can be promoted by the government that represents

morality or "the good life" (Journell, 2017). This same rationale would apply to education in that

schools would not quash "rational deliberation or consideration of different ways of life" if there

is not an infringement of public rights by private views (Gutmann, 1999, p. 44).

Politically Authentic Criterion

The politically authentic criterion bases defining issues as controversial on whether "they

have traction in the public sphere" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 168). If the issues under

consideration are being weighed by voters on ballots, scrutinized by courts and legislative

bodies, or represented by political movements, they would be considered to have political

traction (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Thus, this approach places more importance on whether the

issue is being discussed by contemporary society and politicians rather than whether the views

are rational or whether it is a conflict of private versus public values.

Educator Support or Avoidance of Controversial Issues

Many scholars have explored the decision-making process behind the support or avoidance of controversial issues in educational settings. Though each group is affected in some way by internal and external pressures (Pace, 2021), it is important to identify influences on each separate group to distinguish how those pressures affect decision-making. The following sections review the scholarship on the factors that influence educator decision-making concerning controversial issues.

Teacher Perspective on Controversial Issues

A recent study by Cassar et al. (2023) described the mindset of teachers who were often comfortable and willing to address controversial issues in their classrooms. While some teachers would respond to these issues for practical purposes, such as maintaining classroom management or realizing that they could not return to their lesson without acknowledging the issue, most described that their personal self-image was the greatest influence on their behavior. For some, this internal struggle occurred when teachers feared how they would feel about themselves if they ignored the issue. However, Cassar et al. (2023) noted that the same struggle can result in avoidance of controversial issues when the teacher believes their public image would be damaged by addressing said issues.

Ho et al. (2017) explained that "a teacher's beliefs and sense of purpose can potentially be more influential than other more 'objective' constraints in teacher decision making" (p. 327). Cassar et al. (2023) described that, for many teachers,

> the support of the school community and a favorable wider context . . . are desirable but
> do not seem to be determining factors in terms of whether a teacher will address an

unplanned controversy, highlighting the extent to which teachers determine what actually

happens in the classroom context and the kind of climate they create. If a teacher wants to

address an unplanned controversial issue, the teacher will address it, irrespective of the

context and possible consequences. (pp. 257–258)

Journell (2018) also documented some teachers being willing to ignore the threat of possible

external repercussions because they believed that addressing potentially controversial issues was

important to their personal sense of appropriateness and self-image.

Not all teachers find ignoring potential repercussions an easy task. On the contrary, many

teachers refuse to compromise their jobs, family status, and sense of personal safety despite what

their internal values might dictate (Anderson, 2014; Dunn et al., 2019; Pace, 2021). Many

teachers steer clear of planned or unplanned controversial issues to avoid the emotional trauma

and potential confrontation that can occur (Pitt & Brushwood Rose, 2007). The social

consequences of broaching sensitive topics such as sexuality, cultural beliefs, and political

ideologies can be quite severe in some settings (Beck, 2013; Euronews, 2021). Some teachers

have expressed fear that even their best efforts could still result in students feeling

psychologically unsafe or marginalized when controversial issues that are personally relevant are

addressed (Beck, 2013). For many, this avoidance stems from a desire to protect the feeling of

safety that both teachers and students feel in the classroom.

Administrative Perspective on Controversial Issues

Numerous studies have explored the tendencies and perspectives of administrators

regarding controversial issues. One trend that has been identified is that administrators from

larger schools are more likely to promote multicultural education and the usage of controversial issues:

> Principals might draw the conclusion that the larger the school, the more a multicultural educational climate is needed, and therefore view it as being less divisive. Principals who are in smaller schools with a potentially less diverse student body might believe that the focus on multiculturalism could potentially be divisive between majority and minority students. This analysis might also show that because these smaller schools might exist in smaller communities with potential homogeneous populations or a strong political majority population, the support mechanism for multiculturalism could politically be low. Consequently, for possible political reasons, principals might consider it divisive.
> (McCray et al., 2004)

In addition to finding comparable results, Walsh (1998) linked being in an urban area with larger schools as an additional indicator of administrative support of controversial-issue usage.

Beyond the school setting, there are a few personal demographic characteristics that have been found to influence this administrative decision-making process. McCray and Beachum (2010) found that male administrators were more likely to support the idea that multicultural education should "be made available for all students, elevate the students' self-esteem, emanate from cultural pluralism, and help in understanding the social, political, and economic effects of society and schools on students of color" (p. 6). The more experience an administrator has in that role is also a positive indicator for support of addressing multicultural and potentially divisive issues (McCray & Beachum, 2010; Walsh, 1998). Educational experience and exposure are important factors, as Walsh (1998) described that the administrators that obtained education beyond their master's degrees were more likely to support coverage of controversial usage in the

classroom. Finally, Kahne et al. (2021) linked clear district support for tolerance and democratic education, through policies and hiring practices, to administrative support for the same issues.

A 2011 study by Journell explored how various administrators in different contexts approached controversy through policies and decisions during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Journell (2022) described a scenario in one school located in a heavily pro–Barack Obama urban area that many educators fear could result from a lack of clear policy and leadership support for diverse political ideas:

> The political climate became toxic for the few teachers and students who supported McCain. Any pro-McCain rhetoric, not just in classrooms but also in common areas of the school, was immediately shouted down, and McCain supporters were harassed to the point that some feared for their physical safety. Not surprisingly, many made the decision to keep their support for McCain to themselves. (p. 140).

Similar marginalization and potential harassment can be experienced by individuals that support the Democratic party and their candidates as well.

Journell (2011, 2022) noted that the leadership at some schools took a more proactive approach that was coined "cancelling controversy." Administrations began to restrict election-related activities, both inside and outside of the classroom, to limit potential conflict. One school went so far as to prohibit "social studies teachers from bringing in local voting registrars to explain the voting process in the county and register students to vote, something that the teachers reportedly did every year" (Journell, 2022, p. 141). This censorship and avoidance of political issues in schools has increased as the American political landscape has become more polarized (Dunn et al, 2019; Geller, 2020; Journell, 2022; Kauffman, 2016). For example, education about

LGBTQ groups is often censored out of fear that school support is perceived as a politically charged action within a community that might oppose such public support (McCray & Beachum, 2010) or simply because administrators might lack personal understanding about sexual and gender identity (Payne & Smith, 2018).

Educators and Contained Risk-Taking

There is no singular, correct answer as to whether educators should engage students in discussions of controversial issues. As stated earlier, avoidance can be equated to supporting the status quo, and broaching the topic can raise fears from some within society who believe educators seek to indoctrinate students in certain values and ideologies(McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Judith Pace's (2019) contained risk-taking theory acknowledges that educators consider powers and consequences when they choose (or choose not) to teach about an issue. If an educator sees zero risk to their job and well-being, then they are more likely to broach any topic or issue they deem fit for their class. Likewise, if an educator worries that teaching about an issue will lead to harmful consequences that are not worth risking, they will avoid the topic (Pace, 2019). In the middle of this spectrum are educators who practice contained risk-taking wherein they take account of what they are risking and carefully select when and how issues are discussed (Pace, 2019).

One of the primary risks that teachers have identified is fear of backlash from parents and administrators (Dunn et al., 2019; Geller, 2020; Journell, 2016; Payne & Journell, 2019). Additionally, potential community and administrator responses act as accountability checks to teachers' curricular choices and decisions—especially when it comes to the potential coverage of controversial issues. Though the pressure influenced by these groups varies according to the community and administrator context (Pace, 2021), teachers can be directly or indirectly

controlled in some way by these positions of power (Anderson, 2014). Washington and Humphries (2011) worked with various student teachers to discover potential ways to address these positions of power. One student described that her conscious development of positive teacher-student rapport served as a major step toward protecting her from potential community backlash stemming from controversial-issue coverage. Another helpful resource identified for teachers was taking time during preservice courses to help students discuss their fears about backlash, consider advice from mentor teachers, and discuss the power dynamics between teachers and administrators. Finally, the research team asserted that "the question becomes how such teaching should be approached, not if it should be approached" (Washington & Humphries, 2011, p. 110). Both teachers and administrators can benefit from these types of discussions that serve as proactive approaches rather than reactive approaches.

Administrators and Contained-Risk Taking

When it comes to thoughtful consideration of how decisions about teaching controversial issues are being made, principals and administrators play an integral role in the decision-making process (Glatthorn & Jailall, 2009). Despite rarely teaching directly in the classroom, administrators play key roles in student learning (Hallinger, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood & Sun, 2012) as they seek to establish a safe and inclusive educational environment (Astor et al., 2009; Dessel, 2010; Grissom et al., 2021; Journell, 2022; Moolenaar et al., 2010). In their efforts to establish this equitable education setting, administrators are frequently engaged in "daily exchanges over scarce resources and conflicting goals parleyed among schooling's competitive stakeholders" (Lindle, 2020, p. 1). The following sections review how administrator decision-making could be affected by the perceived risks and pressures from their superiors, external stakeholders, internal stakeholders, and their own values.

District and State Policies. Often administrative support for the curricular decisions of teachers, whether plentiful or lacking, can be directly tied to district or state policies (Journell, 2022). Boyle-Blaise et al. (2008) recognized that while teachers often blame principals for enforcing policy or influencing teacher decisions, principals, in turn, pinned the blame on their administrative superiors, creating a gatekeeping process controlled by the educational hierarchy. With the onset of accountability measures such as the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds acts, Xia et al. (2020) found that district influence on establishing curriculum in schools has greatly increased over the last 20 years. Some districts are proactive and try to avoid any potential controversiality in their schools by issuing blanket decrees, such as prohibiting teachers from discussing elections or political candidates they support (Journell, 2020). The requirement to enforce the policies and laws laid out by school boards and state legislatures limits the support administrators can give to how, when, and what controversial issues might be covered in schools. Teacher decision-making can greatly benefit from administrative guidance and trainings on these types of laws and policies.

External Stakeholders. Beyond the policies and expectations of their superiors, administrators weigh many other risks in their own decision-making processes. Principals take on an incredibly public role within the community such that their behavior and decisions are visible and analyzed by all school stakeholders (Mahfouz, 2020). In addition to the public anticipation that they resolve long-standing educational and community issues (Ripley, 1997), administrators are expected to address and take responsibility for all conflicts and mistakes within their building (Mahfouz, 2020). The increased access and usage of social media by all stakeholders only deepens the stress and scrutiny upon administrators (Mahfouz, 2020).

Like teachers, administrators must consider the reactions of the students, parents, and outside community before, during, and after discussing potentially controversial issues (Shekitka, 2022). Carpenter and Peak (2013) identified two ways that administrators work with parents. The first is parental involvement, wherein parents contribute to and supported school activities. The second is "parental issues," wherein parents contact or meet with principals about concerns (p.156). They found that administrators in their study reported spending more time on "parental issues" than any other tasks and spending limited time on "parental involvement" (p. 156). It becomes quite difficult for administrators to proactively build rapport within the community when most of their time is spent reactively responding to perceived issues from parents (Carpenter & Peak, 2013). Unsurprisingly, principals who experience a wide gap between their own job expectations and community expectations are more likely to experience burnout (Gmelch & Torelli, 1998).

Internal Stakeholders. Through closely collaborating with administrative teams and teachers, administrators can bridge the power imbalance that may exist among the parties by distributing decision-making and establishing trusting relationships (DeMatthew, 2016). Working together to gather thorough data, carefully review details of the issues, and make extensive evaluations (Summak & Kalman, 2020), administrative teams engage in a form of negotiation as they share their opinions and ideas to find an acceptable solution agreed upon by all (Aslin, 2018). Though some principals may feel that sharing power and decision-making processes challenges their sense of identity and role as leaders (Brezicha et al., 2020), Schechter and Shaked (2017) observed that principals found more success in enacting changes through their authentic consideration of the abilities and attitudes of their fellow administrators and teachers. The conscious inclusion of additional voices in the decision-making process concerning

challenging curricular and school issues leads to more equitable experiences for all internal stakeholders (Aslin, 2018).

Personal Values. Administrators should also gauge how their decision-making could be consciously or unconsciously affected by their own political viewpoints, aspirations, and values (Knowles & Castro, 2019). Often schools enforce stonewalling of diverse ideologies or practices despite having mission statements the emphasize developing civic tolerance (Stonebanks et al., 2019), and it can be difficult to gauge whether administrators are aware of unintended marginalization (Journell, 2012). As previously stated, increasing transparency regarding administrative decisions can have a positive effect on creating tolerance for both the adults and the students in the school (Journell, 2012). With those explicit boundaries, which often demonstrate administrative support, teachers are more likely to broach these topics in ways that promote political tolerance in the school (Mutz, 2006).

A Balancing Act of Risks. A study by Reingold and Baratz (2020) described the difficult balance and risks that one principal faced as an administrator in Israel. The principal answered to the Israeli Ministry of Education and also had to consider the cultural environment of Arab and Palestinian residents (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013; Reingold & Baratz, 2020). As an Arab working within a country with strong Jewish cultural and political values, the principal experienced a challenging decision-making process:

> As a non-conformist, the principal must act as a mediator, creating a dialogue between the dictates of Israeli society and the ethnic-cultural dimensions of the local community. Principals can also elect not to try to please either of these two pressure groups, and instead follow his/her educational and moral beliefs. Certain key questions arise from the foregoing: Who governs whom? Does the conflict govern the principal or does the

principal govern the conflict, and how? Does the group that an official belongs to govern

his/her conductor or is it the dictates of the establishment? (Reingold & Baratz, 2020, p.

97)

This dilemma illustrates how many educators, and perhaps administrators in particular,

must wear multiple hats that potentially dictate their decision-making concerning potentially

sensitive or controversial issues. This constrained reality requires leadership with "a degree of

moral courage" as administrators seek to foster success for all involved parties (Reingold &

Baratz, 2020, p. 98).

Finally, a major concern expressed by administrators is the perceived loneliness that

accompanies their responsibility to care for the emotional and relational needs of every

stakeholder, teacher, and student under their care (Kelchtermans et al., 2011; Maxwell & Riley,

2017). While some principals can confer with their administrative peers in the building

concerning decisions, administrators have asked that they be given more time to be around

principals at other schools to connect, build relationships, and create a support network with

whom they can share their concerns and challenges (Mahfouz, 2020). Doing so requires that the

district or school board reduce formal training and anecdotal meetings to prioritize building a

community of administrators. Without prioritizing professional development that responds to the

stated needs of administrators, districts and school communities increase the risk of litigation,

state monitoring, and loss of funding (Alkaabi et al., 2022).

The Effect of Charter Schools on Educator Decision-Making

Representing about 6% of the student population in the United States, charter schools

hold a unique place in the contemporary educational landscape (Zimmer et al., 2021). Friedman

(1955) originally introduced charter schools as a market-based school system, predicting that more families would have access to higher-quality schools as schools competed for students. Ideally, the competition would allow students to be more innovative because they would not have to directly answer to the local public-school boards (Zimmer et al., 2021). Shakeel and Peterson's (2021) longitudinal study followed and compared public school districts and charter schools between 2005 and 2017. Though previous studies described little difference between charter and district schools' test scores at a single point in time (Betts et al., 2018; Cohodes, 2018; Wang et al., 2019), the longitudinal results demonstrated significant gains in test scores– particularly for students from the lowest quartile of socioeconomic distribution, students in the western United States, and Asian, African, and Hispanic American students (Shakeel & Peterson, 2021). Arguing that student performance in charter schools "has trended upward by about a half-year' worth of learning," Shakeel and Peterson (2021) "suspect that improved teaching and learning environments in the charter sector account for most, if not all, of the improvement not explained by background characteristics" (p. 46).

As nonprofit organizations, charter schools have a governing board that builds a school mission and community by creating policies, appointing and supervising administrators, and controlling the budget (Campbell, 2010; DeKuyper, 2007). Around 35% of charter schools are governed by Charter Management Organizations, or CMOs (David, 2018). In other cases, school management is controlled internally to build trusting relationships between the school and its stakeholders (Lazaridou & Fris, 2005). Due to their frequent interaction with boards of trustees, principals at charter schools are often compared to superintendents of school districts (Dressler, 2001; Perry, 2008). Foreman and Maranto (2018) determined that principals that work under

CMOs were better trained for this expanded role, whereas principals of independent charter schools often learned on the job.

However, supervision from CMOs does not necessarily lead to greater autonomy for principals and teachers. A recent study found varying degrees of autonomy "with CMO charters reporting the least autonomy, innovation and standalone charter schools reporting the highest levels of autonomy[,] and traditional public schools falling in the middle" (Hashim et. al, 2023, p. 185). Using the interpretive frameworks provided by the governing board and the school mission, charter principals feel they have a greater ability to make a difference through decision-making that directly affects instruction, curriculum, and school improvement (Bickmore & Dowell, 2014; Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Gawlik, 2015; Gawlick, 2018).

While Cravens et al. (2008) expressed concern that handling superintendent-like duties might limit charter principals' instructional leadership, Gawlik (2018) found that those very duties were viewed as increased instructional leadership due to greater autonomy in budgeting, curricular decisions, and the hiring and evaluation of staff. In particular, the ability to hire teachers and staff that match a school's unique mission has been identified as critical to the success of charter principals (Caldwell, 2016). Hashim et al. (2023) described that principal "autonomy was used to shape a critical internal contingency for school success—teacher expertise, skills, and norms of professionalism" (p. 198). Having hired these faculty and staff, administrators then feel more comfortable collaborating with their coworkers with the joint recognition that failure to do so could lead to school closure (Foreman & Maranto, 2018).

Despite charter schools being theoretically touted as "experimental laboratories or lighthouses from which other schools can learn" (Hassell, 1999, p. 78), many studies have found that charter schools have not fully lived up to the expectations of teacher autonomy and

experimentation (Cynamon & Patel, 2024; Dinham et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2023; Lubienki, 2003). While acknowledging that charters have more organizational autonomy than traditional do public schools, Cynamon and Patel (2024) argued that "charters do not typically emerge out of a desire to experiment with different teaching or organizational techniques, but rather to increase the quality and output of existing educational practices by traditional educational achievement measurements" (p. 173). Dinham et al. (2018) reported that despite talk of increased autonomy in charter schools, it seemed there was greater control than before in the race to achieve standards.

Hashim and colleagues (2023) found that some charter schools that operate under CMOs have "highly prescribed organizational setting[s]" that intentionally recruit younger and less experienced teachers who accept lower autonomy due to their trust in the procedures and policies of the school (Hashim et al., 2023, p. 199). These newer teachers find satisfaction in their level of autonomy as they see the positive effect the CMO's systems and procedures have on student growth and achievement (Hashim et al., 2023). Skerrit (2023) emphasized the need for charter school leadership to clearly and successfully "[narrate] policy and vision" (p. 18) to help teachers view accountability and surveillance in a positive light. However, other studies have demonstrated that charter schools have greater teacher turnover rates than public school districts due to a lack of collective bargaining rights (Ingersoll, 2001; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015). This dynamic could lead to a revolving door of new and inexperienced teachers that weakens the cohesion and effectiveness of the school (Stuit & Smith, 2020).

Summary

This chapter explored how controversial issues can be used as an integral part of democratic education. Literature about what "controversial" means along with how issues are

delineated as controversial were reviewed. Pace's (2019) contained risk-taking theory was

introduced as a key component of decision-making regarding controversial issues. Finally, the

unique circumstances of charter schools and charter principals were introduced due to the

participants of the study being charter school administrators.

Chapter III: Research Methodology

Thematic Analysis Methodology

I used thematic analysis as the methodology for this dissertation. I interviewed seven participants about the effect of various contextual factors on their decision-making process concerning controversial issues (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). As Pace's (2019) contained risk-taking theory considers both internal and external influences on decision-making, using thematic analysis allowed me to explore and analyze these influences on administrative actions concerning controversial issues (Boyatzis, 1998; Elliott, 2018; Thomas, 2006). Pace (2021) described that the teachers she analyzed discovered that something identified as controversial reflected individual and societal beliefs, resulting in her contention that the idea of determining controversy is a social construct. Gergen (1985) has contended that establishing a set truth challenges the perceptions and experiences of others:

> The rules for "what counts as what" are inherently ambiguous, continuously evolving, and free to vary with the predilections of those who use them. On these grounds, one is even led to query the concept of truth. Is the major deployment of the term ["]truth["] primarily a means for warranting one's own position and discrediting contenders for intelligibility? (p. 268)

Rather than accepting only one interpretation of an idea or concept, such as what is controversial and what is not, constructivism explores how internal and external influences affect the perspectives of individuals (Searle, 1995).

Stake (1995) asserted, "Issues are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historical, and especially personal contexts (p. 17). Braun and Clark (2017) highlighted

that thematic analysis allows for an exploration of social, cultural, and structural contexts that influence individual experiences leading to a discovery of socially constructed meanings. In designing this study, I created a potential issues table that, in imitation of a similar table used by Baxter and Jack (2008), identifies social, cultural, and structural contextual factors considered by educators in previous research. The potential issues table is available in Appendix A.

During the study, each participant was given a month to record any experiences at their schools that they identified as controversial. The recounting of these experiences in the second interview served as the foundational data source for the study. I gathered additional data through both semi-structured interviews that further explored the context of each experience and the participant's perception of controversial issues in the school. It is important to note that the interview questions were specifically designed to discover and invite elaboration on risks rather than potential benefits of controversial issue coverage. This conscious exclusion of benefits allowed for a narrowed focus on potential negative outcomes of controversial issue coverage. A future study could explore positive outcomes.

Research Setting and Sampling Strategy

This study focused on working with administrators from secondary charter schools in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Focusing on a smaller sample size (Padgett, 2013; Schoch, 2020), I initially sought eight administrators that could be distinguished from one another through diverse personal and school demographics or experience/educational levels. The final number of participants that were interviewed was seven. Robinson (2014) explained that interview-based studies should have a smaller sample size due to the idiographic focus on individual responses to their settings and personal contexts. Finding seven participants that represented multiple contexts allowed for a focus on contextual effect on each person, furthering

Pace's (2019) exploration of how administrators experience contained-risk taking in their decision-making.

While decisions about controversial issues are not exclusive to high school administrators, I narrowed my focus to that group to seek connections between administrators over similar student age groups. Patton (2014) encouraged the use of selective sampling to ensure that the sample represents unique perspectives. I selected candidates that represent diverse personal and school contexts, such as gender, age, race, experience, rural or urban setting, and educational level. These candidates included three head principals and four assistant principals, based on the potential of an interesting contrast behind the decision-making process of head and assistant principals. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and the identity of their schools.

Participants

Agitha is a White female that became a principal after 18 years of teaching physical education, health science, and sociology. She has spent over seven years as an administrator and is in her sixth year in her role as an assistant principal. Agitha's charter school is in a rapidly expanding suburban area. She completed a master's degree, holds an administrative license, and is currently considering pursuing a degree from various educational doctorate programs.

Henry is a White male that specialized in special education and math during his eight years of teaching. Now in his fourth year of administrative work, he is an assistant principal at a Title 1 charter school in a suburban area. Henry has a master's degree and an administrative license.

Melanie is an African American female who taught business and technical classes for 28 years before becoming an administrator. With 10 years of administrative experience, she currently serves as the principal at an urban charter school with over 400 students. Melanie has completed a master's degree in library and information science and obtained an Administration Supervisory Certificate from a local university.

Table 1

Participant Backgrounds

Category	Agitha	Henry	Melanie	Brittany	Sydney	Mark	Jimmy
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Ethnicity	White	White	African American	White	White	White	White
Age	40s	30s	60s	40s	30s	30s	40s
Highest Educational Degree	Masters	Masters	Masters	Masters	Masters	Masters	Masters
Teaching Background	Physical Education, Health, Sociology	Special Education, Math	Business, Technology, Librarian	Math	Special Education	Financial Literacy	Math
Years Spent Teaching	18	8	28	14	5	4	14
Admin. Position	Assistant	Assistant	Head	Head	Head	Assistant	Head
Years of Admin. Experience	6	4	10	9	6	First year	2
School Setting	Suburban	Suburban	Urban	Suburban	Urban	Rural	Suburban

Brittany is a White female and serves as the head principal of a charter school that specializes in STEM education. She has served as the head principal for 6 years and previously served as an administrator for 9 years and a math teacher for 14. One of the main goals of Brittany's charter school is to help students graduate from high school with an associate degree,

with a success rate of approximately 75% graduates having completed their associate degree. Brittany has a master's degree in educational leadership and an administrative license.

Sydney is a White female in the second year of her current position as principal in a rural charter school that draws many students from a nearby urban area. She taught special education for five years before serving as an administrator for six years. Sydney works at a K–12 charter school and is the head principal of the high school group, which consists of about 300 students. Sydney obtained a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and has an administrative license from a local university.

Mark is a White male who taught financial literacy for four and a half years before switching to administration. Currently in his first year of administration, Mark serves as an assistant principal in a rural charter school with about 400 high school students. Before becoming an educator, Mark worked for many years as a retail manager for a large corporation. He completed a master's degree and holds an administrative license.

Jimmy is a White male and the head principal at a suburban charter school that serves students in grades 7–12. Jimmy taught math for 14 years and has been the principal at the school for 2 years. His charter school's mission centers on character and liberal arts education. Jimmy has a master's degree in math education and a current administrative license.

Data Collection Techniques

Each participant participated in three semi-structured interviews in addition to filling out four weekly surveys between the first and second interview. The first and second interviews, along with the surveys, deepened my understanding of the candidate's positions and experiences through a triangulation of data (Guba, 1981; Rossman & Wilson, 1994). The third interview

served as a member-checking interview to ensure accuracy of findings and the protection of the

candidate's identity and workplace.

Table 2

Sources and Purposes of Data

Data	Purpose
Primary Interview	A semi-structured interview provided an opportunity for guided discussion about major themes and participant answers (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The follow-up questions allowed for joint seeking of accurate interpretations as colleagues through clarification and elaboration (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yen & Inman, 2007).
Four Weekly Surveys	The weekly surveys served as one component of triangulation wherein participants identified any encounters with potentially controversial issues during the week (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014).
Secondary Interview	The second interview involved discussions about the experiences that participants identified in their weekly the surveys. Additional semi-structured questions were asked to further understand how participants approach controversial issue decision-making. The secondary interview serves as another source of data for triangulation purposes (Rossman & Wilson, 1994; Yin, 2014).
Final Interview and Member-Checking	This final formal meeting allowed participants to ensure their privacy while clarifying or correcting any answers that they believed were misrepresented (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). This member-checking also served as a key measure of internal validity (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Foundational Interview

My goals for the primary interview were to build rapport with each candidate, understand

the context of the participants' career and school settings, and introduce the idea of controversial

issue delineation. The average duration of this primary interview was 40 minutes. Though I

prepared specific questions for this primary interview, most of the interview was semi-structured

to place "boundaries around the study without unduly constraining it" (Marshall & Rossman,

2016, p. 83). This semi-structured format allowed me to control the interview and also explore

themes and participant answers(Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To further understand Pace's

contained risk-taking theory (2019) at the administrative level, I focused the interview questions

specifically on the risks perceived by participants in their decision-making. Follow-up questions

allowed for joint seeking of accurate interpretations as colleagues through clarification and

elaboration (Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Yen & Inman, 2007). A list of the prepared questions

interview questions is available in Appendix B.

Four Weekly Surveys

Another purpose of the primary interview was to introduce the weekly check-in aspect of

the study. Participants responded to a Qualtrics survey that was sent on a weekly basis for four

weeks. Each survey asked the following two questions:

1. During the school week, did you find yourself at any point determining whether an issue,

   idea, or event was controversial?

2. What was the issue, idea, or event?

A key component of the triangulation effort, these weekly check-ins gave each participant a

chance to move beyond hypothetical scenarios and reflect on actual events that may occur in

their work as administrators (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Collecting data from a variety of

sources enabled me to more thoroughly test Pace's contained risk-taking theory (2019) and the

effect of context on administrator decision-making (Guba, 1981).

Follow-Up Interview

The second meeting and interview served three primary purposes. First, each participant reflected on their initial answers about their delineation process along with the contextual factors they identified as key in this process. Second, the participants and I reviewed their responses in the weekly check-in surveys. Participants elaborated on the issues they identified, their delineation process, and other aspects of the scenario. Finally, I asked some prepared questions. The duration of the second interview depended on the number of experiences with controversiality identified by the participant. For example, one candidate identified only one instance of controversiality, and the interview lasted 20 minutes, whereas another participant shared five experiences with controversiality, leading to an interview time of 80 minutes. Like the initial interview, the follow-up interview was semi-structured to provide flexibility with the direction and emphasis of the conversation. A list of the prepared questions is included in Appendix C.

Final Member-Checking Interview

I conducted the final interviews after analyzing the data and compiling a rough draft of the findings. Having separated my findings so they were directly related to each participant, I gave them the opportunity to ensure their privacy and clarify or correct any answers they believed were misrepresented (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). This member-checking not only allowed the participants to ensure they were being authentically represented but also served as a key measure of internal validity (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Crabtree and Miller (1999) highlighted that this close collaboration allows participants to tell their own story rather than the study being an interpretation of their story. Finally, if a participant and I decided that extensive revision of the rough draft was required, I rewrote those portions and met with them again to review the new additions for accuracy and privacy concerns.

Data Analysis

I recorded each interview and transcribed the contents. I began the process by reviewing each experience described by the participants to determine which experiences might not be shareable due to specific details that threaten privacy and to identify similar experiences that could be merged or represented by one specific account. While some participants identified only one experience with a controversial issue during the month between interviews, others identified four or more. With that in mind, I ensured that I included an experience from each participant. In the case of similar experiences, I selected experiences for the study based on whether they had more contextual information than the others. Finally, I omitted a few experiences due to privacy concerns expressed by me or the participant.

After selecting experiences to be analyzed for the study, I first grouped participant responses from both semi-structured interviews by interview prompt and assigned each participant being a specific color to easily distinguish between them. After completing the transcription and question grouping, I used open coding to analyze the data for potential themes that might not be aligned with previously identified research or personal expectation (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Miles & Huberman, 1994). An example of a theme that was recognized through open coding was the participants' tendency to identify situations rather than content as examples of controversial issues in their school.

Following the open coding process, I used axial coding to organize and analyze additional connections that further shed light on the participant's answers (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I highlighted the responses in specific colors that aligned with specific themes within controversial issue scholarship, such as Pace's contained risk-taking studies (2019, 2022), unanticipated broaching of controversial issues (Biesta, 2010; Cassar et al., 2021; Kawashima-

Ginsberg et al., 2022), and the established sets of criteria for determining how open or controversial an issue could be (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017). I also sought to find and organize vivo codes that represented specifically worded answers that did not align with expected theoretically based codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This additional coding increased objectivity while opening the door to multiple interpretations of the data (Larsson, 1993; Sackmann, 1991; Yin & Heald, 1975).

Having constructed codes and categories within the data, I began to write about the themes and direct answers that addressed the research goals of the study. In the process of writing, I shared my findings with colleagues to examine potential bias and authenticity of the findings (Huberman & Miles, 1983; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Finally, as stated earlier, I met with each participant to review the findings and to ensure they accurately reflected the intended response of each participant (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Internal Validity

As just mentioned, I invited members of the dissertation committee and fellow scholars to review the data and findings to ensure internal validity. In these reviews, all data was anonymized to protect the identities of the participants. This peer examination and debriefing helped to identify and eliminate potential bias in my findings while ensuring that the findings I connected with any potential theories were truly reflective of that research. In addition, the third interview with participants served as an opportunity for them review and discuss the accuracy of my interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Stake (1995) highlighted the strength of this practice as the participants "help triangulate the researcher's observations and interpretations . . . [as the participant] is asked to review the material for accuracy and palatability" (p. 115). Our joint goal

was to ensure that the descriptions and interpretations could be recognized by others that share those common contexts and experiences (Sandelowski, 1986).

External Validity

The intentional selection of a thematic analysis served as a generalizing tool due to the replication of the methods with multiple participants (Hayashi et al., 2019). Thus, the greater the number of potential participants, the greater the potential for the findings to be transferable or applicable to similar contexts and posited theories (Guba, 1981). I described this study explicitly to allow future researchers to evaluate and potentially replicate the study in their own endeavors. The comparability (Stake, 1994) or transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings is also tied to my ability to provide ample contextual information about each participant so that others can transfer the findings to their own settings (Krefting, 1991). Within the findings, each participant was given a pseudonym. Through the third member-checking interview, participants also ensured that they and their contexts were accurately represented without revealing their identity.

Reliability

Before holding any formal interviews with participants, I presented the potential questions to each member of my dissertation committee for their review. These reviews ensured that the questions were worded to truly reflect my intended meaning while also verifying that each question could be interpreted the same way by potential participants (Guba, 1981). Variation in answers is anticipated in qualitative research, yet the reliability of the results is directly tied to ensuring that the variation is due to their contexts and experiences, not to the interview method (Field & Morse, 1995; Krefting, 1991).

Objectivity

I selected two members of my dissertation committee to ensure accurate representation of administrators. Dr. Alyson Lavigne is an Associate Professor in the Instructional Leadership branch of the Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) department at Utah State University (USU) and agreed to help me both understand and accurately represent an administrative perspective. Dr. Breanne Litts, of the Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences department at USU, has years of experience ensuring that research accurately represents participants and benefits all parties. The recent naming of Dr. Steven Camicia as Chair of the School of TEAL department at USU also allowed me to include another administrative perspective in this study. The combination of my own reflexivity and their auditing of my process and findings (Guba, 1981) ensured the results reflected the experiences and voices of participants rather than being a product of my own design.

Finally, the research plan allowed for multiple forms of triangulation to more fully explore the perspectives of the participants (Guba, 1981; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The primary interview provided me with the opportunity to better understand the context of each participant while building rapport. The second interview and check-in review allowed each participant to provide new, reflective data that helped both parties understand how the decision-making process plays out in their lives. Thus, in the final interview, the participants and I were more comfortable analyzing responses and findings together due to the extended time and contacts we had shared (Krefting, 1991).

Positionality Statement

Even after serving for four years as a teacher educator and college professor, my language and mindset in regard to teachers demonstrate that I still view myself as one of them. In discussing teachers with university peers in conversations or conferences, I tend to align myself, even unconsciously at times, with the teachers by using the word "we" rather than "they." This mindset influences my perspective and interpretations of studies. I am genuinely trying to understand administrator decision-making because, for too long, administrators felt like "others" in my life. Some interpretations of the data probably stem from my teacher's perspective, while others stem from a teacher educator's perspective. Even so, I am grateful this study gave me the opportunity to work with and learn from administrators who also seek to help teachers and administrators in their joint pursuit of providing a relevant and transformative educational experience.

Chapter IV: Findings

In this chapter, I review the findings from the thematic analysis I conducted with secondary charter principals in the Rocky Mountain region. The research I conducted focused on the delineation of controversial issues and the subsequent decision-making process participants used to approach controversial issues in the curriculum and school. I have organized the data gathered from the various interviews and weekly surveys into three sections that present the findings as answers to each research question.

Research Question #1: How do administrators determine what makes a potentially controversial issue appropriate or inappropriate for classroom use?

Introduction

I gathered this data from the first and second study interviews. I asked participants to define the term "controversial" and provide examples of controversial issues they had encountered in their work as administrators. After being introduced to Pace's (2019) contained-risk taking theory, participants identified and discussed the risks they have experienced and perceive for both teachers and administrators as they confront potentially controversial issues in the curriculum and schools.

How Do Charter School Administrators Define the Term "Controversial"?

As stated, each charter principal was asked to define the term "controversial." Participants' answers are displayed in Table 3. Their answers generally identified opposing or conflicting viewpoints as a crucial element in defining "controversy"; however, simple disagreement did not necessarily equate with controversiality for many of the principals. Terms such as "biased extremes," "intense reactions," "extreme opinions," and "strong feelings"

demonstrated that potentially controversial issues often engender passionate responses in both

teachers and administrators. Sydney, Brittany, and Melanie based their answers on community or

social reactions in creating potential controversy, while Agitha, Jimmy, and Mark described

internal or family values as being at the core of the conflict. Finally, Henry's response stands out

in that he believed both sides should have "a basis or something that is equal in their argument"

that, when shared, leads to a difficult "judgment call one way or the other."

Table 3

Participant Definitions of Controversial

Participant	How Do You Define the Term "Controversial"?
Jimmy	"There's some sort of opposing view about an interaction. Maybe values are in conflict or perceptions are in conflict. Desired outcomes are in conflict."
Mark	"Something that I think would belong in the home to be taught versus in school. So, things that are extremes and biased, I guess, would be a huge indicator for me [if something] has potential to be biased one way or the other."
Sydney	"I would define it as something that could cause an intense or extreme reaction in a fairly sizable portion of the population."
Brittany	"I generally think of that as social issues that people have extreme opinions about."
Henry	"When there are multiple perspectives of something and there's multiple viewpoints of that perspective, and each viewpoint has a basis or something that's equal in their argument. And whether they conflict or not, they both have ways of sharing that information equally to the point where it's hard to make a judgment call one way or the other."
Agitha	"At first I think of maybe differences of opinions, but I also think of words like 'personal' and 'emotional.' 'Political.' I think of the word 'values' when it comes to controversial. Anything that maybe goes a little deeper and becomes closer to the core of someone's either personal self or their values."
Melanie	"Topics that come up where there might be strong feelings on one side of the community or not strong feelings on the other or issues that can actually divide people and communities."

What decision-making process do charter principals use when considering the appropriateness of an issue?

Three themes emerged as the charter school principals considered their own decision-making processes in regard to controversial issues. The first theme was a desire to deeply understand the scenario before making a decision. If a controversial issue has arisen during class, Brittany talks with the student or parent that brought up the concern and the other students in the classroom to understand their perspectives. Then she sits down with the teacher to "find out what the learning objective [was] for, what the topic was, how it was presented, and what the discussion was from the teacher's point of view," as do the other principals. Jimmy added that he seeks to ensure that discussions are not occurring just for the sake of controversy, because, he said, "We want students to be confronted with tough topics so that they can be taught how to handle those tough topics in a productive way." Agitha stated that if she discovers, at this point, that an issue is "not tied to the standards or the topics in that class, . . . then it probably is not appropriate."

Sydney provides an example of the second theme through her focus on how the issue was presented and how the community has already or might react to its presentation:

At the end of the day, I'm the one that receives the heat. I'm the one that receives the angry phone calls. I'm the one that defends. If after investigation, I feel like educationally the scale is going to tip heavier, then I'll give it a yes. If not, then it's not worth the risk for my teachers, students, or school.

Melanie signaled a similar concern with how the issue might affect the teacher, the student, the student's friends, the parents, and the school community. Sydney's and Melanie's answers both

demonstrate that an issue's effect might matter more in their decision-making process than the need or desire to present the issue.

The final and third theme manifested itself through the expression a desire to have a conversation with other administrators in the building so that, in Mark's words, "it's not just one person making a decision." Henry expressed that he is "fortunate to have a few [fellow administrators] to bounce ideas off and thoughts, and [that they] can work through these concepts together." The administrators can discuss the results of the investigation, review the school's policies, weigh the effect of potential decisions on the school community, and potentially create new policies that help the school should similar issues arise. If the administrative team decides the issue is appropriate for use, Mark's team wants to "make sure that [they're] presenting it in a way, if [they] do decide to move forward, . . . that's not biased and just factual and straightforward." Finally, Brittany tries to educate the parents, teachers, and students about the outcome so they can understand why the decision was made.

The Effect of Potential Risks on Teacher Decision-Making

While considering their decision-making process, the participants recognized the increased scrutiny that teachers have been placed under in recent years. Agitha worried that the expansion of social media, the influence of media, the greater emotional sensitivity in the population, and the heightened caution of parents combine to make it "very difficult to be an effective educator" right now. Brittany called attention to the greater need for educators to acknowledge and understand the wide range of cultural, religious, and personal backgrounds of their students so they can "weave and know just how far to go" or "shy away from hot button topics that might get out of hand." Henry perceived how the fear of potential retaliation, or the loss of their job, affects educators' desire or ability to express their opinion on topics as well.

The charter principals are well aware that the potential consequences of teacher decision-making go well beyond the classroom.

Risks Prioritized by Teachers, According to Charter School Administrators

Four of the charter principals considered job security to be teachers' first priority. Agitha observed that concerns over job security has led teachers to be "very, very nervous about controversial issues," causing them to "come to [administrators] with the smallest of issues because they want to make sure they're doing the right thing." While Henry described that 90% of these conversations are "just checking" before teachers approach an issue, some teachers express concerns about the outcome of a lesson and approach Henry seeking to know if they handled it correctly or needed to backtrack or fix anything. Henry believed these instances are caused by a feeling "in the forefront of their mind that if they handled this the wrong way, then is their job or career in jeopardy?"

This fear is exacerbated by what Jimmy described as a potentially "exhausting and energy depleting" encounter with a parent. Sydney emphasized the concern "Is this going to somehow get home and if it gets home, will it make mom and dad mad?" Sydney believes that to get their students "to feel" and "really internalize what is being taught, teachers must consider whether their lessons will inspire engagement or "trigger bad emotion." Brittany described this concern as not necessarily a fear of parents' reactions but rather as a lamentable miscommunication or perception of the care and support teachers give to their students. thus, Jimmy believed that many teachers realize that "it's not worth it and [they'll] just try to do something else instead and avoid [the potentially controversial issue]." Melanie expressed that even when the administrative team supports a teacher's decision, she still sometimes

recommends avoiding the potentially controversial issue based on the perceived sensitivity of the students, parents, or school atmosphere.

Mark offered a unique perspective with his belief that most teachers "are prioritizing what'll be easier on them and what supports them in their individual classrooms, not necessarily the system as a whole." Mark has observed that this potentially myopic approach can lead teachers to believe that what works in their classroom should be adapted to all classrooms or that "everyone should have that same system or opinion just based on their own personal experiences." According to Mark, doing so not only potentially discounts the perspectives and experiences of their fellow teachers but can also lead to conflict with an administrator that has to prioritize the "system as a whole."

Risks Administrators Hope Teachers Prioritize in Decision-Making

Various charter principals expressed a desire for teachers to conduct a personal audit about the potentially controversial issue before approaching it. Most of the participants' responses were posed as questions they hoped teachers would ask themselves during their decision-making process. This list of questions appears in Table 4, along with the for each question.

Table 4

Personal Audit Questions Recommended by the Participants

Personal Audit Question	Rationale Behind Question
Should this issue even be covered? Does it fit the standards or help the students?	Melanie: "If it's in the state standards, then that is very supportive of what the teacher's going to teach. If it's not in the state standards, that's when you're probably going to run into trouble."

Is it my responsibility to have this type of conversation with the students?	Henry: "We do have a level of trust that we have with our teachers, but we still kind of want to keep them contained in terms of what kind of conversations they can have in order to restrict any potential problems with people disagreeing or other issues, and kind of blaming the school for that."
Do I personally think this issue should be taught, or am I hesitant?	Agitha: "If it's questionable when I'm thinking of presenting [an issue] or teaching it or using it in my classroom, then I probably shouldn't do it . . . especially if [a teacher is] licensed, trained, or going through licensing, there's that factor there where they can ask like, oh, I don't know if I should teach that."
How much do I know about this issue?	Sydney: "Sometimes what I find is teachers will want, they have good intentions, but they'll dive in on something they don't know well enough that it gets out of hand."
Have I invited another teacher or administrator to review this issue as well?	Agitha: "I call it 'more eyes.' So, if I'm determining how I should approach a lesson, it's always good to have eyes, especially by maybe someone more seasoned. . . . The reason things go south is because a lot of times there isn't content collaboration."
Have I invited an administrator or other teacher to be present in the classroom as I teach about this issue?	Jimmy: "The teacher can have a member of the admin in that classroom as another just set of adult eyes to make sure that how [the issue is] being taught is academic, that the purpose is clear."
What burden might teaching this issue place on other teachers?	Brittany: "A good [comparison] is the timing of a field trip. Great, these students are really going to benefit from this, but I'm doing it the week before finals. What other factors are involved in making that decision and what is the burden that it's putting on my colleagues by scheduling this field trip at this time?"
How will this issue affect my students and their families?	Melanie: "I mean, I meet students who use drugs at home, parents use drugs. But as a teacher, if you're teaching a health class and you're trying to teach against the ills of drugs, that might be controversial to some students."
In what light could this issue place the school?	Mark: "Is this going to cause issues for our school? Is this going to slander our name in any way?"
Have I prepared my students sufficiently for this issue or content?	Melanie: "When teachers do have to discuss controversial issues like [those in] the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the teachers are very good about setting it up and not just diving into the book headfirst. They give the students a heads-up. Some of them will even contact parents and let

> them know [they're] going to be discussing a particular
> book."

The Effect of Potential Risks on Administrator Decision-Making

I conducted the second interviews with participants about a month after the first interviews, so they would have adequate time to focus and reflect on their personal experiences with making decisions related to controversial issues. In this section, I present the risks participants identified in their own decision-making processes and the risks participants believed administrators should prioritize

Risks Identified in Administrative Decision-Making Concerning Controversial Issues

As the primary leaders of the school, the charter principals often cited a concern for how potentially controversial issues might affect internal and external perceptions of the school. Agitha phrased this concern as "In what light does this put the school?" She continued by saying that being a parent also affects her decision-making process in that she considers the perspective of a parent or guardian and asks herself, "What would I want to have done? What would I want to be communicated to me? How would I want to be involved?"

The charter principals also identified the need to consider not only parental reaction but also community reaction. Jimmy illustrated how his familiarity with the political ideology and values of his community might affect his decisions about a potentially controversial school play:

> We really consider our demographics. We have a very conservative, overall, very
>
> conservative community. So, if a school play is kind of risqué or coarse in some way,
>
> we're going to think and say, okay, when our parents sit down here and they're going to

be bringing their little kids with them and their grandparents and they sit down, is this

going to make them feel uncomfortable? Well, that's going to influence the plays that we

approve.

The participants honored the significant role of parents in their charter school community but

also recognized and prioritized the opinions of additional stakeholders such as extended family

members, local government leaders, and families that could potentially select their school for

their children in the future.

Internally, the administrators considered what Mark described as "blowback or

complaints" from their staff and teachers. Sydney set out how her familiarity with individual

teachers and staff members affects her support for potentially controversial issues in the

classroom:

Which staff member are we talking about? Which teacher? A teacher that struggles with

classroom management, for example, wants to dive into something that could be difficult

to get right. I would definitely advise them maybe [to go] a different direction. A teacher

who has amazing relationships with students and has their classroom well under hand and

understands something in a nuanced way, I think can take more risk, if that makes sense.

An established level of trust with the teacher in question factors greatly into Sydney's

willingness to support their approach to potentially controversial issues. Additionally, the charter

principals want to be familiar enough with their student population that decisions align with what

is best for the students. Prioritizing student well-being is not necessarily rooted in protecting

students from difficult issues but rather in a desire that the potentially controversial issue, in

Mark's words, helps the students become "better citizens . . . [and] better prepared for the real world."

Just as the participants hoped teachers would undertake a personal audit about their position and understanding of the issue, Henry described his own introspection: "I consider how much information I know personally . . . that is fact versus my opinion, and [think about] at what point [should] I share my thoughts or opinions over what is fact and express it that way." In trying to make the best decision, Henry wants to ensure he cautiously approaches the issue so that his opinions do not overtake the need to fully understand other potential perspectives on the issue.

Risks Prioritized by Administrators

Five of the seven participants responded that their first priority in considering controversial issues is the effect on the entire school. Sydney described her desire to "make judgements that can be somewhat universalized, which is almost, it really is impossible for a lot of these situations." Similarly, Henry expressed the desire to "make sure that [they're] [handling issues in] the correct way so that everyone is treated the same" or "to handle a situation [in such a way] that all parties are satisfied with the outcome, to the best of [administrators'] ability." Mark expressed that sometimes this means considering what is "best for students as a whole, and not necessarily one individual student. Is this system going to be better for all students in all classrooms and not just this one instance?" Even as she reflected on doing what is best for the entire school community, Melanie cautioned against decision-making that minimizes the effect on individual students, because "sometimes their experience at school is the only good thing that's happening in those students' lives."

In seeking a decision that is equitable for the students, the participants recognized that teachers, staff members, parents, families, and community members might all interpret the decision differently. Sydney remarked that, just as teachers do, principals must ask themselves, "Will this make parents mad or not?" Agitha expressed this concern in terms of "failing to serve the families." She also emphasized the "difficult balance . . . to consider enrollment and retaining [their] students while also upholding policy and maintaining the safety of [their] school." Brittany expressed that weighing the amount of information needed to constantly balance the needs of each current and potential stakeholder while predicting their reactions is "the hardest part for [her]." She explained that charter principals experience decision fatigue because they must consider so many perspectives.

Finally, the charter principals discussed the need to ensure their decisions are aligned with state policies. Sydney commented that she had to keep up with the constant new educational laws and policies, as "some of those bills, if they were to pass, would have really large impacts" on her school and decision-making. Additionally, Jimmy expressed, "We don't want to get in trouble [with the] school board. That's my boss. I don't want to do something that's going to reflect poorly on me and my judgments." Aside from Jimmy, the only other mention of job security came from Agitha, who commented that she was not worried about losing her job or facing potential reprimands because "[she] feel[s] like [she's' had enough experience where [she] can make reasonable decisions."

Summary

This first research question for this study explored historical and hypothetical experiences with controversial issues in schools. The participants defined the term "controversial" and described how they have recognized or might recognize a potentially controversial issue in their

schools. They also identified the risks that teachers and administrators might consider in their decision-making processes and prioritized those risks for each group. The second research question shifted from hypothetical scenarios to review experiences identified as controversial by the participants during the month between the first and second interviews.

Research Question #2: How did the charter school principals arrive at a response concerning controversial issues during our month of research?

For a four-week period, each participant received a weekly survey asking them if they had encountered any potential controversial issues that week. In the second interview, I followed up on their responses to better understand the issue and to learn about each participant's decision-making process in relation to the experience. Due to the sensitive nature of these accounts, I have used pseudonyms to present these experiences in an effort to protect the identities of anyone involved. A table that delineates each issue, how the administrator knew it was controversial, the risks they considered, and the outcome is included in Appendix D.

Participant Experiences with Controversial Issues During the Study

Experience #1:

A social studies teacher reached out to her principal before using a first-person narrative from a World War II soldier that described the scene before him as he entered a village that had been bombed. The portion in question was his graphic description of some dead children in the village. The teacher wanted to use the book but was unsure if "the primary text was worth exposing them to this gratuitous kind of violence." The principal and teacher deliberated about the situation.

First, the administrator asked the teacher if the material covered course standards and if it aligned with the charter school's mission. Second, they reviewed whether society would consider the book to be quality literature. Third, they examined the description in the narrative to determine whether it portrayed violence as a desirable quality and whether the content was unnecessarily gratuitous. Finally, they discussed whether the teacher could reach her goal of

accurately portraying the horrors of war without using that specific portion of the text. After the discussion, they "decided that if you read the text, [the author] actually describes the village and the damage and the loss of human life prior to the really more poignantly graphic paragraph with the children." They identified where the teacher should end their review of the account to avoid presenting the questionable content to the students.

Experience #2

A charter school allows their upcoming graduates to create a senior ad in that year's yearbook. One senior ad contained a pentagram symbol and was flagged by the yearbook committee for administrative review. The principal commented, "It was interesting because we have other students that have put other religious symbols in their senior ads, and we let those go. But this one was flagged." The principal met with their administrative team, the student, and the student's parent to better understand the situation.

The administrative team felt that the symbol should not be allowed and that all religious symbols should be removed from the senior ads. They discussed potential community reaction to the ad and the possible pushback that could result. The principal explained, "After talking to the parent and student about what [the symbol] means to them, I made an executive decision to keep [the ad]." She knew her decision ran counter to her administrative team's decision, but, she commented, "I as an administrator, didn't feel like it was ethical to allow one religious symbol if we weren't allowing all of them, even if that religion is seen as controversial by many in the community." Upon reflection, the principal believed the additional information provided by the student and parent would not change the administrative team's opinion. After this experience, the administrative team decided to change senior ads for next year because they had grown tired of dealing with similar issues.

Experience #3

A governor sent an email to all schools in the state outlining the findings from numerous studies demonstrating the negative consequences of allowing students to have or use phones in the classroom. The governor encouraged each school district and charter school to reassess their phone policies so that student learning would not be impeded by cell phone usage.

Shortly after discussing this email with their team, an administrator opened the Facebook pages of other school districts and read comments from parents about implementing a stricter phone policy. Doing so helped the administrator gauge potential reactions from her own community.

The administrator decided to look closer at the data concerning cell phone usage and learning, because "sometimes data can go one direction, and if you just only look for certain types of data, you can support your decision." To help her make an informed decision, she specifically looked at studies and data opposing the governor's call for stricter cell phone policies. Worried that a hasty decision would hurt more than help, the administrative team is still assessing the situation as of the time of this writing.

Experience #4

A vice principal of a charter school filled in as a substitute teacher in a class. A couple of students had their cell phones out, and the vice principal asked them to put the phones away. The students took their phones out again later in the class, and the vice principal took the phones and told the students that they could get them back at the end of the school day. One of the students was the daughter of two teachers that worked at the school. The vice principal was surprised when the teachers asked for the phone back during the school day. The teachers disagreed with

the vice principal's decision to take the phone away, citing the head principal's statement in a meeting that the decision should be left to the teacher. However, the vice principal knew that the school's handbook said no cell phones were allowed in the classroom.

The vice principal believed that the teachers/parents were mistaken, because the vice principal had followed school policy and was the teacher in the classroom during that period. The vice principal returned the phone to the teachers/parents when they asked for it. The vice principal reflected, "I would have never kept the phone from them," explaining that administrators always returned phones to parents that requested them. However, the teachers/parents framed the disagreement as if the vice principal had not followed the head principal's instructions. Despite following all protocols instituted by the head principal and stated in the handbook, the vice principal remarked, "I just did not want to battle with them."

Experience #5

A student athlete was accused by the opposing team of making racist comments during a basketball game. Upon review of the video tapes of the game and after questioning the players and coaches, the administrative team did not find evidence to back the accusation. The principal described the difficulty of the situation:

> The controversial part for me is at what point do we push back and ask the accuser why that type of thing was mentioned when there's no evidence or anything pointing towards something bad. So that's where I find it controversial because racism obviously is a big controversial thing and we take it extremely seriously, especially if our school's being accused of certain things, but we also want to make sure the other side is accountable for the reports that they've given.

The principal wanted to ensure they had addressed the issue while also protecting their students and school from seemingly false accusations.

The principal met with the school's administrative team to determine whether to push back against the accusations, ask for their evidence, or drop the issue altogether. If no evidence was provided, the administrative team wanted to ensure that "the other person who made the claim got the help they needed if they made false accusations." The team was also concerned that if they pushed back, there would be increased public scrutiny and pushback from the opposing school. After having an unproductive discussion with the opposing athletic director, the school decided to not push back any further than they already had.

Experience #6

During the holiday season, a teacher decorated their classroom door with a paper tree and wreaths that used tardy slips as ornaments. Teachers and staff from the school were concerned that these publicly displayed tardy slips violated Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws since others would know that these specific students were tardy more often than other students. Despite finding that the slips contained only first names, which did not violate FERPA laws, the principal asked the teacher to either obscure the names or remove the ornaments. The principal explained, "It was just a resolution that could be made quickly . . . and I just decided that was the best decision with the short amount of time that we had and to just kind of be more safe than sorry."

Experience #7

A social studies teacher submitted a movie as part of her curriculum that contained a scene of children bathing outside in a bucket that showed rear nudity as they ran back to their

homes. The teacher told the principal that they felt the movie "perfectly aligned with the curriculum" and that it would be a "great chance to expose students to the culture of that time." The principal said, "My perception of the nudity is that it is probably pretty innocuous since it's a rated G movie and the setting was in rural France in the early to mid-1900s." Even so, they were hesitant to allow the movie to be shown as the school was in a very conservative community.

The principal believed the content could be perceived as offensive, saying, "I could envision me getting two or three emails from parents and . . . having to explain why [the movie] was allowed." Considering the potential headache of community fallout, the principal responded, "It's not worth it. Just pick a different movie." Upon learning that the scene could be edited out of the movie, the principal allowed the edited movie to be shown.

Experience #8

A student was taken off an Individualized Education Program (IEP) plan because the parents "expressed that they were tired of the stigma associated with their student being part of Special Ed." Now the student pits the parents against the teachers whenever he does not complete assignments at school:

> When he goes home and [his] parents ask him about [an assignment], he gives an excuse about how he is feeling emotionally unsafe. And then [the] parents get mad at the teachers for making him feel emotionally unsafe to the point where he's unwilling to turn in his work when in reality he just didn't want to do it."

The principal viewed this student as having "a victim mentality," yet the parents continually blame the school and teachers for the student's academic behaviors. The vice

principal that had been working with the family encouraged a strict approach, but the principal decided to give the family a fresh start and withhold initial judgment.

As the struggle has continued over many months, the principal expressed concern that the parents would "say that somehow [the school] forced [the student] off of the IEP when that's not how that happened, . . . and that they might sue [the school] over the way that [administrators] . . . enacted their 504 plan and the services that [they] have offered." The principal chose to support the teachers due to the large amount of documentation demonstrating what the school's in behalf of the student. Upon reflection, the principal regretted not following the vice principal's advice and still worries about potential accusations related to improper handling of the IEP or possible litigation.

Experience #9

A parent complained to the principal about a teacher's rainbow flag displayed in their classroom. The parent was "quite angry about it and she really thought the pride flag was indoctrinating kids." The principal expressed a belief that the flag was not a major concern to the school as the adults and teachers in the building "are totally accepting of rainbows . . . and know the rainbow represents LGBTQ+ pride." However, the principal worried that other parents might complain about the flag and that the situation might be brought up to the school board. The principal met with the parent, allowed the parent to vent, and described her understanding that the pride flag represented equity for everyone. The parent "still didn't like it, but she didn't take it any further." Finally, the principal spoke with the teacher, and the flag was taken down upon the principal's request.

Experience #10

A principal was placed in a scenario in which they had to meet the demands of a student's divorced parents who had remarried. The noncustodial parents disagreed with how much control and access a court order gave to each set of parents. The principal explained that the noncustodial parents "can have access to the educational information of the student but [don't] necessarily make . . . decisions without the permission of the custodial parent." The noncustodial parents also observed that the student's biological mother did not like her ex-husband's wife and was frustrated that the nonbiological parent was involved in decisions concerning the student.

The principal was concerned that they might be accused of not following the court order correctly but also felt that the court order was not as specific as it should have been. After concluding, "We pretty much just have to interpret the court order best we can," the administrative team emailed the noncustodial parents with details about how the situation had been handled thus far. In their most recent communication to the noncustodial parents, the administrative team said, "We will continue to follow the court order as best as possible and continue to communicate with [the student's mother] about educational decisions involving her child."

Experience #11

A state legislature passed a bill that required every school to have someone in the building who had a concealed weapon permit. That designated person would be required to carry their weapon with them every day at the school. The principal felt the bill was "a reactive initiative, saying, "I think there are a lot of other things that we could put in place to support students and to prevent school shootings." The principal was concerned that none of her teachers would accept that responsibility and that they might have to hire someone because of the

faculty's unwillingness to carry a concealed weapon in the school. Also concerned that the decision could lead to a greater risk of violence due to having a gun in the school, the principal contacted the congressperson that wrote the bill:

> I wrote him my concerns officially as a school leader and just said, Hey, you haven't thought this through well enough. I know that you attended all of these seminars and all of these committee meetings and everything else, but you are solving a problem that our state does not have. And I really tried to lay out my points as best as I could.

As of the time of this writing, the principal has not heard back from the congressperson and has not reached a decision about how to meet the demands of the new bill.

Experience #12

Every year, a teacher presents Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail in their class. In this primary source document, Dr. King outlines why he believes people have a responsibility to follow just laws and a duty to break unjust laws. In the letter, Dr. King uses the N-word in a historical context, not in reference to someone. However, this year, there had been several incidents in which the N-word was used by students toward other students. In these situations, parents were involved, and, due to the extreme sensitivity around the issue, it became difficult to address the issue.

Given the situation at the school, the teacher questioned whether using this important primary source document was prudent. The principal, concerned that the students would lose the learning benefits associated with the document, weighed the sensitivity of the school community against the fact that discussion of the document is required in some AP classes. The teacher and the principal agreed that using the document would present more problems and overshadow Dr.

King's message. The principal still grapples with these lingering questions: "Will we use the primary source document next year? Will our students be mature enough to see the importance of the document? Is there ever a time that the N-word should be spoken, spelled out and not abbreviated as the N-word?"

Experience #13

In class, a social studies teacher shared a primary-source account of a Spanish explorer that described his treatment of the native populations. The portion in question was his first-person perspective of raping a native woman. The principal was observing the lesson when "a student raised their hand and they're like, this is really gross. Why are we reading this?" The principal was not familiar with the content and immediately obtained their own copy of the source to see what the complaint was centered around. The principal described the account as "callous and very unfulfilling" but not "particularly graphic." It was not long before the principal received phone calls from parents complaining about exposing 9th-grade students to that kind of content.

The teacher told the principal that they "felt very passionately that if [they didn't] share some of the hard parts of history, [the] kids [would] not understand how horrific [the experiences of] the native population were." Despite recognizing that the teacher did not properly prime the students for the content, the principal was hesitant to "blacklist things or to tell teachers no when they are passionate about opening kids up to the right ideas." The principal also felt there had to be a way to teach the lesson without shocking the students or having them "go home and tell mom that something traumatic happened at school today." As the principal and teacher reviewed the material together, they decided that the lesson could be taught without needing to include that

specific description. New copies of the primary source were created with the account ending before that scene.

Experience #14

A principal was asked to interview a candidate for a job who had applied before the job was officially posted. The candidate is a direct relative of one of the original charter school's founders. The principal was informed that there were no other candidates. In the typical hiring process, a job is posted, the administrative team reviews all the applications, and the team selects three to five candidates for interviews. In this scenario, the school founder pressured the principal to skip that process and interview only their relative/candidate. The principal viewed this as nepotism but was worried about potential retaliation and job security if they resisted. At the time of this writing, the principal is still weighing whether they should resist and expressed that this kind of nepotism is "continuing to be a problem, but nobody really talks about it."

Experience #15

A dispute was brought to the attention of a principal concerning space shared between the orchestra, choir, drama, and photography programs. Though the stage and classrooms had been reserved so that classes did not share the space at the same time, each group wanted additional space for storage and class activities. The principal described their desire to accommodate their teachers' needs but recognized doing so is not always possible. Concerning this specific issue, the principal said, "There was an issue where we had different teachers needing the same space, and how do we manage that? However, one group can't monopolize the space." Concerned that the teachers might view and talk about their fellow teachers as adversarial opponents, the principal wanted to find a resolution without having to make the decision themselves. At the time

of this writing, the principal and teachers are scheduled to meet together so the teachers can

listen to one another and "see each other's perspectives and then . . . come up with a solution.

The principal expressed, "If I hand [the solution] down, chances are three people are going to be

unhappy because I'm going to make a compromise."

Perhaps It Is More About the Context Than the Content

Surprisingly, only 4 of the 15 experiences described here focused on content, whereas the

other 11 revolved around perceived controversy in the context surrounding decisions made by

the charter principals. Experience #4 is one example of an administrator making a final decision

based on context rather than content. When the charter vice principal took the student's phone

away, they were accused of not following the head principal's instructions. Although the vice

principal had followed both the school handbook and the head principal's instructions, they

returned the phone to the teacher/parents because they "did not want to battle them." The

potential conflict that could result in unpleasant working relationships weighed heavier in the

vice principal's mind than the appropriateness of their decision.

The principal in Experience #15 weighed similar concerns, stating, "Chances are that

three people would be unhappy" if they made the final decision about using the shared space.

The potential for an appropriate compromise that helped all parties in some way was less

important when compared to the possible conflict that could result from the administrator's

decision. Rather than create an adversarial climate among the concerned parties and the

administrator, the administrator decided to allow the teachers to meet together to resolve the

issue.

Despite having evidence supporting their school, the principal in Experience #5 decided to not push back further against racial accusations attributed to their student due to the potential of increased opposition from the other school that could lead to negative publicity and public scrutiny.

Even when decisions relate to content, the decision-making process can center more on the school or community context rather than the appropriateness of the issue. Consider Experience #12, in which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Birmingham Letter had been deemed acceptable by teachers and administrators and used in the classroom for many years. During the school year when this study was conducted, however, the charter school had dealt with a high number of racially charged incidents involving the N-word. The decision to not include Dr. King's letter that year reflected the changed context that resulted from an unusually racially charged school climate.

Experience #7 similarly describes a situation in which the administrator called the content "pretty innocuous" yet asked the teacher to edit the movie to avoid potential community pushback. These examples typify the idea of something being deemed controversial as a social construct (Pace, 2021) or based on the situational context. Even when content or a decision had been deemed appropriate, the delineation of some experiences as controversial was based on an ever-changing school and community climate.

Participant Delineation of Controversial Issues

Biesta (2010) described the unenviable position that educators are put in when they must make decisions about validity, appropriate responses, equity, and other factors related to unanticipated controversial issues. One of the major components of this study involved

reviewing unanticipated controversial issues identified by the participants. In sharing their experiences in the surveys and second interview, the participants demonstrated that each issue had already been deemed as controversial. The next step was to explore the delineation process behind each issue to understand why the participants deemed them as controversial. Each experience presented in this study fell under one of the three previously established sets of criteria for determining how open or controversial an issue might be: epistemic, political, and politically authentic (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017).

Epistemic Criterion

In describing the epistemic criterion for determining the controversiality of an issue, Journell (2017) stated, "If an issue has more than one contrary view deemed rational based on credible evidence, then teachers have a responsibility to teach that issue as controversial in a way that frames all rational positions as equally legitimate" (p. 342). Thus, empirical, or rational, evidence behind opposing viewpoints creates the perception that an issue is controversial (Hand, 2008; Journell, 2017).

For example, in Experience #4, a vice principal took away a cell phone from a student whose parents were teachers in the building. The vice principal believed they were following the school rules described in the manual. The teachers that were parents of the student questioned the vice principal's action, claiming the head principal had expressed to the faculty that the cell phone policy was up to each teacher. Despite the fact that the vice principal was acting as the substitute teacher when the student's phone was taken away, adhering to both the instructions in the manual and those given by the head principal, the parents/teachers challenged the vice principal's decision. The vice principal, seeing the potential contention that could arise from different interpretations of the policy, stated, "I did not want to battle them."

Similarly, a fear of increased conflict between teachers lay behind the delineation described in Experience #15, wherein multiple teachers wanted to use shared space for their classes, each feeling their demands should be prioritized. Whereas vice principal in Experience #4 acquiesced to the parents/teachers to avoid conflict, the principal in Experience #15 laid the burden of decision-making on the teachers in disagreement.

In other experiences, administrators found themselves defending their school against external accusations. In Experience #8, parents who had removed their student from an IEP plan accused teachers of not doing enough to serve their student. Having kept thorough documentation of their meetings, specific efforts to help the student, and communications sent home, the administrative team and teachers rebutted that accusation. In Experience #5, a student athlete was accused of using racist language despite evidence backing the student athlete's vehement denial of doing so. In both experiences, the administrators decided to avoid further conflict and not push back against the accusations despite having ample evidence to defend their schools.

The final examples of administrators using epistemic criterion in their delineation process involved administrators and teachers determining if the potential benefit of a curricular decision was worth the risk of community or parent backlash. In Experience #1, the educators weighed whether the depiction of a soldier finding dead children after a village was bombed was necessary to authentically demonstrate the brutality of war. In Experience #7, the principal and teacher weighed whether a "pretty innocuous" few seconds of rear nudity in an otherwise "perfectly aligned" movie was a payable price to "expose students to the culture of that time." In Experience #12, the principal and teacher weighed using Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail due to King's use of the N-word. Finally, the principal in Experience #13 found

themselves questioning whether the description of a sexual assault was needed to ensure students understood the cruelties faced by Indigenous peoples during Columbus's time, even though the account was taken directly from an authentic primary source.

Political Criterion

The political criterion for deeming something as open or controversial is centered around whether public actions infringe on private values (Gutmann, 2007; Journell, 2017). Five experiences shared in the study were deemed controversial due to a conflict that centered around the perceived infringement of values. The administrator in Experience #14 struggled with the perceived nepotistic demand to interview someone without going through the regular due process. In Experience #6, teachers deemed posting students' first names on tardy notices on the door as inappropriate even though it did not violate FERPA laws. Another principal was faced with determining whether censoring a pentagram symbol in the yearbook was religious discrimination in Experience #2.

While these three issues centered around the differences in values between internal stakeholders of the school, the principals also had to mediate between frustrated parents and the administrators and teachers who were making decisions. In Experience #9, a parent expressed concern that a rainbow flag in a classroom was indoctrinating students about LGBTQ+ lifestyles, while the teacher argued it was a symbol of equity and belonging. Finally, a noncustodial parent felt disenfranchised when her ex-husband's new wife was involved in school discussions and decisions about her child. Despite a court order that allowed the involvement of the student's stepmother, the noncustodial biological mother challenged the fairness of such a practice.

Politically Authentic Criterion

The final observed criterion centers around issues that are deemed controversial due to their traction or consideration within the public political sphere (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Experience #3 describes the political discourse that followed the governor's request for all schools to create stricter phone policies. Parents, students, teachers, community members, and other stakeholders had strong and divergent feelings about the proper course of action. Similarly, in Experience #11, conflict between teachers, administrators, and others arose when the legislature created a new law requiring each school to have an adult in the building that carries a gun at all times.

Risks Identified in the Study

Pace (2019) introduced contained risk-taking in education after observing the decision-making process of teachers and teacher educators when faced with potentially controversial issues. Many other studies have identified specific considerations, frequently not explicitly named as risks, that educators weigh as they deliberate whether and how to address controversial issues in schools. The current study focused on the risks identified and explained by charter school principals as they experienced potentially controversial issues in their schools. Table 5 contains examples of the risks identified by the participants that align with previous research. Each quote is given without a name attached to it because many of the examples tied to the experiences were anonymized.

Table 5

Shared Risks Between Teachers and Administrators

Contextual Influence	Participant Example
Board or State Policy	"I know in the health classes it is required by state law that teachers must notify parents if they are going to talk about some

(Boyle-Baise et al., 2008; Journell, 2020, 2022)	topics that might be controversial. And then parents can opt out if they like."
Hierarchical Power Dynamics (Anderson, 2014; Camicia, 2008)	"They said, well, the [head] principal said it was going to be up to the teachers. I think he did say that but that is confusing because the handbook says no cell phones."
Parental Pushback (Geller, 2020; Pace, 2019; Payne & Journell, 2019)	"I wondered if there were more parents who felt like her. That is always a concern. You, as an administrator, must look at your big picture and my concern was that there were more parents like her."
Teacher Concerns (Shechter & Shaked, 2017)	"We had some teachers speak up and say, well, I don't think this belongs in the classroom, so we had to put it on pause."
Administrative Team Concerns (Aslin, 2018; Summak & Kalman, 2020)	"Working together with other administrators and having that conversation is the big first step for us. So that way it is not just one person making the decision."
Community Values (Journell, 2012; Reingold & Baratz, 2020; Pace, 2019; Shekitka, 2022)	"Our school community is pretty conservative. I am fairly conservative myself when it comes to things that I want to see or want students to see in a public school."
External Data (Pace, 2019, 2021)	"For instance, with the phone policy, there's lots of data and surveys and research that show us why we should consider choosing a certain route."
Societal Trends (Camicia, 2008)	"In 10th grade, they study World War II and communism. They are going to read excerpts out of Marx's 'The Communist Manifesto.' Now, that is a controversial topic, but we do not want teachers to shy away from it."
School Values (Dunn et al., 2019)	"I need to protect the school and organization in general. So, anything that may be controversial, my first thought is how does this make our organization or student body look?"
Personal Values and Ideology (Cassar, 2023; Ho et al., 2017; Knowles & Castro, 2019; Pace, 2019)	"I as an administrator, didn't feel like it was ethical to allow one religious symbol if we weren't allowing all of them, even if that religion is seen as controversial by many in the community."
Student Well-Being	"I am confident that we're at least on the right track and that we're at least trying to make decisions that protect our kids

(Gould et al., 2011; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009)	while also allowing the educational components to come forward."
External Stakeholders (Journell, 2022)	"I think the big thing is having every stakeholder have a seat at the table to be able to have those discussions and for us to be very transparent with why certain things are done rather than just saying, 'This is just the way it is. Deal with it.'"
Distrust in Disclosure (Journell, 2011, 2016; Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022)	"The parent was more concerned about it after hearing that, as the teacher was giving a definition for the word 'banned' and some of the examples, she did it with an agenda. She presented it as someone with an opinion about that instead of presenting it the way the curriculum had set it up."

Another major finding of this study is that, when considering potentially controversial issues, administrators examine and respond to remarkably similar risks that the teachers do. Both parties appraise the educational value of the issue and weigh those benefits against perceived risks (Pace, 2019, 2021). Both consider their own feelings on the issue and often avoid disclosing their opinions to help students form their own viewpoints on challenging issues (Journell, 2016; Kelly, 1986; Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022). Both consider the potential effect on their jobs and careers (Anderson, 2014; Camicia, 2008). And of course, both teacher and administrator care deeply about the potential reaction and backlash from parents and the community (Geller, 2020; Journell, 2012; Pace, 2019; Payne & Journell, 2019; Reingold & Baratz, 2020; Shekitka, 2022).

Considering the many common risks weighed by all educators when faced with potentially controversial issues, the study participants hoped that teachers would view them in less of an adversarial light. For example, administrators understand that teachers are concerned about parental kickback or concern, but, to paraphrase Sydney, principals are the ones that receive the heat and the angry phone calls. The principals acknowledge that checking in with them before or after addressing controversial issues can be uncomfortable for teachers, especially

when principals hold some power over their job security. However, the principals hope that these

check-ins can be construed more as an opportunity to get on the same page and to prepare the

principal for potential backlash. Additionally, these check-ins with principals, department chairs,

and other coworkers help protect teachers from potentially acting in ways that could hurt the

school or affect their own job security. Through conscious collaboration with other educators or

"another set of eyes," the teacher and administrator are preventing potential backlash by ensuring

the content is academically appropriate and the teacher's approach benefits the students.

Table 6

Risks Identified Through Vivo Coding

Contextual Influence	Participant Example
Federal or State Laws	"The risk would be that it is a violation of FERPA laws with people knowing certain students are tardy more often than other students."
Litigation	"Despite my confidence in our fully documented efforts, I'm also concerned that they might sue us over the way that we have enacted their 504 plan and the services that we have offered."

Finally, through vivo coding, I identified two additional risks that were not found in

previous research concerning controversial issue decision-making. Examples of those risks

appear in Table 6.

"It's Not Worth It"

As the administrators considered risks concerning controversial issues, a commitment to

move forward and accept a potentially controversial outcome, such as the decisions in

Experiences #2 and #11, proved to be the exception rather than the rule in participants' decision-

making process. Considering that 3 of the 15 experiences (Experiences #3, #8, and #10) have not

yet been resolved at the time of publishing, in 10 of the remaining 12 experiences, the potentially controversial issue was cut or avoided. In these examples, administrators and teachers chose to avoid the issue despite curricular backing, agreement about the appropriateness of an issue, or the allowance of the issue according to school and state laws.

Many of the risks identified by the participants aligned with the previously identified risks scholars had identified. For example, in Experiences #1, #7, #12, and #13, primary accounts and movies were edited to avoid potential emotional trauma for students (Pitt & Brushwood Rose, 2007). Posters that aligned with FERPA laws or school policies and values were removed in Experiences #6 and #9 to ensure no one felt marginalized or psychologically unsafe (Beck, 2013). In Experience #4, the vice principal followed both the school manual and the head principal's instruction when they took away a student's phone, yet they quickly returned the phone to the parents/teachers to preserve a positive working relationship (DeMatthew, 2016). In Experience #5, the principal felt they had ample evidence to prove the innocence of their student and school when the student was accused of using racial slurs, yet the principal decided to not push back further against the accusations to avoid potential increased negative public scrutiny and perception of the school (Cassar et al., 2023). The principal in Experience #14 followed the instruction to interview and hire a specific person due to concerns about job security, even though it was a clear case of nepotism (Anderson, 2014; Dunn et al., 2019; Pace, 2021). Finally, the avoidance in Experience #15 is based in the belief that the decision would be more acceptable if reached by the teachers rather than issued by the principal (Aslin, 2018; DeMatthew, 2016; Summak & Kalman, 2020).

Like teachers, this pattern of avoidance is based in weighing legitimate risks for the educators, students, and school (Pace, 2019). The potential benefits of discussing these

controversial issues might be important, but at the end of the day the potential risks often carried

greater weight in principals' decision-making process. As Jimmy phrased it, sometimes educators

say to themselves, "It's not worth it and I'll just try to do something else instead and avoid [the

potentially controversial issue]."

Additional Decision-Making Insights

After participating in the study, multiple participants described their increased sense of

confidence in their policies and administrative teams. Henry complimented his team on being

"very keen on what's present day research, what could be potential things that are coming up that

we could have conflicts with" so they could get ahead of any potential scenarios. He additionally

reflected that "when it does come to a sketchy situation, we usually have a procedure or protocol

in place already, so it doesn't become a debate on how to approach something." Sydney similarly

spoke of "a sense of confidence that . . . [they're] running in the right direction" but with a

caveat, saying, "I've been more attuned to how incredibly difficult administrators have it with

making decisions that are going to be somewhat controversial." Sydney's gratitude for a

supportive administrative team that works together was similarly reflected in Agitha's

thankfulness that she could confidently delegate some decisions to her vice principals to lighten

her own load.

Some participants used hindsight to recognize negative tendencies in their personal or

team decision-making process. Mark commented that his team did not "do a great job explaining

why [they] thought a certain way" and said that the "the people who complained the most were

the loudest, or were the first ones to talk to [them], [and] got their way on that controversial

issue." Brittany realized that she tended to have an initially sarcastic reaction when faced with a

potentially demanding situation. Though she knew this initial reaction was made in jest, she said

that "it shuts down problem solving" in her team, and she now monitors her emotional reaction to controversial issues "so that [the team] can come up with creative solutions with how to handle things."

Even with positive internal rapport, some participants described how difficult it can be to approach potentially controversial issues without clear external guidance. For example, reflecting on the challenge faced by educators regarding transgender policies and issues, Henry said:

> I understand why legislation has kind of kept their distance with things like [transgender issues]. But in terms of a school perspective, we are the boots on the ground working with students in certain situations. It would be nice to have direction from legislation or the State Department of Education on ways to address those types of issues. And right now, it has just been super unclear, more of a broad outline of what you should deal with, but it comes down to the school and how they work through these situations.

Sydney expressed concern about how challenging it is for charter school administrators to interpret vague guidelines or new legislation: "We've had a lot of administrator burnout in the charter school system because we don't necessarily have the support that you would have at a district level."

Mark described how difficult his experience with controversial issues has been during his first year as a principal:

> I am just a relatively new administrator, so it would be very nice for the state to provide regular training on handling controversy, controversial topics, and not just policies as far as what is allowed and what's not allowed, but principles that undergird those policies

and have those things. Not just taught once, but maybe there is a resource, a website, that

we could go to get further training as needed.

These charter school administrators are sincerely working to create equitable learning

environments, but they've found that, like their teacher counterparts, they are often placed in a

no-win situation due to the lack of guidance, policies, and trainings on controversial issues.

Finally, as demonstrated by various scenarios in which a decision has yet to be made,

various participants reflected on the importance of acting slowly and being reflective. Jimmy

spoke of his deepened realization that:

I don't need to solve this in the next hour. Let me talk to each of the teachers, get their

input, hear them out in a week. Let's meet, we'll sit down, we'll figure it out. But we

don't need to figure it out today in the next 30 minutes.

This intentional deliberation can prevent a knee-jerk reaction to the loudest voices and

instead encourages administrators and teachers to take time to ensure issues are approached and

decisions are made in alignment with the right priorities. Agitha's reflection that "you never

know what you're going to get just as an educator and to never be surprised that you haven't

seen it all" emphasizes the need for administrators to avoid hasty decisions, when possible, in

favor of careful consideration of perspectives, data, and contexts before reaching a resolution.

Summary

This section explored the experiences identified as controversial by the participants

during the study. Participants explained the risks that they considered in their delineation and

described how they made decisions concerning those issues. The risks shared among teachers

and administrators were identified along with a few new risks that the administrators

encountered. Finally, additional insights from the participants about controversial issue decision-making were presented. The findings from the final research question examine how these risks and lessons can be applied when both planned and unanticipated controversial issues arise in schools.

Research Question #3: How do charter school administrators expect teachers to respond to anticipated and unanticipated controversial issues?

I derived this final set of data primarily after the second interviews. The participants had spent over a month recording in surveys any potentially controversial issues they had encountered in their schools, and the second interview allowed them to expand on those experiences. Before conducting these interviews, I provided an example of a local school district policy that required teachers to submit lesson plans to their principal before they broached any planned or unplanned controversial subject. Using that example as one end of the spectrum of administrative control over controversial issues, I presented pure autonomy as the opposite end. With those two ideas in mind, we proceeded to discuss where on the spectrum administrators believed they fell and how they hoped teachers would approach anticipated and unanticipated controversial issue in their schools.

Approach to Anticipated Issues

Each administrator said that regarding controversial issues, they leaned more toward fostering teacher autonomy rather than requiring preapproval from administration. Agitha expressed concern that by taking away autonomy by requiring administrative approval , they were "creating robots." A repeated theme was that these principals were comfortable giving more autonomy to teachers because the principals had vetted and hired them. Jimmy explained this idea, saying he knew the school hired teachers that aligned with the school values: "We were very careful about who we hired. If the people we interviewed [didn't] have a strong adherence to our mission [of emphasizing moral values through classical education], they didn't make the cut." Multiple administrators expounded on this idea, saying that their trust was not rooted only

in their hiring decisions but also in the training and help available to teachers within the school. Mark spoke about the many resources available to teachers that engender that trust:

> If you've hired the right teachers and you've given them the right information and the tools, if they're using PLCs correctly, professional learning communities where they're working with their department heads, then you definitely shouldn't need to have to check off all these different lessons because at the end of the day, you should be trusting who your employees are. And if it's someone you can't trust to do a lesson like that, then you probably shouldn't have them in the building.

Agitha reiterated this idea as she expressed a belief that due to their education, training, and experience, teachers have an innate ability to recognize questionable material. Her recommendation is that if a teacher feels "like, oh, I don't know if I should teach that," then the issue should simply be avoided.

Yet despite their commitment to support teacher autonomy, the principals hoped teachers would take steps to further protect the teachers and provide the best learning experiences for their students. Five of the seven administrators hoped the teachers would warn them before such lessons to prepare them in case any parental, student, or community backlash occurred. Brittany clarified, "It's not necessarily an approval, but a heads up, we're covering this topic. . . . It's sort of a middle ground where it's not really seeking permission, but it's professional courtesy." The principals offered several suggestions for providing "a heads-up" or warning. Teachers could provide a lesson plan, speaking points, or topics to the administrator ahead of time so they could review them together. Both Agitha and Melanie specifically expressed that newer teachers could most benefit from a joint review. Melanie explained, "I have no problem giving the teacher some pointers on some things they might encounter, especially if they're a new teacher. But if they're

a new teacher, they could be surprised." The principals wanted to be prepared to answer questions and advocate on behalf of their teachers in case a parent or other concerned party contacted them.

In addition to reaching out to administrators for help, the principals also suggested that teachers take advantage of their collaboration partners in the building. Henry maintained that many concerns about job security can be alleviated through conversations with administrators, department chairs, counselors, and coworkers before or after broaching controversial issues. Using "more eyes" brings protection that comes from seeking help as one determines whether and how these issues should be approached. Agitha reflected, "The reason things go south is because a lot of times there isn't content collaboration." Jimmy encouraged teachers to invite a member of administration to observe potentially challenging lessons so they have a witness that the content was appropriately handled and academically relevant. Jimmy emphasized the protection provided by the presence of another adult during these lessons:

> If they know they're on a highly controversial topic, invite another teacher or another member of the admin team to be in that room and just to be another set of eyes. So, if something does go awry, maybe students start taking the discussion this way and the teacher has a hard time bringing it back so that another adult can be there to say, okay, this is what happened. This is how the discussion went down. This is the intent of the lesson.

Rather than view reaching out to others as administrative oversight, Sydney hoped her teachers would view this as a "collaborative mentoring" relationship that helps the teachers protect themselves and their students from unnecessary conflict or misunderstanding.

Because joint failure to meet the expectations and mission of the charter community could lead to school closure (Foreman & Maranto, 2018), the charter principals hoped teachers would consider their shared responsibility to protect the school. In many instances, these teachers have been specifically hired by administrators that recognized a similar commitment to the values and mission of the school (Caldwell, 2016). Participants desired that teachers would approach them with the confidence that they already have a great measure of trust in them. Melanie hoped that newer teachers especially would view collaboration positively as it prepares both teacher and administrator for potential surprises and challenges.

Another factor the participants hoped teachers would consider is their own preparation for the topic and the preparedness of their students. Sydney expressed concern that sometimes teachers "have good intentions, but they'll dive in on something they don't know well enough so that it gets out of hand." It is quite appropriate for a teacher to delay or avoid a potentially controversial issue due to a lack of knowledge of or preparedness for the issue. Considering that good teachers prime their students to help them fully understand and handle challenging academic issues and exercises, the principals hope that teachers have consciously primed themselves as well. Additionally, it is important to take the professional courtesy of informing administration, parents, and other relevant stakeholders about potentially controversial issues. Experience #13 demonstrated the chaos that can ensue when the teacher has not primed the students or the observing principal for a primary historical source that described a sexual assault.

Approach to Unanticipated Controversial Issues Broached in the Classroom

Even when educators foresee and prepare for potentially controversial issues, these inevitable unanticipated issues challenge them to decide what is educationally desirable (Biesta, 2010), determine the validity of the issue (Journell, 2018), and "make sense of the events in real

time" (Kawashima-Ginsberg et al., 2022, p. 38). Yet these unscripted and highly pressured moments can be transformed into "unscripted teachable moments" (Cassar et al., 2023, p. 256) by teachers that have prepared themselves for unanticipated controversial issues. The following sections review the actions participants recommend for teachers making decisions about unanticipated controversial issues.

Acknowledge and Redirect

Students sometimes ask questions or want to talk about controversial issues that are on their minds. If a student broaches a controversial issue during class time, the charter principals encourage teachers to validate the student through acknowledging the question. Sydney expressed concern that ignoring or punishing the student for these unanticipated interruptions could be "very hurtful," saying, "I would argue it ruins the relationship or can damage the relationship between the kid and the adult." Having taken a few seconds to recognize the student and question, Most participants recommended that after taking a few seconds to recognize the student and the question, teachers should delay the answer to allow the teacher time to think about the question and to refocus the class on their original topic. Brittany provided the following example:

> I would love it if the teacher acknowledged [the student's] question and said, "Do you
> know what, Johnny, that is a fantastic question. Let's talk more about it after class," or if
> it's completely inappropriate for the lesson and not what their plan is, "Hey, Johnny, I
> love that you asked that question, but we need to stay focused on this particular topic
> right now. We've got a lot of work to do in this area, so let's redirect back to this area."

Agitha emphasized that this type of answer redirects the conversation to another time or place without ignoring or embarrassing the student. Sydney commented that teachers can even use that moment of delay and validation to think about the question in case they feel the need to address it immediately.

Should the teacher decide that it is not the right moment to address the issue, they can encourage the student to talk with them after class. This allows the teacher to follow up on the question enough to, in Brittany's words, "find out where a referral was needed or if a parent needed to be talked to or what exactly is going on in that student's world so that we could get resources to the student." For example, Mark hoped his language arts teachers would direct students to their history teachers when students have questions about historical issues, thus "encouraging the conversation in the correct environment." Through this delineation process, teachers could pinpoint when to involve parents, counselors, social workers, principals, and other professionals in the conversation.

This approach, as challenging as it might be for a teacher that wants to help the student at that moment, also helps teachers avoid potentially speaking inadvertently or inappropriately about an issue. Sydney acknowledged just how difficult it can be for her teachers to delay an answer or redirect students to parents. She hoped her teachers would not view the delay as avoiding their job but rather as protecting their job:

> I hate having to tell teachers that [they need to consider protecting their jobs] . . . but I think we are caught between a rock and a hard place with a lot of these conversations. At the end of the day, I don't want to put any educators in jeopardy.

All seven principals hoped the teachers would approach these unexpected issues with their own well-being in mind, not just the student's.

Stick to the Standards

Another major theme in discussing unanticipated controversial issues was the need to adhere to the standards outlined by the state or class. Ensuring that any topic discussed in class, expected or unexpected, aligns with these standards provides protection for teachers and their schools. Henry offered counsel for teachers in this situation: "If [an issue] doesn't fall within one of [the class's or school's] standards or the things that they're focused on, then [teachers should be' very, very direct with the students, saying, that is not what we discuss in this class." Jimmy strongly expressed a need for teachers to remember who pays for their salary and whom they are serving:

> If we're being funded by public dollars and society has decided, hey, we value your
>
> services enough that we want to put our money into it, then society gets to decide what's
>
> taught. To me, it's so important that not just controversial topics, but any topic that we're
>
> going to take class time to teach ties into those state standards. There is plenty of leeway
>
> for teachers to address current issues that tie closely in with state standards that might be
>
> controversial. To me, it's inappropriate to go outside of that and bring up controversial
>
> topics because at that point, to me, it's for controversy's sake. Students can have those
>
> conversations, the teachers can have those conversations on their own time using their
>
> own dollars, but if it's state money that's paying for the light bill, paying for the heating
>
> bill, . . . then what we spend class time doing needs to be aligned with what our state has
>
> said is the curriculum.

Despite the charter schools having unique missions and educational approaches, the administrators clearly understood that they still answer to the public and to the state.

One principal proved to be the exception in comparison to her peers. Because her charter school offers a wide array of college-level courses, Brittany believed it is permissible for her teachers to go beyond the state standards: "I view it more as at a minimum you're going to teach the state standards and then if you have time to go beyond that, then go beyond that." Considering that many of their students graduate with associate degrees, Brittany allows her teachers more autonomy because she feels the students and parents have consciously chosen to learn in a college-level environment.

Two principals identified a potential drawback in strictly adhering to the standards. Agitha remarked that it is unrealistic to expect the standards to fully meet the needs of the students: "We work on creating the policies and protecting the rights of all individuals, [and] we can get pretty close to it, but I don't know if that's possible." As he considered the intended goals of state standards, Henry wished the state policies and procedures would be more specific and that state agencies would provide more specific guidance to educators on how to follow them. While hoping his teachers based their teaching on state standards and policies, simply having a list of standards was not enough for educators to effectively meet the needs of hundreds of schools and thousands of students.

Be Mindful of Your Power and Careful with Your Opinion

Finally, if an unanticipated question is identified as on topic or appropriate for the class, the charter principals hope that engaging it would lead to a productive class discussion. Brittany stated, "If it's something that's particularly relevant to students, that also ties into the lesson . . . I

would love for the teacher to skillfully open a discussion where the students can debate back and forth their viewpoints." The key, though, is that the discussion must be centered on student participation. Henry emphasized that his team trains teachers to "try to take the personal bit out of it as much as possible . . . [and] make sure [the teachers] cover all perspectives of it." Mark also hoped that his teachers would stick to the facts or data points without the students ever knowing the teacher's opinion on the issue.

Jimmy was open to his teachers potentially giving "an honest, thoughtful, and sensitive response" to questions and issues that students bring up. He continued, "The teacher needs to always keep in mind that the classroom is not the place to promote their own political or religious beliefs specifically. . . . They should be able to clearly explain their viewpoint while not promoting it." The power teachers have in the classroom must be carefully exercised. While expressions of opinion could help students better understand a topic, the potential to unduly influence student perception on divisive issues has led Henry to encourage his teachers to "steer away from it" rather than create a potential problem.

Approach to Private Unanticipated Issues Broached Privately

There was very little variance between how the charter principals wanted their teachers to address unanticipated issues in the classroom and in private conversations. Mark repeatedly returned to the power teachers hold in those moments, reflecting, "Our job is to educate students and give them the tools to be able to come up with their decisions or their . . . opinions on their own." Jimmy considered the scenario and stated, "It's even more critical that the teacher is slow, thoughtful, and intelligent" in a private setting so that if an opinion is expressed, the student can consider the perspective "without any feeling of pressure to adopt a certain political view or certain religious view. . . . And then they feel like they can go get a bunch of other perspectives

to inform their final view." Brittany emphasized that her state has specific guidelines and expectations so that teachers "can facilitate discourse about political positions, but they can't endorse any politic or religion." Her concern is that any expression of opinion would not only be unethical but directly in conflict with state policy. Melanie reiterated that teachers must create and protect the boundary between themselves and their students, even if they are maturing teenagers.

Many participants encouraged the teachers to bring in another teacher or adult to help with a private conversion with a student. Agitha explained, "It gets tricky to be in a setting with a teacher and a student alone. It's always better to have more than one adult present." Sydney also stressed that doing so protects teachers and students:

> We do have to, at the end of the day, realize that we're not the parent and these kids are not over 18. I would say, well, why don't you reach out, ask the kid, see if you guys can reach out as a team to the parent and get this question answered? Now granted, you do kind of have to know your parents because sometimes talking to their parent may make their lives worse. And then in that case, you don't have to bring it up to the parent. Otherwise just leave it alone. And I hate that answer, but it's the answer that I would have to give as an administrator.

Though it can be incredibly difficult for her teachers not to teach or help their students, Sydney hopes her teachers prioritize protecting themselves and their students first.

Summary

This final research question focused on the approach that the participants hoped teachers would consider as they confront anticipated and unanticipated controversial issues. The

participants encouraged teachers to conduct a personal audit concerning the circumstances of the issue, stick to course standards, and be mindful of their power. A section was also dedicated to how teacher responses might change when the issues are broached privately rather than during class time. Chapter 5 explores the connections between the data and previous research and presents recommendations for practice and future studies.

Chapter V: Discussion, Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future

Research

Introduction

As I began my survey of controversiality in schools, I found ample research that explored how teachers delineated and dealt with potentially controversial issues (Biesta, 2010; Camicia, 2008; Fukami & Mayer, 2019; Hess, 2003, 2008, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017; 2018, Kelly, 1986; Pace, 2019, 2021; Wansink et al., 2019), but I found little about administrators' decision-making processes regarding these issues (Journell, 2012, 2017, 2022). This dearth of research was concerning considering that, to paraphrase Sydney, administrators are the ones that receive the heat and must handle the angry phone calls for any conflicts in their building (Mahfouz, 2020). This chapter reviews how the findings align with and add to the existing literature concerning controversial issue decision-making. I have divided the chapter into sections, including a section that addresses practices and concepts that can mitigate and hopefully dissipate possible future conflict between educators, a section for implications, a section for limitations, and a section that explores future research possibilities.

Controversial Issue Decision-Making

Though I began the study with a specific focus on curricular decisions, I quickly realized that the participants viewed much of their day-to-day decisions concerning internal and external stakeholders as potentially controversial. I anticipated the participant experiences and interview dialogue would be focused on content, but most experiences were instead based around *context*. Though unexpected, most of the participants took the study in that direction. This additional focus on context-based controversiality echoed Lindle's (2020) finding that the daily struggle to

create an equitable educational environment weighs heavily on administrators. As shared earlier, Henry emphasized that controversy was about the difficult "judgment call one way or the other" that administrators had to make concerning issues. Thus, the contextual outcomes of administrative actions and decisions had a major effect on the participants' delineation of experiences with controversial issues during the study (Shekitka, 2022).

Camicia's (2008) remark that the process of determining whether issues are open or closed is "contingent and subject to a dynamic web of power relations" (p. 312) is also repeatedly manifested in the experiences of the participants. Perhaps the clearest example of this pressure from people in power positions is presented in Experience #14, in which a charter administrator is encouraged by a charter founder to interview and hire one the founder's family members for a position. The administrator resisted doing so because it did not follow proper hiring procedures and because they recognized nepotism in the demand. Similarly, the principal in Experience #9 worried that a lack of action concerning a parental complaint about a rainbow flag display could snowball into the parent taking the situation to the charter school board. It is crucial, then, that administrators have open conversations with their teachers about the community, parental, and internal pressures, or contextual factors, that affect their decision-making process, especially when the decision directly affects their classroom and students. Though teachers will not always agree with administrative decisions, they can understand how pressure from hegemonic powers, the community, parents, and coworkers can effect educational decisions (Anderson, 2014; Apple, 2004; Foucault, 1991; Journell, 2012; Pace, 2021). Conscious or unconscious avoidance of these discussions implies that administrative decisions could be based solely on the administrator's opinion rather than a complex web of contextual pressures.

Another noteworthy finding of this study was that the charter school principals considered and prioritized a broader scale of school effect than did teachers. As I reviewed the diverse experiences of the administrators, I recognized that most of their decision-making was based upon similar criteria and perceived risks identified for teachers by researchers. However, considering the more extensive scale of pressures faced by charter school administrators, it is unsurprising that they identified risks concerning governmental laws and litigation that had not yet been explored in controversial risk-taking. In a traditional public school setting, the district offices or teacher unions respond to potential lawsuits and adjustments introduced through legislation (Marianno et al., 2022; Sciarra & Dingerson, 2021). However, due to their superintendent-like responsibilities, charter school principals can be placed in scenarios in which they confront a broader range of issues (Dressler, 2001; Perry, 2008). Just as teachers are faced with similar responsibilities in ensuring that all of their students have access to similar learning experiences, administrators make similar decisions while considering a larger scale. Though some teachers might disagree with how administrative decisions individually affect them or their classes, many of these decisions are based on their perceived responsibility to do what is best for the entire school and community rather than on individual circumstances.

For instance, the final decision on an issue could be grounded in ensuring equitable opportunities for specific individuals or groups within the school. This idea was demonstrated in Experience #2 through the principal's determination to allow a potentially controversial religious symbol in the yearbook despite potential coworker or community backlash. Decisions can also stem from the increased role charter school principals play in representing their community. This is demonstrated in Experience #11, in which the principal directly reached out to their congressperson about guns in the school in order to communicate her stakeholders' concerns. It

is beneficial to teachers when administrators specifically illustrate how this greater scale of responsibility affects their decision-making in content-based or contextual conflicts. Through sharing their own decision-making process, administrators provide guidelines, examples, and tools that teachers can use in their own experiences with controversial issues or decisions.

One of the tools that administrators can consider is the set of personal audit questions suggested by participants. Though the list of questions is not comprehensive or universal, it reflects the participants' desire that teachers engage in internal discussion when confronted with expected or unexpected controversial issues. This self-examination can help teachers consider and evaluate not only the appropriateness of the content but also the contextual factors that might affect how the content could be shared and received. Clear-cut guidelines can help teachers feel confident in making decisions about discussing controversial issues.

There are, however, concerns though that should be considered and addressed before implementing these types of internal audits or guidelines. Rather than support controversial-issue usage in schools, these guidelines could potentially act as an additional barrier to them. Teachers may be overwhelmed as they internally consider their own potential insecurities about the issue, neutrality, community norms, and their ability to effectively address the issue (Cassar et al., 2021). Additionally, if implementing these guidelines requires administrative approval, potential controversial-issue coverage might be viewed as being controlled only by the those in power (Anderson, 2014).

To create more robust and democratic guidelines, educators must also consider whether their decisions about controversial issues truly serve the students or instead serve the dominant powers and cultures (Foucault, 1980). While many decisions about controversial issues can be traced to a refusal to compromise jobs, family status, and sense of personal safety (Anderson,

2014; Dunn et al., 2019; Pace, 2021), moments may arise when an issue should be addressed specifically because it does analyze, evaluate, or push back against societal norms. These instances truly embody the concept of contained risk-taking (Pace, 2019) as educators must consider not only the risks but also the potential benefits of covering the controversial issue. By discussing controversial issues, educators can empower students to enact changes through ensuring that part of a democratic education involves opportunities to critically inquire and contest the various dimensions of society (Hess, 2009).

Another important factor to consider in creating guidelines is the need to examine one's personal bias concerning the controversial issue. An audit cannot be honest without acknowledging the filter of a person's own ideology. Personal ideologies have been connected to instructional and curricular gatekeeping (Knowles & Castro, 2019), with some educators demonstrating that their personal beliefs are more influential in making decisions about controversial issues than the consideration of context or possible consequences (Cassar et al., 2023; Ho et al., 2017; Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022). Educators must remember that every decision to include, ignore, or avoid an issue could be deemed as a political action. Taking a moment to recognize how any potential biases might affect decisions can help both teacher and administrator to ensure their actions are founded on educational outcomes rather than on personal agendas (Dunn et al., 2019).

Though a valid concern exists that schools might not be equipped to provide a foundational source of democratic education, I believe the findings of the current study demonstrate that, as administrators examine their practices and advocate for further conversation with teachers concerning controversial issues, teachers and administrators can make progress in developing a united approach to controversial issues. The conversation cannot be the end,

however. Through increased mutual understanding of the risks and benefits of covering controversial issues, educational stakeholders can collaborate to provide clear guidelines for discussing these issues. Learning how to acknowledge and understand diverse views, deliberate on political questions, and enact changes in society are foundational democratic skills gained from using controversial issues in the classroom (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Implications and Recommendations

In response to Journell's call for principals to "make their administrative decisions more transparent" (2012, p. 591) concerning the selection and rejection of controversial issues, administrators can provide more explicit instruction and training that helps teachers understand the associated pressures and risks at a schoolwide scale. Moreover, administrators should be more explicit about their decisions that are protective rather than preventive. Often, censoring or avoiding an issue has little to do with the issue itself and instead stems from a desire to avoid potential negative outcomes for the school, teacher, and students. As teachers and principals share and discuss their perceived risks and potential benefits, it opens the door to cocreating equitable policies about potential controversial issues in the school.

Mark expressed that when policies are cocreated by stakeholders, there is a transparency behind why certain things are done rather than teachers having to hear "this is just the way it is— deal with it." A cocreated policy based on multiple perspectives and present-day research not only gives direct guidance on how to approach potentially controversial issues but also creates systems that endure beyond the departure of administrators and teachers. Consciously including additional voices in the decision-making process related to challenging curricular and school issues leads to more equitable experiences for all internal stakeholders (Aslin, 2018) and can bridge the potential power imbalance between each party (DeMatthew, 2016). Cocreating

policies can also help teachers feel more comfortable seeking help and advice concerning controversial issues as they arise. Conscious efforts to establish trusting and supportive relationships between teachers and administrators mitigates the personal and professional risk each party takes as controversial issues are broached and addressed (Journell, 2022; Pace, 2021).

Even as the participants reflected on their need to clearly communicate expectations and policies to their teachers, they called for state educational leadership to do the same. School boards, state curriculum specialists, and legislators need to recognize the immense pressures educators feel when making decisions about controversial issues. Policies and laws should be proactively cocreated with educators so that there are clear guidelines on how controversial issues should be approached in education. Policymakers should meet regularly with teachers and administrators to understand the effect of current laws on communities, schools, students, and personal contexts. Furthermore, increasing interactions between principals at different schools and districts can combat the isolation many administrators feel. Rather than quietly gathering during formal trainings, principals need opportunities to share their experiences and concerns with their peers.

Finally, as each community has unique values and cultures, it is important for teacher educators to meet frequently with local teachers, principals, and district leaders to understand the contextual influences and risks that affect local decision-making. Introducing these contextual factors in class could prevent or address potential myopic preservice teacher perspectives. By helping their students to understand the risks faced not only by teachers but administrators, teacher educators can promote collaboration that is based not only in job security but also in the pursuit of equity for all students. Consciously framing administrators as collaborative partners

can help preservice teachers avoid stereotyping them as adversaries and proactively create trusting relationships with them.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was that I could not guarantee that each participant would, during the study, engage in decision-making about controversial issues. Though there is a gap of time between the first and second interviews wherein the participant could check in with me about potential controversial issue delineation, the lack of guarantee of that experience could lead to speculation and hypothetical scenarios. However, each participant did experience and record moments of delineation, but they did not share similar numbers of experiences. For example, one participant identified only one instance of delineation, whereas other participants identified six to seven instances. A longer-term study in the future could provide both researcher and participant more time to fully explore the process of delineation through repeated engagements, possible observations, and continued discussion about contextual effects on administrative decision-making.

Further limitations existed in the scale of both the location of the study and number of participants. A sample of administrators in a greater variety of locations would lead to consideration of a greater diversity of contextual influences such as different state laws, school demographics, and administrator demographics. I selected the number of participants based on the feasibility of completing the study completed in a timely manner, but a more prolonged study could allow for a greater number of participants. Again, this study can serve as a starting point for further research that expands the sample size, location, and time frames.

Recommendations for Future Research

All participants in this study worked for independent charter schools. Future studies could examine the decision-making process of charter principals that work under a CMO and compare it to the process of independent charter principals. Future studies could also focus on public or private school administrators. I discovered that public school principals frequently need district permission before participating in any study. Though I understand the need for a district policy to ensure students are protected in any academic research, this type of policy also places potential participants in a position in which their bosses or supervisors know that they are discussing the risks and challenges associated with controversial issues. In this case, participants might censure their answers, knowing that district leaders can see and recognize their responses, which could potentially lead to repercussions.

In keeping with the theory of contained risk-taking, future studies could work with district leaders such as superintendents and school board members to explore the risks they consider as they create and execute policies concerning controversial issues. The comparison and contrasts of risks considered by each level of hierarchy could provide insights into the unique pressures faced by each party. Additional research could observe and explore the cocreation of policies and procedures related to controversial issues by teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, a longer-term study could focus on how the a cocreated set of questions, or audit, affects decision-making for both administrators and teachers.

This study did not focus on two major influences on controversial issue decision-making: the potential benefits of controversial issue coverage and student input. I recognize that my quest to identify risks in this study might have resulted in more barriers to controversial issue coverage. A thorough exploration of administrative perspective on potential benefits of covering

controversial issues in the classroom is necessary to foster a more robust discussion between teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. Finally, investigating whether and how student perspective affects educator decision-making concerning controversial issues would ensure that students' views matter "because *all* views should matter in a democracy" (Hess, 2009, p. 162; emphasis in original).

Conclusion

The findings and implications of this study offer opportunities for administrators and teachers to share and collaborate in an effort to ensure that "the question becomes how [controversial issue] teaching should be approached, not if it should be approached" (Washington & Humphries, 2011, p. 110). Controversial issues will inevitably arise in curricular, classroom, and administrative settings (Biesta, 2010; Cassar et al., 2021; Kawashima-Ginsberg et al., 2022) as well as in diverse societal, work, family, and personal settings (Hess, 2009; Journell, 2012; Pace, 2021; Parker, 2003). The onus is on educators to create a collaborative environment in which they proactively anticipate these moments rather than wait for the potential fallout that can result from a reactive approach. In this endeavor, administrators and teachers can shift away from miscommunication or a lack of trust and instead focus on how they can create safe environments in which students can engage with and learn from controversial issues.

Appendix A – Potential Issues Table

Note: This list was compiled before the research was conducted and does not reflect the actual issues identified by the participants during the study.

Table 7

Potential Contextual Influences on Decision-Making Concerning Controversial Issues

Contextual Influence	Source
Board or State Policy	Boyle-Baise, M., Hsu M. C., Johnson, S., Serriere, S. C., & Stewart, D. (2008). Putting reading first: Teaching social studies in elementary classrooms. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 36*(3), 233–255.
	Journell, W. (2020). Teaching about the 2020 presidential election. *Social Education, 84*(5), 267–271.
	Journell, W. (2022). Classroom Controversy in the Midst of Political Polarization: The Essential Role of School Administrators. *NASSP Bulletin*, 01926365221100589.
Hierarchical Power Dynamics	Anderson, D. (2014). Outliers: Elementary teachers who actually teach social studies. *The Social Studies, 105*(2), 91–100.
	Camicia, S. P. (2008). Deciding what is a controversial issue: A case study of social studies curriculum. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 36*(4), 298–316.

Master Narrative	Camicia, S. P., & Franklin, B. M. (2011). What type of global community and citizenship? Tangled discourses of neoliberalism and critical democracy in curriculum and its reform. *Globalisation, Societies and Education,* 9(3–4), 311–322.
	Eisner, E. (2002). The three curricula that all schools teach. *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs,* 3, 87–107.
Parental Pushback	Geller, R. C. (2020). Teacher political disclosure in contentious times: A responsibility to "speak up" or "fair and balanced"? *Theory & Research in Social Education, 48*(2), 182–210.
	Payne, K. A., & Journell, W. (2019) "We have those kinds of conversations here . . .": Addressing contentious politics with elementary students. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 79*, 73–82.
Administrative Pushback	Pace, J. L. (2019). Contained risk-taking: Preparing preservice teachers to teach controversial issues in three countries. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 47*(2), 228–260.
Community Values	Journell, W. (2012). Ideological homogeneity, school leadership, and political intolerance in secondary education: A study of three high schools during the 2008 Presidential Election. *Journal of School Leadership, 22*(3), 569–599.

Reingold, R., & Baratz, L. (2020). Arab school principals in Israel–between conformity and moral courage. *Intercultural Education, 31*(1), 87–101.

Shekitka, J. P. (2022). School structures and curricular choices: The social studies classroom in religious and secular schools. *Religion & Education, 49*(2), 163–191.

Societal Trends	Camicia, S. P. (2008). Deciding what is a controversial issue: A case study of social studies curriculum. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 36*(4), 298–316.
School Values	Dunn, A. H., Sondel, B., & Baggett, H. C. (2019). "I don't want to come off as pushing an agenda": How contexts shaped teachers' pedagogy in the days after the 2016 US presidential election. *American Educational Research Journal, 56*(2), 444–476.

Internal Values and Ideology	Cassar, C., Oosterheert, I., & Meijer, P. C. (2023). Why teachers address unplanned controversial issues in the classroom. *Theory & Research in Social Education,* 1-31.
	Ho, L. C., McAvoy, P., Hess, D. & Gibbs, B. (2017). Teaching and learning about controversial issues and topics in the social studies: A review of the research. In C. M. Bolick & M. M. Manfra (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of social studies research* (pp. 321–335). Wiley Blackwell.
	Knowles, R. T. & Castro, A. J. (2019). The implication of ideology on teachers' beliefs regarding civic education. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 77*, 226–239.
Student Values	Pace, J. L. (2021). *Hard questions: Learning to teach controversial issues*. Rowman & Littlefield.
	Washington, E. Y., & Humphries, E. K. (2011). A social studies teacher's sense making of controversial issues discussions of race in a predominantly white, rural high school classroom. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *39*(1), 92–114.
External Stakeholders	Journell, W. (2022). Classroom Controversy in the Midst of Political Polarization: The Essential Role of School Administrators. *NASSP Bulletin*, 01926365221100589.

Appendix B – Primary Interview Questions

Background Questions

- How would you describe the community that you work in to someone that is unfamiliar with the people, setting, and community values?

- Did you teach before becoming an administrator? What subjects did you teach and for how long?

- How much post-secondary education have you obtained?

- How long have you served as an administrator? How long have you been in your current position?

- Are there any aspects of your personal background that you believe increase your ability to be a successful administrator? Any aspects that you believe hinder your ability?

- Are there any factors within the district, school, or community that you believe increase your ability to be a successful administrator? Any aspects that you believe hinder your ability?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions About Delineation

- How do you define the term "controversial"?

- Can you name a few issues that have arisen in your schools, since becoming an administrator, that you believe were inappropriate for the educational setting? Why do you believe they were inappropriate?

- Can you name a few issues that have arisen in your schools, since becoming an administrator, that were censured in the educational setting but you believe should have been addressed or taught? Why do you believe they were appropriate?

- How do you personally decide if an issue is controversial for a classroom setting?

- As an administrator, can you think of a time when you had to make a personal decision about whether something was appropriate for the classroom or school setting?

- Do you believe that your delineation about whether something is controversial has shifted since becoming an administrator? How so or why not?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions About Contextual Factors

- Do you believe that any potentially controversial issue should easily be tied to the state- or district-approved curriculum?

- Given a spectrum between complete autonomy of the teachers and the requirement that teachers seek permission from administrators before addressing any potentially controversial topics, where do you stand? Why?

- In deciding whether an issue is appropriate for a specific classroom or educational setting, what factors do you consider?

- What factors do you hope teachers consider before they decide whether to include a potentially controversial issue in their class?

Appendix C – Second Interview Questions

Follow-Up Questions

- Since our last interview, have your views on addressingcontroversial issues in the school shifted?

- Have you considered any additional factors that might affect your decision-making process when it comes to determining whether an issue is appropriate in your school?

- How did you come to remember or realize those factors?

- Which factors do you believe weigh most heavily on teachers in a controversial issues decision-making process?

- Which factors do you believe weight most heavily on administrators in a controversial issues decision-making process?

- How would you expect a teacher to respond to the hypothetical scenario that a student asks a question about a potentially controversial current event or issue in the classroom?

- How would you expect a teacher to respond to the hypothetical scenario that a student asks a question about a potentially controversial current event or issue in your office or in a private conversation?

- In your mind, should the response differ in public and private settings? Why or why not?

Appendix D

Table 8

Delineations, Risks, and Outcomes of Participant Experiences with Controversial Issues During the Study

Administrator Experience	How Did the Principal Determine the Issue Was Controversial?	Risks Considered in Principal Decision-Making	Resolution
#1 Potential use of a primary source that describes a soldier walking past dead children during a war.	"Is the primary text worth exposing them to this kind of gratuitous kind of violence, is the question she was posing to me. So then of course it becomes my determination as to whether or not she should be presenting that to kids in her class at the point when she approaches me."	Does this cover course standards? Does this meet our school's mission? Is this considered great literature that society highly values? Does it portray violence as an attractive or desirable quality? Is it particularly gratuitous, or is it shown in reality with real consequences? Can you teach the same thing and get the same emotional or academic effect	"We decided that if you read the text, [the author] actually describes the village and the damage and the loss of human life prior to the really more poignantly graphic paragraph with the children. So, we decided just to end the primary source there and not have the rest of it presented to the kids."

		for these kids without this text?	
#2 A student requested to include a pentagram in their senior ad in the yearbook.	"Why it's interesting is because students have put other religious symbols in their senior ads, and we let those go. But this one was flagged."	How does my administration team feel about the situation? How will the community react if they see this symbol in the yearbook? Why does this student want to use this symbol? Is it right to reject one symbol and accept others?	"I made an executive decision to keep it though that was counter to what we had decided as a team." "We are changing the way that we do senior ads because we are tired of these types of problems."
#3 State governor encouraged stricter phone policies throughout the state.	"I follow a couple other school districts Facebook pages, and they were posting things and there were lots of comments from parents about agreeing or disagreeing about phone policies being stricter." "We have a group of students that we bring together to talk about our phone policy and to come up with a better phone policy as a school. And so, hearing what they talk about in those	What does the data from multiple perspectives tell us about potential policies? What do parents think? What do students think? What do our teachers think?	The administrative team has not updated their policy yet as they are still assessing the situation.

meetings with students, obviously there's a lot of controversy around what students feel like are appropriate phone use."

#4

A vice principal substituted for a teacher and took away a student's phone after giving a warning. The student's parents, who are teachers in the building, asked for the phone back immediately and accused the vice principal of not following school policy. | "They said, well, the [head] principal said it was going to be up to the teachers. Well, I think he did say that, but that's confusing because the handbook says no cell phones." | Did my actions align with school policy?

Is it worth it to debate or disagree with these parents/teachers? | Despite following both versions of the policy (the vice principal was acting as the teacher at the time and strictly followed school policy, the vice principal returned the phones to the parents/teachers: "I just did not want to battle with them." |
| #5

Players on the opposing team accused a student athlete of making racist comments during a basketball game. | "The controversial part for me is at what point do we push back and kind of what's the term, justify those, the accuser or ask the accuser why that type of thing was mentioned when there's no evidence or anything . . . because racism obviously is a big controversial thing and we take it extremely seriously, especially if our school's being accused of certain things, but we also want to make | "We just didn't want our school to be put more in the spotlight. . . . I feel like if we were to push back, I feel like [the other school] might've pushed back even harder or things like that. And if they could provide evidence, great. But if they couldn't and we just become the center of a news story without any claims or evidence, that wasn't worth the risk in that case." | "I had a personal discussion with the other athletic director and talked back and forth about it, but we decided not to push any more than what we did." |

sure the other side is accountable for the reports that they're giving.

#6	Faculty and administrative members worried that the teachers should not be sharing this information in such a public way.	"Is this violating FERPA laws or not protecting the privacy of the students?"	"We asked the teacher to either black out the names or to turn the papers over. So, we thought it was creative to use the paper in that creative way, but we also didn't want to be in violation."
Holiday decorations on a teacher's door included ornaments that were tardy slips showing students' first names.			
			"It was just a resolution that could be made quickly, . . . and I decided that was the best decision with the short amount of time that we had and to just kind of be more safe than sorry."
#7	"Our school community is pretty conservative and I myself am fairly conservative when it comes to things that I want to see or want students to see or want, and especially in a public school."	"The potential headache of how it might be perceived, and the potential [community and parental] fallout swayed me."	"We determined that the video could be edited so that they wouldn't see any of those scenes and we haven't had an issue."
A social studies teacher wanted to screen a G-rated movie that "perfectly aligned with the curriculum," explaining that it would "be a great chance to expose students to the culture of that time." However, the movie contained some rear nudity of children.			

#8

A student was taken off of an IEP plan at the request of the parent. "[the parent] expressed that they were tired of the stigma associated with their student being part of special ed."

"When [the student] goes home and parents ask him about it, he gives an excuse about how he is feeling emotionally unsafe. And then parents get mad at the teachers for making him feel emotionally unsafe to the point where he's unwilling to turn into his work when in reality he just didn't want to do it."

"He is playing both sides, meaning he has a victim story" that pits his parents against his teachers.

"I'm worried that they will say that somehow we forced [the student] off of the IEP when that's not how that happened. I'm also concerned that they might sue us over the way that we have enacted their 504 plan and the services that we have offered."

"I have so much documentation showing what we have done for this student. But there is that tiny part about the IEP where they may come back and say, Do you know what? You forced us out and you violated special education law by doing that."

No resolution had been reached at the time of this study's publication.

#9

A teacher displayed a rainbow flag in their classroom.

"We had at least one parent who was in the building for some other reason, and she saw something that [she] identified as a rainbow, and she was quite angry about it. . . . She really thought the pride flag was indoctrinating kids."

"I wondered if there were more parents who felt like her. That was a concern. That's always a concern. As an administrator, you have to kind of look at your big picture, and that was my concern, was that there were more parents like her."

"I met with the mother, and I let her vent, and I told her that I appreciated her bringing that to my attention, and I told her what the pride flag meant. It represented equity for everyone. She still didn't like it, but she didn't take it any further."

		Would the parent go to the school board?	"I did talk with the teacher, and he actually took it down, but this year he has something else [potentially controversial] at his door."
#10 A dispute between divorced parents about who should be making the decisions and attending meetings involving their child/student. The noncustodial parent disagreed over how much control and access a court order gave to each set of parents.	The noncustodial parent "can have access to the educational information of the student, but doesn't necessarily make the decisions without the permission of the custodial parent." The noncustodial parent also "doesn't like her ex's wife and she doesn't like her being involved with things."	"The risks were potentially that we're not following the order and that we might be in violation of it."	"We pretty much just have to interpret the court order [the] best we can." "We emailed the parent about how we've handled things and the final communication from me was we will continue to follow the court order as best as possible and continue to communicate with her about educational decisions involving her son."
#11 A bill was passed that required every school to have an adult in the building that carries a weapon at all times.	"That's a reactive initiative in my opinion. I think there are a lot of other things that we could put in place to support students and to prevent school shootings, and that having someone with a gun guaranteed to be	Does this force the school to hire someone for this position? What if no staff or faculty member wants to do this?	"I messaged the representative who wrote that bill. I wrote him my concerns officially as a school leader and just said, Hey, you haven't thought this through well enough. I know that you attended all of

in the building is not the answer to prevent school shootings."

Will this only lead to a greater risk of violence due to having a gun in the school?

these seminars and all of these committee meetings and everything else, but you are solving a problem that Utah does not have. And I really tried to lay out my points as best as I could."

At the time of the study, this issue had not been resolved.

#12

A teacher wanted to present Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," but this primary-source document contains Dr. King's use of the N-word. Due to frequent schoolwide issues with this word, there was an increased sensitivity about using the word in the school community.

"The teacher knew what a volatile thing this was, and I was just so glad they came to me because that would be quite difficult otherwise."

Are the students mature enough to handle this document?

How will parents and the community respond if students are exposed to this word?

The administrator and teacher decided to not use the document.

"It's sad that our kids did not get that opportunity to study that letter because the letter wasn't even about the N-word."

"Will we use the primary-source document next year? Will our students be mature enough to see the importance of the document? Is there ever a time that the N-word should be spoken, spelled out, and not

abbreviated as the N-word?"

#13

A teacher shared a Spanish explorer's primary-source account that describes his treatment of the Indigenous populations. The portion in question was his first-person perspective of raping an Indigenous woman. According to the administrator, the account was "callous and very unfulfilling," but "it wasn't particularly graphic."

"So, a student raised their hand and they're like, this is really gross. Why are we reading this?"

"We got parent phone calls saying, why did you let my ninth grader read this? Little Bob doesn't need this in his head."

The teacher "did not prime" the students before presenting the material.

"The teacher felt very passionately, though, that if we don't share some of the hard parts of history, kids will not understand how horrific this truly was for the native population. . . . And I don't want to just blacklist things or to tell teachers no when they are passionate about opening kids up to the right ideas."

The administrator and teacher reviewed the material together and decided to "[present] it in a way that doesn't maybe shock these kids or make them go home and tell mom that something traumatic happened at school today, which is not what we want happening."

#14

An administrator feels forced to interview and hire a candidate for a job due to the candidate's family connections to a board member. Usually, the school waits until they have multiple candidates to conduct interviews, but she was told to do the interview right away.

"I feel this is nepotism, but the school board member is asking me to ignore the rules."

If I resist would there be potential retaliation, or would my employment be threatened?

At the time of the study's completion, the administrator had not decided whether to acquiesce to or resist the demands.

#15

The orchestra, choir, drama, and photography programs all asked for

"We try to accommodate what teachers, the space that teachers would like, but that's not always possible. And

"I've listened to each of them, and I've heard them individually talk about why they need the space and they

"My hope is that as we meet together and I'll be there to facilitate as needed, we can get them to talk with each other,

greater use of shared spaces for their equipment and classes.

so, there was an issue where we had different teachers needing the same space, and how do we manage that? However, one group can't monopolize the space."

each have valid reasons, and they're all kind people. They have great hearts, but sometimes when they talk about a coworker, they're talking about them as an adversary."

listen to each other, and help them see each other's perspectives and then have them come up with a solution. Because if I hand it down, chances are three people are going to be unhappy because I'm going to make a compromise."

Appendix E – Informed Consent Form

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled "Is That Controversial or Is It Me?" I will describe this study to you and answer any of your questions. This study is being led by Joseph Cochran, Teaching and Educational Leadership Department at Utah State University. The Faculty Advisor and Primary Investigator for this study is Dr. Rachel Turner of the Teaching and Leadership Department.

What the Study Is About
The purpose of this research is to help educators understand how controversial issues are identified and what risks are taken into consideration as administrators weigh whether a controversial issue should be addressed in the classroom.

What I Will Ask You to Do
I will ask you to meet with me for three interviews to discuss your educational context, experience, and perspectives on controversial issues in educational settings. Each meeting can be held in person or over Zoom according to distance and time concerns.

The first meeting will take between 30 and 60 minutes. I will ask some questions about controversial issues and your decision-making process about addressing them. I will also introduce and explain a weekly check-in component to the study.

Between the first and second interviews, you will receive four weekly check-in emails with a link to a Qualtrics survey. Each survey is identical and has two questions about whether you encountered a moment wherein you had to make a decision about the controversiality of an issue and what that issue was.

The second meeting will be between 30 and 60 minutes. We will revisit your answers from the first interview to see if your perspective has shifted. We will also discuss any responses from the weekly check-ins. If no issues were identified in your responses, we will discuss past issues you've considered before the study

The third and final meeting will be between 30 and 60 minutes. Before we meet, I will share a draft of my findings for your review so that you can ensure you are both accurately represented and protected. If necessary, we will discuss needed revisions to ensure those goals are met. Should a pertinent journaling arise between the second and third interviews, we can discuss that as well.

Risks and Discomforts
Though there are multiple safeguards in place to prevent it, there is a risk that participants may experience a loss of anonymity through the audio recordings, data storage, and analysis. District, charter, or private school leadership could learn about the participation of their employees and exert pressure to influence or prohibit participation. There is also a possible level of discomfort for participants as the audio of each interview is recorded.

Benefits

An anticipated personal and professional benefit from participating in this research will be an increased awareness of how controversial issues are distinguished, used, and avoided in the educational setting. The overall process should help you better relate with teachers while increasing your ability to communicate your own circumstances and beliefs to them.

Additional external benefits for the academic community will be increased understanding of how administrators determine whether an issue is controversial. The contextual factors considered by administrators can also be identified and explored through future research.

Perhaps one of the greatest potential benefits will be the increased understanding and empathy among teachers and administrators as they navigate the challenges associated with providing an authentic civic educational experience for their students.

Incentives for Participation
Each selected participant will receive up to $400 in total compensation for their participation in the study. Participants will be sent a Visa gift cards after completing each aspect of the study. The compensation and amounts will follow this schedule:

__Research Study Aspect__	__Amount__	__Anticipated Completion Time__
Primary Interview	$100	Early to Mid-November
Response to four weekly check-in surveys	$40	Between first and second interviews
Secondary Interview	$100	Early to Mid-December
Final Interview/Member-Checking	$100	Late January
Completion of Data Analysis	$60	Late February
Total Compensation	$400	

Your name and contact information may need to be shared with Utah State University finance staff to process your payment, but they will not receive any research data or other details about the study.

Audio/Video Recording
Each interview will be recorded. If the meeting is held in person, I will record the interview audio with a recording device. If held over Zoom, the meeting will be recorded through Zoom.

The recordings will be used for transcription purposes and will be stored in a secure online Utah State University box system. All audio recordings and survey responses will be permanently deleted at the completion of this primary study in 2024. As this study is designed to serve not only as my dissertation research but also as the basis for potential academic articles, the deidentified transcripts will not be destroyed until five years after completion of the initial study.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security
All recorded interviews will be stored within the secure Utah State University box drive, and each video and participant will be given a number as identification. The dissertation and future articles will all use pseudonyms in place of actual names and places. I may combine the responses from multiple participants into a composite person if ample shared traits exist. Only I

will have access to any identifying information, and I will destroy all identifying information at the conclusion of the study.

Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though I am taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent by email could be read by a third party.

Participation Is Voluntary
Your voluntary participation is appreciated and needed to achieve the research goals. This study is designed to triangulate the data gathered through multiple interviews and weekly check-ins. Completing all portions of the study is required for the use of your data. Please ensure that you believe you will be able to complete all aspects of the study before signing this form.

Follow-Up Studies
I may contact you again to request your participation in a follow-up study. As always, your participation will be voluntary, and I will ask for your explicit consent to participate in any of the follow-up studies.
May I contact you again to request your participation in a follow-up study?

_____

If You Have Questions
The researcher conducting this study is Joe Cochran, a graduate student at Utah State University, and the Primary Investigator is Dr. Rachel Turner. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Joe Cochran at joe.cochran@usu.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at 435-797-1821 or email them at irb@usu.edu.

Each participant will be sent a copy of this form after all parties have signed.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I have asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature_____ Date_____

Your Name (printed)_____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for three years beyond the end of the study.

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Education & Credentials

Utah State University – Logan, UT
Ph. D. in Education Specializing in Curriculum and Instruction   **August 2024**

Western Governors University
MS in Curriculum and Instruction   **June 2018**

Brigham Young University — Provo, Utah
BA in Spanish Teaching with a Minor in History Teaching   **April 2013**
Post-Baccalaureate Coursework for Social Science Composite Licensure   **September 2014 – June 2015**

Utah Secondary Education Level Two Teacher Certification,
Certified Social Science Composite Teacher, Spanish and U.S./World History Teacher   **May 2019**

Professional Experience

Adjunct Instructor – Ancient Scripture Department   **August 2021 - Present**
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY – Provo, UT

Adjunct Instructor – Church History and Doctrine Department   **January 2023 - Present**
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY – Provo, UT

Graduate Assistant Instructor – Teacher Education and Leadership   **August 2020 – May 2024**
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY – Logan, UT

Graduate Assistant Researcher– Utah State University   **August 2020 – May 2024**
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY – Logan, UT

Social Sciences Teacher – South Hills Middle School   **June 2015 – June 2020**
JORDAN SCHOOL DISTRICT – Riverton, UT

Seminary/Institute Teacher   **May 2013 – June 2014, August 2020 – December 2022**
CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS – Orem and Logan, UT

AP Human Geography Exam Reader   **June 2019-Present**
COLLEGE BOARD – Cincinnati, OH

ACT Prep Instructor   **Jan 2020-Present**
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY – Provo, UT

Especially for Youth Instructor   **2022-2023**
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY – Provo, UT

Teaching Experience

<u>Undergraduate Courses Taught</u>

Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY **Fall 2021 – Winter 2024**
LOGAN INSTITUTE OF RELIGION **Fall 2020**

Foundations of the Restoration
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY **Winter 2023, Winter 2024, Fall 2024**
LOGAN INSTITUTE OF RELIGION **Winter 2021, Winter 2022**

Teachings and Doctrines of the Book of Mormon
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY **Fall 2023, Fall 2024**
LOGAN INSTITUTE OF RELIGION **Fall 2021, Fall 2022**

The Living Prophets
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY **Spring 2023, Spring 2024**

The New Testament
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY **Summer 2024**

Secondary Social Studies Methods
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY **Fall 2020, Spring 2023**

Secondary Social Studies Practicum
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY **Fall 2020, Spring 2023**

Educational and Multicultural Foundations
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY **Fall 2021**

Teaching Social Studies in Elementary School
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY **Spring 2022, Fall 2022, Fall 2023, Spring 2024**

Elementary Education Practicum
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY **Spring 2022, Fall 2022, Fall 2024, Spring 2024**

<u>Secondary Courses Taught</u>

AP Human Geography **2015-2020**
SOUTH HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL

World Geography **2016-2020**
SOUTH HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL

United States History **2015-2016**
SOUTH HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Book of Mormon **2013-2014**
MOUNTAINVIEW HIGH SCHOOL SEMINARY

Spanish 1 **2013**
BYU UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT TEACHING

Publications

Cochran, J. (2024). ''A house of prayer for all people'': A guide to Christ's cleansing of the temple. *Religious Educator*, *25*(2), 92-113. https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-25-no-2-2024/house-prayer-all-people

Cochran, J. *(*2024*).* Is that controversial or is it just me? *Utah State University Dissertation.*

Cochran, J. (2024). ''Out of Darkness.'' https://www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/out-of-darkness

Turner, R., Knowles, R. & **Cochran, J**. (2024). Profile of an elementary teacher: How integration and instructional strategies differ across elementary classrooms. The Social Studies, DOI: 10.1080/00377996.2023.2297030

Knowles, R., **Cochran, J.,** & Turner, R. (*Under Review*). Informed but unengaged: A quantitative analysis of teacher ideology and multicultural picture book selection.

Taggart, A., Nielsen, S., **Cochran, J**., Stewart, C., Hansen, D., & Kennett, D. (*Under Revision*). Leading educational organizations serving refugee students.

Conference Participation

Brigham Young University Education Week
Cochran, J. (2024). *Seeking Life Eternal – To Know Jesus*. Provo, UT.

Utah State Research Symposium
Cochran, J. (2024). *Is That Controversial or Is It Just Me?* Logan, UT.

American Academy of Religion - Rocky Mountain-Great Plains Regional Meeting
Cochran, J. (2024). *A House of Prayer for All People - A Guide to Christ's Cleansing of the Temple*. Provo, UT.

Association of Teacher Educators
Turner, R. & **Cochran, J.** (2024). *Exploring pre-service teachers' experiences in social studies practicum: Implications for practice.* Anaheim, CA.

Utah State Research Symposium
Cochran, J. (2023). *What could have been: A review of student life at Brigham Young College*. Logan, UT.

Utah State Data Analysis Symposium
Cochran, J. (2023). *The rise and fall of Brigham Young College in the 1900s*. Logan, UT.

College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA)
Knowles, R., **Cochran, J**., & Turner, R. (2022). *Informed but unengaged: A quantitative analysis of*

teacher ideology and multicultural picture book selection. Philadelphia, PA.

University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA)
Taggart, A., Nielsen, S., **Cochran, J.**, Stewart, J., Kennett, D. W., & Hansen, D. (2022). *Leading educational organizations serving refugee students.* Seattle, WA.

Utah Council for the Social Studies (UCSS)
Turner, R. & **Cochran, J.** (2022). *History is NOW: Using historical picture books to teach controversial issues to young learners.* Salt Lake City, UT.

Brigham Young University Education Week
Cochran, J. (2017) *Walking in His Footprints: Steps Towards a More Christlike Life*. Provo, UT.

Brigham Young University Idaho Education Week (Keynote Speaker)
Cochran, J. (2017). *Look Up and Live*. Rexburg, ID.

Brigham Young University Idaho Education Week
Cochran, J. (2016). *Walking in His Footprints: Steps Towards a More Christlike Life*. Rexburg, ID.

Utah Foreign Language Association (UFLA)
Cochran, J. (2013). *Bringing the World To Your Classroom*. Ogden, UT.

Service

Utah Senate Youth Scholarship Judge	**2015 – 2022**

Manuscript Reviewer
BYU Religious Educator	**2022 - Present**
Journal of School Leadership	**2023 – Present**

Conference Submission Reviewer
College & University Faculty Assembly (CUFA)	**2024**

Awards/Recognitions

Recognition of "Above and Beyond" Advocacy for Students with Disabilities   **2024**
Brigham Young University Accessibility Center

Brigham Award Recipient   **2022**
Student nominated annual award given by Brigham Young University in recognition of service to students

Golden Apple Recipient   **2019-2020**
Student nominated Teacher of the Year Award given by South Hills Middle School

I Fight for Students Award Recipient   **2020**

Award given by South Hills Middle School Administration in recognition of advocation for students