Liberty University
DigitalCommons@Liberty University

Faculty Publications and Presentations

School of Education

1-2011

The Role of Controversial Issues in Moral Education: Approaches and Attitudes of Christian School Educators

Samuel J. Smith
Liberty University, sjsmith3@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/educ_fac_pubs

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Smith, Samuel J., "The Role of Controversial Issues in Moral Education: Approaches and Attitudes of Christian School Educators" (2011). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 167.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/educ_fac_pubs/167

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

The Role of Controversial Issues in Moral Education: Approaches and Attitudes of Christian School Educators

Samuel J. Smith, Ed.D., Liberty University

Abstract

This study investigated the approaches and attitudes of Christian school teachers as they addressed controversial issues in moral education. Thirteen teachers from four schools were interviewed extensively. A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was implemented. Participants conveyed that they attempted to remain pedagogically neutral in matters relating to denominational differences among Christian churches. While acknowledging that indoctrinative techniques may alienate students, teachers chose to indoctrinate selectively, especially in matters critical to the Christian faith. Issues impacting the classrooms included abortion, sex, doctrine, homosexuality, evolution, etc. Teachers rarely chose to remain neutral on controversial issues unless by doing so they sensed that they would undermine parental authority or a particular Christian church's denominational doctrine.

Introduction

Is it possible to teach morality without addressing controversial issues? Some curriculum theorists (Oser, Althof, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2008; Sockett, 1992) respond with a resounding "no!" They perceive moral education and an issues-centered curriculum as inseparable, that to teach values is essentially to address controversy. Teachers can, however, be reluctant to address authentic values that have real meaning for students because of the risk involved in dealing with the controversy. Levitt and Longstreet (1993) suggest that efforts to cling only to the safe values in avoidance of authentic values provide a counterfeit education, stating, "If we are to deal authentically with our crisis in civic values, then [authentic values] must be confronted, regardless of the level of controversy that may be invoked and no matter how negative the reactions of parents may be" (p. 142).

Gerzon (1997) claimed that parents have indeed reacted to the level of controversy. In an atypical analysis of the 1980s growth in private and home schooling, he attributed the migration to parental reaction to a lack of controversy in the curriculum:

[Avoiding controversy] has made education monolithic. Dissenting and minority viewpoints were marginalized and were either pushed underground into private schools, the swelling home-schooling movement, or other anti-public school advocacy organizations. The message from the education establishment to their customers all too often boiled down to: 'Love it or leave it.' Not surprisingly, many have left. (p. 8)

If Gerzon's (1997) analysis is accurate, parents chose alternative forms of education because of their dissatisfaction with how public schools were addressing or failing to address issues relevant to the parents but perceived as controversial by the school. Such issues exist, however, in Christian schools as well. Should controversial issues also be at the core of the Christian school curriculum? If so, what stance should teachers take? Should teachers make known their opinions or keep them to themselves? It would be absurd for teachers to attempt to be neutral on every issue, but regarding most controversial issues, many, like Kupperman (1985) and Merry (2005), believe that it would be improper and even offensive for teachers to impose a particular point of view.

Singh (1989) defined the practice of teachers deliberately withholding their own opinions on controversial issues as procedural neutrality. Advocates of procedural neutrality argue that it is the best means of avoiding indoctrination of students while still developing their rationality. Though some believe this approach to be the only responsible and professional stance to adopt, Singh pointed out that it is highly problematic and even unacceptable when teaching controversial moral issues relating to topics such as racial discrimination. Moreover, a neutral stance, though attempted, might in actuality be impossible at the most and disingenuous at the least (Cotton, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the specific problems that Christian school educators face as they address controversial issues in the moral education curriculum and to discover how some of these teachers chose to approach such issues. What are their attitudes about the role of controversy? How does this affect their instruction? Do they assume a neutral or intentional role? How do they avoid indoctrination, or do they avoid it? How do they define indoctrination? Do they struggle with integrity as they endeavored to commensurate their instructional duties with their religious convictions? What role do they believe controversial issues play in students' moral development?

Method

Hermeneutic phenomenological research methods were applied to this study. Max van Manen (1990) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as a human science that studies persons and the essences of their lived experiences. It uses interpretive description to explain a particular aspect of the "lifeworld" while acknowledging the complexity of lived life. The word phenomenology is derived from the Greek word phenomenon, which means "to show itself" (Ray, 1994, p. 118). It is the meaning of an experience that is intended to be shown as it is described in the language of the participant. The data of hermeneutic phenomenological research are narrative in nature. The researcher collects and analyzes extensive narrative data for the purpose of acquiring a greater understanding of a particular situation (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005), which ultimately contributes "to one's thoughtfulness and one's ability to act toward others, children or adults, with tact or tactfulness" (van Manen, p. 7). A dynamic interplay among the following research activities is the essence of hermeneutic phenomenological research:

(1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; (6) balancing the research process by considering parts and whole. (van Manen, p. 31)

Participants

While random sampling is a characteristic of quantitative research, Gay (1996) points out that sampling for qualitative research is purposeful. Teachers were selected from member schools of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) in the state of Florida. Thirteen teachers, representing four schools, agreed to participate. Seven of the teachers were female and six were male. Their years of teaching experience ranged from three to 27 years with an average of 11 years. Their present teaching assignments were distributed as follows: primary elementary, 3; upper elementary, 2; middle school, 3; and high school, 6. All 13 were Anglo-American.

Procedure

Data collection. The study relied on face-to-face, open-ended interviews that were followed up with telephone interviews as necessary for clarity. Written accounts of selected experiences also were requested of participants who expressed a desire to share more information than time allowed in the interview session. In accordance with the interview suggestions of McMillan and Schumacher (1989), interviews were in-depth and minimally-structured. A general interview guide consisted of the following list of questions:

Regarding moral education.

1. Describe your moral education curriculum.
2. How is it implemented?
3. What is the intent of your moral education curriculum?

Regarding the role of controversy.

1. Have controversial issues arisen within the moral education curriculum? If so, describe the situation.
2. How did you address the situation?
3. What role do you believe controversial issues play in the moral development of your students?

Regarding intentionality, neutrality, and indoctrination.

1. When controversial issues arise, what stance have you taken?
2. Why have you taken this stance?

3. Do you believe the stances you have taken in the past were the best ones for the students' moral development? Why or why not?
4. In what instances have you chosen to remain neutral? Why have you done so?
5. What does indoctrination mean to you?
6. Do you practice indoctrination? Why or why not?
7. How might you summarize your beliefs regarding the discussion we have had on moral education, controversial issues, and the intent of the teacher?

Frequent, extensive note-taking is usually necessary in this type of research (Gay, 1996; Morse, 1994); however, for the purpose of encouraging continuous, uninterrupted dialogue, note-taking was minimized and audio recording was utilized. The interviews were transcribed to enhance analysis.

Each initial interview was approximately one hour in length. The audio recordings were transcribed and mailed to the participants requesting written reflective comments or clarifications. Follow-up conversations with three of the participants were conducted for the same purpose. In the follow-up writings and conversations, the participants confirmed their original statements but took the opportunity to re-present them in a clearer, more succinct fashion.

Data analysis. Research data were analyzed for the purpose of enhancing understanding of the phenomenon under study. Morse (1994) and van Manen (1990) were used as guides in the process of data analysis. In order to implement the inductive reasoning necessary for phenomenological research, a decontextualization of the data must occur. Morse (1994) refers to this process as sorting and sifting. The data are removed from their contexts of persons and instances and are isolated into individual descriptions. The data of this study underwent an interparticipant analysis and a categorical analysis. The interparticipant analysis involved the comparison of transcripts from several participants while the categorical analysis entailed a sorting by commonalities. After the data were categorically analyzed, a coding sorted the information for the purpose of uncovering underlying meanings in the text. Themes emerged as metaphorical references, idiomatic phrases, and descriptive words were highlighted. According to van Manen (1990), themes formulate as the data are simplified and the phenomenon's meaning is captured.

Results

Categorical Results

The moral education curriculum. Upon initially being asked about their moral education curriculum, five of the 13 teachers immediately named publishers who distribute either Bible class courses or biblically-based character building textbooks. The three publishers named were A Beka Book Publishers, Bob Jones University Press, and Purposeful Design Publications. Most other references were made to the Bible as the foundation for the moral curriculum. It was referred to as the "stand-alone truth," "the moral measure of our lives," and "the bottom line for any moral education curriculum." While those who mentioned packaged curricula were

identifying moral education strictly within a Bible class context, those who mentioned the Bible as their source for moral education spoke in terms of interdisciplinary integration of biblical principles throughout various subject areas: history, physical education, science, and math.

Three of the male high school teachers described their moral education curriculum as a list of rules and expectations that they enforced in the classroom. They explained how they communicated the standards and the actions they took once the guidelines had been violated. "My life" was the response given by one who emphasized that his moral education curriculum was an informal process of serving as a good moral example.

A variety of responses were given as to how the curriculum was implemented. Bible class was mentioned again along with descriptions of how the integration process was conducted throughout the subjects with scriptural principles being integrated when appropriate. Class discussion and application were reported as common means of implementation with application involving the selection of Bible verses that would comment directly or indirectly on a particular moral issue. Teachers commented regularly on their awareness that moral education was pervasive and that they believed it occurred more in an informal series of interactions with students than it does in any particular class or program.

Above all, the primary intent of the Christian school's moral education curriculum as voiced by these teachers was that students be converted to Christianity if they were not already Christians upon coming to the school. This was expounded upon in many ways: teachers' intents were that students "Love the Lord and His Word," "see the consequences of obeying or not obeying God and how that affects their lives and others' lives," "listen to God," and "Live godly lives." Teachers spoke of their desire that students have a "personal relationship with God."

One teacher spoke of her primary intent as that of developing an awareness of diversity in her students, that all people were "created differently with a purpose by God." The individualistic nature of the teachers' intentions were expressed in references to God's plan for individual students and that part of their moral development was in finding their places in God's plan.

A final intent that was consistently voiced related to the desire to see students develop a "general sense of right and wrong." This was couched generally in terms dealing with the goal of developing decision-making skills, Christian character, and ownership of convictions.

Our goal in the moral education is to create an ownership of the convictions that the Scripture teaches we should have. It's not enough just to say, 'Here's the standard; you've got to live it.' Because we can't on our own. Without the cross, we have no hope. So, the power by which we live our lives is in the cross. To get a kid to own the convictions we're talking about would be the ultimate goal.

Controversial issues in moral education. Two teachers, a second grade teacher in her ninth year and a middle school math teacher in her 18th year, claimed that controversial issues had never arisen in their classrooms at all. Later, the second grade teacher commented that daily issues of students getting along with one another had indeed been controversial and that the issue of students' parents going through divorce had been controversial. Also, after being probed the

middle school teacher identified the school dress code as a regular topic of controversy among her students.

Listed from most frequently mentioned to least frequently mentioned are the following controversial issues: (1) abortion; (2) various forms of sexual expression—premarital sex, masturbation, and oral sex; (3) entertainment—music, videos, and television; (4) various distinctive denominational church doctrines; (5) politics; (6) homosexuality; (7) evolution versus creation; (8) New Age beliefs and practices; (9) divorce; (10) violence in schools; (11) AIDS; (12) school dress code regulations: (13) roles of men and women in society and specifically in marriage; and (14) slavery.

While many cautioned that students might introduce controversial issues for the sole purpose of getting teachers off task, all teachers interviewed stated that they would normally proceed cautiously to address the issue in class. Five of the 13 said that they would "just tell them what the Bible has to say about it." Three of the others also would refer to biblical references only after giving students time to discuss their own beliefs together. Whether referencing the Bible initially or waiting until the end of the discussion period, the intent appeared to be to settle the issue by drawing upon a final authority. The others reported that they would encourage students to talk, that they would hit the issue "head on, no holds barred," and that they would attempt to present real-life examples for students to examine.

I try to let them talk about it. And then 'let's go to Scripture and see what we can find in the Bible that speaks about this issue.' And sometimes that may take a day or two, and I encourage them to try and seek out passages of Scripture that will speak to that issue. It's not something that I want to push aside because, if it is a concern to them, then I think it has value. And I don't tell kids that they can't speak about something like that if I don't agree with them. That's something that we need to talk about. So, I encourage kids to talk whether I have the same opinion or not.

All 13 teachers unanimously agreed that controversial issues play a significant role in the moral development of their students: however, their reasons for this were extremely varied. Two of them put qualifiers on their positive responses: "If the students have a good Bible background" and "if they're guided." Others reported that the inclusion of controversial issues in the curriculum fosters student thinking, helps them to understand why others believe what they believe, and assists them in developing their own values and morals. It also provides opportunities for students to practice articulating their reasoning in a safe environment before possibly having to defend their beliefs in a hostile environment.

The teacher's role. Depending on what the issue was and whether there was a clear biblical mandate connected with the issue, about a third of the interviewed teachers would directly turn to Scripture to respond to a controversial issue in the class. "If according to God's Word I can see where I can become dogmatic on something, I will be dogmatic on it." The others claimed that they tried to attempt to remain neutral until requested by the students to give an opinion. Several expressed a measure of frustration with this procedure; below is an example of the reasoning one teacher articulated:

That's a hard one because sometimes your first reaction as a young teacher would be to jump at the side of that which is right automatically. And that's the easy way to go, but as a teacher there is a responsibility we have to maintain an objectivity at least for as long a period as possible to get the kids to be able to share, because I think if you side one way or the other quickly—I know I'm speaking from a teacher's standpoint here—then you're forcing the kids either to an adversarial position or the position where they just agree with you and nothing gets discussed. So I will eventually share with them what I think. But initially, I'm trying to get them to come to me with 'Well, what do you think about that? What is your position on that? Why do you think it's wrong? And what about these issues? Have you considered these things in relation to what you are saying?' Teachers who can do that not only create lively discussion but I think also position a kid to be equipped to make those hard calls.

There were two types of justifications offered for the stances that teachers take when controversial issues arise. Those teachers who had said that they were likely first to present to the students what the Bible had to say regarding a particular issue offered justifications such as "It works" and "It's the truth." In the group interview one teacher commented, "That's the whole purpose of a Christian school teacher, to direct the students to a Christ-like behavior. And Christ-like behavior is not the world's behavior. You can't be stepping on the fence expecting to have both worlds." "He brings up the fence," a second teacher continued, "I think a line has been drawn, and you have to be on either side of it. There is no straddling of the line any longer. 'Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay.'"

Another type of justification was offered for those teachers who maintained that they would attempt neutrality until questioned about their opinion by students. These teachers said they did so in order to foster thinking in their students and so students would remain open to the teacher's instruction and would not be alienated.

One teacher who had previously commented that he typically played the "devil's advocate" with students and gave his justification as wanting to prepare students to be articulate "in the market" and to prepare them to take whatever "abuse" might come as a result of their viewpoints.

Self-evaluations of whether teachers' stances were always for the students' best moral development produced mixed results. Nearly half the respondents gave confident affirmations that they believed their stances in dealing with controversial matters were always for the students' best moral development. One teacher expounded, "I try not to ever say, 'This is right and this is wrong because this is what I believe.' I don't do that. I use the Bible. So that doesn't ever really make you doubt what you've done." A teacher who had earlier said that his moral education curriculum was his life explained,

Paul said that he wished everybody was like him. And I always thought that was pretty cocky and egotistical, and yet I can truthfully say that if people had my beliefs and morals, that I would have no trouble with that. It's not cockiness, but I believe that what I believe is right, and I hope the kids will see that.

Those who evaluated themselves as not always having taken the best stance for their students' moral development addressed the issue of alienating their students or of undermining parental authority.

If the discussion causes them to doubt something that their parents have taught them and gives Satan a wedge to use against—their parents are ultimately responsible for them, and even the best intentions, if it causes them and gives them some iota of rationalization to disobey or disrespect their parents, I have been wrong.

This particular teacher made regular reference to parental authority throughout the interview. She repeatedly described the Christian school as a place where parents would not be undermined. In her school, at least one parent must sign a statement that he or she is a Christian. This concern might not be as strong in Christian schools that make no such requirement.

Other negative self-evaluations communicated a self-awareness of behavior that possibly could offend students and thereby alienate them altogether. "There have been times," one teacher stated, "when I've been very opinionated and maybe not tactful with students." Another confessed,

I can tend to be pretty sharp. I have to watch how I say things, not necessarily what I say, but the tone of voice. And having been around as long as I have—the idea that I'm throwing my weight around like 'Who are you, you little pipsqueak?'

Yet another illustrated the student alienation effect this way: "Now, what's good and what's best are two different things, and sometimes our good is the enemy of God's best. So, whenever I'm trying to push what's good, at times I alienate the children."

Only two of the 13 teachers clearly stated that they do not remain neutral when controversial issues arise. Of those who gave examples of times when they considered themselves as practicing neutrality, most of them, in fact, were not neutral based on their own accounts of the situations. They interpreted their tactfulness as neutrality believing that consideration for students' opinions, whether the teacher agreed or not, was the measure of neutrality. This can be seen in the following teacher's statement:

She could see that I wasn't buying it, but I chose to pretty much remain neutral on it and not—and she did comment to me later. She said, 'I know you don't believe what I said, but at least you didn't put me down like Mrs. So-and-so did.' So I remain neutral in that way.

Another teacher, in claiming to remain neutral at times, said that she would tell her students,

'If you want to know my reasoning, I'll give you my Scriptures. Then you can think about it, pray about it, and when you come to the age where you are not under the authority of your parents, then you can make up your own mind. But make sure you base your decisions on truthful ideas.'

By far, the most commonly mentioned issues on which teachers felt an obligation to remain neutral were those relating to denominational doctrines. Many participants described their

schools as inter-denominational or nondenominational as they explained why it would be crucial for them to remain neutral on such issues. Other issues mentioned on which teachers prefer to remain neutral were as follows: music, movies, politics, divorce, women working outside the home, Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy.

Roman Catholic doctrines were cited often as being those that would surface in class and that would require that the teacher remain neutral. One teacher explained that he would remain neutral only if a Roman Catholic student were in the classroom; otherwise, he would teach what he believed to be "wrong about the doctrine." This is similar to what another teacher stated about homosexuality; she would remain neutral if she knew that a student in the class had a homosexual relative but would otherwise clearly speak out against homosexuality. A common response in dealing with such issues was that teachers regularly referred students to their pastors or their parents to discuss them.

For most, it was difficult for them to render their definition of the term indoctrination. They struggled with the negative connotations of the word while believing that it was something that they themselves do in the Christian school. Some explained that indoctrination was wrong except in the case of significant teachings such as salvation by Christ alone. Others identified it as always wrong while a few saw nothing wrong with indoctrination as long as it was based on the truth of the Bible.

A few images were offered to describe the associations connected with the word indoctrination.

- *My immediate reaction is to think of somebody joining the military, and the first they do is sit you down, and you're probably going to listen to an hour lecture.*
- *You stand in line. . . . You're told what the rules are. You're told how you should behave. . . . There's no grey area. There's no room for you to question. You do it, and you do it with no questions.*
- *I'm thinking of the Communists—the Cold War.*
- *Each student is a basket. When you put them into the river . . ., they're full of water. They are in an indoctrination process in the Christian school receiving all about the lordship of Jesus Christ. We are submersing them in that indoctrinating process.*

As difficult as it was for the participants to offer a definition of indoctrination, it was just as difficult for them clearly to summarize the variety of mixed thoughts and feelings in each response. Below are select words and phrases from their definitions: *not thinking, spitting out rote, training, forcing, steering, submersing, instill, habit, manipulate, infuse,pigeonhole, to bury into the mind,* and *investing*. Two elementary teachers expressed no negative connotations in their definitions as they described indoctrination as "teaching philosophy" and as "what you are taught about the Bible."

Answers became even more complex when participants were asked whether they themselves practiced indoctrination. Eight responded positively with the remaining five answering negatively. Two of the negative respondents offered alternative terms for what they attempted to accomplish instead of indoctrination: one stated that he was "investing" in his students, the other that he was "discipling" them.

In the eight responses of those who acknowledged that they did indeed practice indoctrination, there seemed to be a sense that they had no other option, that indoctrination was a means they had to use especially in matters of spiritual issues such as salvation.

I would only [indoctrinate] with scriptural things when it comes to salvation. Other lesser things I would be very careful not to do that. Obviously, you want to see people go to heaven, I'm not pushy-pushy, but I don't back down. I don't waiver. I'm not tolerant of other ideas. 'This is what God says, and this is the way it has got to be in this particular instance. It's black and white.' And I say, 'If you've got a problem with me, then go to the Lord because He is the one who said it. I'm just passing the message on.'

Upon facing controversial issues in the moral education curriculum, Christian school educators perceive their role in a variety of ways. The following categories were developed from the participants' descriptions, stories, and beliefs.

Recruiter of mercenary soldiers. The recruiter of mercenary soldiers solicits the assistance of a student who holds the same beliefs as she does. She then encourages that student in a variety of ways to verbalize the argument that she would rather not risk verbalizing herself.

Censor. The censor removes the controversial material before students have the opportunity to be exposed to it; thereby, avoiding the controversy altogether.

Herald of truth. The herald of truth sees his role as that of messenger of the proclamation to those who may be unaware of the expectations held by the author of the message.

Facilitator. The facilitator creates an environment conducive to discussion. She values the opinions of students and encourages their expression.

Spiritual boot camp drill sergeant. The spiritual boot camp drill sergeant intentionally creates a militaristically rigorous environment. Students are conditioned until they perform as automatons on demand. An artificially adversarial environment is created to prepare them for the day when students will face a true adversary and will need to defend themselves.

Selective indoctrinator. For the selective indoctrinator, there are certain issues whereby the ends justify the means. If salvation or righteous conduct appears to be the result, indoctrination is an appropriate means to arrive at this end. For all other matters, it is inappropriate.

Thematic Results

Two pairs of themes were apparent throughout the responses of the 13 teachers participating in this study—themes illustrating the struggles that teachers face as they addressed controversial issues while attempting to develop morality. Institutional loyalty and critical thinking constituted the first pair. Selective indoctrination and sensitivity to possible student alienation constituted the second.

Institutional loyalty versus critical thinking. On one hand, controversial issues were valued for their ability to promote critical thinking and lively discourse. Teachers realized that disequilibrium was necessary to bring about serious cognitive consideration of a matter and that evaluation of a controversial matter could lead to positive moral action on the student's part. On the other hand, teachers struggled with their own personal convictions and the mandate from school and home to promote institutional loyalty to family, church, government authority, and biblical absolutes.

When should the Christian school teacher promote critical thinking? In matters where there was clearly a perceived biblical mandate or a school policy, participants preferred directly to teach the mandate and to discuss the benefits of following it. In matters where there was no biblical or institutional mandate, they were likely to permit open discussion while remaining ostensibly neutral or to share with students his or her personal convictions. The risks of facing the retribution of parents or school caused some to limit the promotion of critical thinking as it related to controversial moral issues.

Selective indoctrination versus sensitivity to student alienation. Christian school teachers expressed positive feelings about indoctrinating selectively. While struggling with the negative connotations related to the word itself, participants believed that it was imperative and unavoidable that they indoctrinate students in the way of eternal salvation and in moral absolutes as expressed in Scripture. These were the only issues in which they were comfortable using such a tactic. In all other instances it was perceived as inappropriate.

Another theme expressed in the data revealed that, although teachers were compelled to indoctrinate on certain issues, they were keenly aware that students might become alienated because of these tactics. They acknowledged that their success as teachers depended upon their ability to maintain a positive relationship with students and that some coercive instructional strategies might very well alienate a number of students, thereby hindering the pedagogical relationship.

Teachers appeared to be less neutral than they claimed to be at times. While trying not to alienate students, they reported resorting to strategies that may seem less coercive but are quite manipulative nevertheless. The characterizations mentioned earlier illustrated some of these strategies that may have been less offensive to students but that were extremely manipulative. One such example was that of the "recruiter of mercenary soldiers." To solicit, encourage, and reward those who openly voice the opinions of the teacher while the teacher appeared to be neutral was a disingenuous manner of relating to students.

Another artificial relationship with students was the one in which the teacher chose to play a role, such as devil's advocate, without clarifying with the students that it was a role play. This characterization mentioned earlier was called the "spiritual boot camp drill sergeant" because of the intent of the teacher to strengthen students in their arguments before they faced true opposition. A more covert means of manipulation was to censor out controversial material before students had an opportunity to be exposed to it. This constitutes what has been referred to as the null curriculum—that which is intentionally not taught (Eisner, 1994).

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the specific problems that Christian school educators faced as they addressed controversial issues in the moral education curriculum and to discover how some of these teachers chose to approach such issues. The intent was to listen to their voices in order to understand better what they experienced as they attempted to fulfill their professional and spiritual obligations. They expressed a variety of perspectives about their moral goals for students, the role of controversy in the moral development of their students, and their own roles as teachers. The data supplied by the teachers in this study contained many anecdotes, opinions, and directives. To summarize the content of the transcripts, however, is less meaningful than to consider the recurring themes prevalent throughout the conversation.

The first notable theme was that of loyalty. To be loyal is to be true to or faithful to another entity. In this case the objects of the teachers' loyalties were family, church, government, and biblical absolutes. By far, the greatest loyalty for these teachers was to biblical absolutes. If the Bible directly or indirectly addressed a controversial issue, the principle was presented as the final authority on the matter. If there was no biblical mention of the issue, teachers overwhelmingly preferred to refer the matter to parents and pastors while remaining neutral themselves. When controversial issues revolved around governmental figures, teachers cited biblical defense for continuing loyal prayer support and submission to governmental authority.

A seemingly competing theme was that of critical thinking. Teachers acknowledged the value of controversial issues in that they "get students to think." Because of the political climate of the Christian school, however, teachers may not always welcome controversial issues into the curriculum. Fiscal control of most Christian schools is based in homes and churches. Parents' tuition and church support are what feed the Christian school budget. To encourage critical thinking of principles or doctrines taught in the students' homes and churches could bring the demise of the teacher.

Selective indoctrination was yet another theme present in the data. Despite negative connotations and definitions provided by the participants of indoctrination, they overwhelmingly acknowledged their practice of selective indoctrination. This is compatible with the literature of character educators who embrace indoctrination of values as one of their chief methods. Participants in the study repeatedly stated that indoctrination was justified for two prominent reasons: (1) others indoctrinate, and (2) the eternal salvation of students depended upon it. Therefore, specifically in the area of eternal salvation, indoctrination was considered an acceptable practice.

Finally, the theme of student alienation was evident throughout the data. Realizing that coercive techniques might bring about a rejection by the students, teachers spoke regularly of their caution not to "push away" or to "alienate" students, especially in matters dealing with types of entertainment and different denominational doctrines.

An awareness of these themes may assist teacher educators in better preparing preservice teachers to address curricular turbulence. It may further the conversation with inservice teachers,

parents, and school leaders about what specific goals they have for the moral development of students and the role controversial issues might play in accomplishing those goals. Also, those who construct policies for Christian schools might consider crafting guidelines that provide teachers a framework from which to operate when certain types of controversies arise, especially as they relate to doctrines held by a school's sponsoring church. Whether intentionally injected or occurring spontaneously, controversy will perennially subsist in the curriculum and will serve both to spur learning and to stir contention.

References

Cotton, D. R. E. (2006). Teaching controversial environmental issues: neutrality and balance in the reality of the classroom.
Educational Research, *48*, 223-241. doi: 10.1080/00131880600732306

Eisner, E. (1994). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan College Publishing.

Gay, L. R. (1996). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Gerzon, M. (1997). Teaching democracy by doing it! *Educational Leadership*, *54*, 6-11.

Kupperman, J. J. (1985). Why some topics are controversial. *Educational leadership*, *42*, 73-76.

Levitt, G. A ., & Longstreet, W. S. (1993). Controversy and the teaching of authentic civic values. *The Social Studies*, *84*, 142-148.

McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (1989). *Research in education: A conceptual introduction*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Merry, M. S. (2005). Indoctrination, moral instruction, and nonrational beliefs: A place for autonomy?
Educational Theory, *55*, 399-420. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.2005.00003.x

Morse, J. M. (Ed.). (1994). *Critical issues in qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Oser, F. K., Althof, W., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2008). The Just Community approach to moral education: system change or individual change?
Journal of Moral Education, *37*, 395-415. doi: 10.1080/03057240802227551

Ray, M. A. (1994). The richness of phenomenology: Philosophic, theoretic, and methodologic concerns. In J. M. Morse (Ed.), *Critical issues in qualitative research methods* (pp. 95-115). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Singh, B. R. (1989). Neutrality and commitment in teaching moral and social issues in a multicultural society.*Educational Review*, *41*, 227-242.

Sockett, H. (1992). The moral aspects of the curriculum. In P. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum* (pp. 543-569). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science far action sensitive pedagogy*. London: The State University of New York Press.

Wilding C. & Whiteford, G. (2005). Phenomenological research: An exploration of conceptual, theoretical, and practical issues. *OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health*, *25*(3), 98-104.