Victor **Malo-Juvera**
and
Lisa **Scherff**

Standardized Censorship

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Context for the Reality of Standardized Censorship

Victor Malo-Juvera

During my first year of teaching, I had no classroom of my own because I taught in an overcrowded school; instead, I would teach in other teachers' rooms while they had a planning period. After one class in my department head's room, she asked me why I was teaching grammar even though it was not on the state exam that students took each year. The test she referred to was the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test), and that was what our school grade was based on. Florida was one of the first states to give schools A through F grades, and those grades determined various rewards and punishments for both teachers and administrators. Although the pressure on teachers to eschew in-depth discussions of verb-subject agreement rarely makes news, it is an example of the power of test-taking curricula to dominate classroom time and marginalize or even eliminate other forms of instruction, including the reading and teaching of young adult literature.

Censorship is most often thought of as a direct conflict, usually one in which parents or community members petition to have a text removed from classroom instruction or school libraries. There are similar instances of administrators ordering teachers not to use certain texts or to remove them from classroom libraries. Beyond official challenges to texts, there are also many forms of silent censorship (Nye & Barco, 2012), where teachers or librarians decide not to incorporate some texts because of fear of reprisal for their choices. Although most of the attention in issues of censorship focuses around the aforementioned types, there is another type that is as insidious as silent censorship and perhaps even more ubiquitous than direct censorship. Some teachers embrace this type of censorship, while others have no other choice. I refer to this pandemic as *standardized censorship.*

As it functions in public schools, standardized censorship refers to the curricula, policies, standards, norms, and goals that prioritize standardized testing, remove academic freedom from teachers, and support the continued Othering of marginalized peoples based on constructs such as color, race, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, age, or religion. Standardized censorship is similar to institutionalized racism as it is embedded in the many institutions associated with public schooling and is often invisible to casual examination; furthermore, it often perpetuates institutionalized racism via the valorization of standardized testing, which has long been considered a form of institutional racism (e.g., Kohn, 2000).

Consider that in many public school systems, the official curriculum is geared toward narrowing the achievement gap, which is measured by standardized tests—a troubling paradox in and of itself. This type of censorship, then, is often more prevalent in schools that serve lower socioeconomic populations where students typically score poorly on standardized tests.

In these schools, budgets are often already meager due to lower property taxes and charter schools taking valuable student dollars; the dwindling funds that are left are often used to purchase commercial curricula and computer programs that promise to deliver better test scores. The result is not just an aging book room with worn out and dated novels, but a dearth of time for teachers to address anything other than the mandated curriculum.

Note that within the context of this discussion, standardized censorship is different from issues of teacher choice. Consider that English teachers at many schools work together to create an integrated vertical curriculum that often includes reading choices for grade levels, and teachers of Advanced Placement language and literature courses often use texts that regularly appear on the AP exam. Although censorship can certainly play a role in these types of discussions, I do not consider these to be forms of standardized censorship because classroom teachers are deeply involved in these instructional decisions.

Beyond reducing students' access to texts by dominating time and money, standardized censorship also results in the creation of a roadblock to implementing social justice education.

Beyond reducing students' access to texts by dominating time and money, standardized censorship also results in the creation of a roadblock to implementing social justice education. This is not because administrators or parents attempt to censor teachers from introducing students to potentially controversial texts or topics, but because teachers are expected to be using other texts and/or excerpts that have been chosen by those outside the classroom in order to achieve standards that are created with little or no input from classroom teachers. Thus, while a teacher or librarian who is facing a challenge to a specific text can seek help from NCTE, ALA, authors, and scholars, there is little recourse for teachers who are not able to teach a young adult novel because they are busy "teaching to the test."

The ramifications of this are serious, as without the ability to dedicate instructional time to teaching whole novels, efforts toward social justice are often negated or relegated to an "add on" status. Contemporary social justice issues are usually best represented in young adult literature, as canonical texts typically do not address current topics such as police brutality or immigration laws, and many perpetuate and codify the very problematic social attitudes that teachers are trying to address.

Some may argue that this type of censorship does not prevent students from accessing texts as part of school or classroom libraries; however, scholars such as Groenke (2012) have warned against relegating noncanonical titles and genres to the margins of curricula. I would argue that it is critical to understand the level of privilege afforded to a text that is read, studied, and instructed on a whole-class level versus a title that sits on a shelf, available to students but not allotted instructional time. The canon derives its power from its enforcement as mandatory for whole-class readings, and despite the fact that numerous scholars (e.g., Haertling Thein & Beach, 2013; Kumashiro, 2002) have pointed out that the canon is predominantly white, male, and heteronormative, there are still many educators and scholars who believe that young adult literature should be voluntary reading or choice reading. I am not arguing against adolescents having choice in the titles they read, nor am I railing against reading just for pleasure, but it is hard to imagine being able to foment the large-scale changes that social justice educators advocate for through the independent reading practices of adolescents, while texts that codify the very things that oppress students often occupy the center of the curriculum.

The results of standardized censorship are evident, as some students who are entering college now have been educated entirely under a system dominated by standardized testing. Just as troubling, there are many teachers now with years of experience who have never taught anything but "to the test" and others who have only followed scripted curricula. In some states, teachers are pitted against each other by evaluation systems that demand winners and losers, and the level of surveillance discussed by MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, and Palma (2004) in their analysis of teachers' experiences under a scripted reading program has only become more intense in public schools. All of this points to a future genera-

tion of teachers who may think that "good teaching" is faithfully following a provided curriculum without critically questioning that curriculum—ironic in a time when "critical thinking" is being touted as a necessary skill for students.

All is not bleak, though. There are teachers around the country who are struggling to give their students access to topics and texts in the face of standardized censorship. One of those is this issue's guest columnist, Lisa Scherff, who shares her experiences with various forms of standardized censorship. Lisa was a high school English teacher for six years and a teacher educator for 11 years at the university level before returning to the high school classroom in 2013. Her experiences provide us with a first-hand view of how teachers navigate standardized censorship in an environment where they are shackled by a panoply of curricular constraints.

Experiences from High School

Lisa Scherff

As I started writing this piece, I realized just how much YA literature has influenced my thinking and teaching. Because of YA literature, I am a more informed and understanding person, and that leads me to make certain curricular choices. This has profound and weighty implications for the students I teach. Sadly, however, some of these choices are limited by what is considered "important" in literacy instruction in the current high-stakes educational climate: pacing guides, close reading (i.e., a fixation on excerpts), and higher test scores.

The teaching of literature and English/language arts classes now looks much different for me than it did when I started teaching high school in 1996. Back then, graduation exams did not exist, nor did No Child Left Behind, the Common Core State Standards, mandatory online modules, or incessant teacher bashing. Each year, I consistently taught two novels and a full-length play in my on-level and advanced classes. We studied films; we created games for learning; we wrote in many genres; we did research projects; we made classroom newspapers; we kept writing portfolios.

When I returned to the classroom in 2013—after 11 years as a teacher educator—I was shocked to see that novels were not included in the pacing guide. For those unfamiliar with pacing guides, they are mandated plans, week by week and quarter by quarter, of what teachers must teach in their classes. Usually created at the district level, the goal of a pacing guide is to have everyone, literally, on the same page, so if a student transfers from School A to School B, no "instruction" will be lost. On a more sinister level, it also means that administrators can use them to control their teachers. At any time, a principal can make a surprise visit to a classroom, and if the teacher is not on the designated page, then that teacher could be in trouble. What that trouble is depends on the administration—a bad evaluation, even more monitoring, or worse. What these guides fail to consider—and this is just one of many areas in which they fail—is that schools are different, classrooms are different, teachers are different, and most important, students are different.

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These differences are most often ignored, as evidenced by the required adherence of teachers to mandated texts on the pacing guides, and these texts are often excerpts rather than full-length novels. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) drove teaching in a particular direction, distilling it down to multiple-choice work. Now we have the latest initiative—CCSS—driving the teaching of excerpts. As a result, we have pacing guides and no novels. This idea of focusing on short excerpts is intended to "help" students perform better on standardized tests, which are comprised of short texts (poems, stories) or excerpts. However, McConn's (2016) study in an eleventh-grade classroom showed that students in two groups—intensive reading ("reading the minimum number of texts required by the syllabus with a focus on the details," p. 164) and extensive reading ("reading more, with less focus on details and more focus on amount of reading," p. 166)—performed equally well on assessment measures. Although not comparing excerpts to novels, McConn's study shows that the *old way* (my italics) works in terms of literacy instruction.

How could I be an English teacher and *not* teach

a whole-class novel? There are thousands of novels sitting in our book room, and for what? There are so many reasons why students should be reading novels (including YA)—the joy of the story, the timeless themes, the legendary characters, the chance to become lifelong readers—and they all go back to Louise Rosenblatt and the need for affective reading, not just efferent reading. As Roen and Karolides (2005) wrote of Rosenblatt's ideas:

> It [transactional theory] acknowledges the teacher not as an authority representing the meaning and background of the literary work but as a catalyst of discussion, encouraging a democracy of voices expressing preliminary responses to the text and building group and individual understandings. The teacher's voice is at once that of the shepherd and of a partner participant. Student readers are empowered. (p. 60)

Beyond the fixation on using excerpts, the push to incorporate nonfiction has also limited teachers' choice of fictive texts, due to the oft-cited CCSS mandate being misinterpreted.

To meet the teaching requirements for tenth-grade English, I was to spend the first two to three weeks of school having students read two short stories, break down argumentative prompts, and learn note-taking strategies. There were some supplementary ideas listed in the guide (idioms, colloquial language), but they were not mandatory. Luckily, the stories were interesting, and the practice of unpacking writing prompts and learning how to take notes were valuable. However, what if, as a teacher, I didn't want to start the year with those two short stories? What if my student population suggested a different beginning plan? What if, as a professional, I wanted to use the textbook as a tool, not *the* tool? I couldn't.

Beyond the fixation on using excerpts, the push to incorporate nonfiction has also limited teachers' choice of fictive texts, due to the oft-cited CCSS mandate being misinterpreted. As a literacy educator, I have noticed that many administrators became frightened when the Common Core required 70% of students' reading to be nonfiction by twelfth grade, so they overreacted and misinterpreted that to mean that there is no time for literature when students need to read so much nonfiction. But as Carol Jago notes (2013), that percentage is based on the NAEP Reading Framework—and the NAEP "does not measure performance in English class. It measures performance in reading, reading across the disciplines and throughout the school day." Thus, here is another instance of a text noting one thing and people (and for-profit companies) interpreting it as something else, resulting in a very detrimental misinterpretation. Never was it written that teachers must teach 70% nonfiction in English classes. Period. Here is another instance of a single mandate (that a portion of the population interprets and demands) driving policy and practice.

Sadly, even though pacing guides have gone by the wayside, in some areas I still hear stories from teachers whose administration bans them from teaching a whole novel or a whole play. Yes, you read that correctly. In high school English classes, teachers are not allowed to teach a whole novel or a whole play that is in the textbook! (On another note, last year I had a colleague ask me if she "had" to teach a novel. I had to stop myself for a few seconds before responding to her because I sadly wondered what, in her classroom experience, would lead her to even pose this question.) Whether it is because school leaders feel there is not enough time or whether it is because there are excerpts on "the test" for which students need to be prepared, the result is the same: a fragmented, short-sighted curriculum that deprives readers of the literature experiences they are entitled to.

Another example of how excerpts on high-stakes tests are driving instruction is online modules. Many of us have seen how technology drives instruction rather than being used appropriately to enhance instruction. Mandatory online modules serve as the latest example. Based on a quarterly score on an online "reading" assessment that all students must take, students are put into a pathway in a different computerized teaching program (the assessment and the online program are not from the same company). Students must complete 15 minutes each week in this online platform during each of several classes (e.g., English, reading, math, PE, driver's ed). This means that some students are being asked to sit in front of a computer for more than 60 minutes each week to get "taught" literacy practices. Why? Because it is suggested that time spent on this program will increase

test scores. Each week, reports are generated that show how many minutes each school is spending on this program. And yes, to answer your question, "they" can see which teachers are doing it and which ones are not.

Why do teachers go along with mandates like this? I think they do because of the pressure of value-added models (VAM). In many districts like mine, there is no more tenure. We are all on annual contracts, and in some cases, student performance on one high-stakes test can be worth 30–50% of one's VAM score. Because there is no more step pay (guaranteed annual salary increases), the only way teachers can earn more money from year to year is through their students' test scores. The consequences for being rated unsatisfactory can be termination. In Florida, for instance, "annual contract teachers" who do not "perform well" on the evaluation system, "would probably not be awarded another contract" (Florida Education Association, https://feaweb.org/senate-bill-736-how-will-it-affect-me).

I was one of those teachers. At the end of my first year back in the classroom, I received an unsatisfactory VAM score. You read that correctly.

Higher test scores are the name of the game today. That is the reality of teaching. I have a great administrative team, but I see the pressure the team is under from its administration. Schools are given public grades, and because our district is entirely school choice (schools compete for students), that final grade is what the public sees. And no matter how I feel about our required graduation exam (I hate it and think it is stupid), the fact of the matter is that I want all of my students to pass it. If they don't, then all they receive after four years is a certificate of completion, not an actual high school diploma. Because I want my students to have as many post-secondary opportunities as possible, I must look beyond my outrage at the unfairness of it all and find ways to work within the current system.

I do teach full-length works in my classroom. Last year we read *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945/2004), *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850/2009), and *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 1606/2003)—and I did find ways to connect all of them to current events. This year, we are reading *Animal Farm* and *Macbeth*. While there is no third full-length work, I am incorporating independent research. Each student has picked a burning question of his or her choice to investigate and then write about and present to the class. I wanted to incorporate this because, along with reading novels, the annual research paper/project has also disappeared. In this time of fake news, research literacy is not only a "college-ready" skill, but a lifelong literacy need.

The teenagers I teach see so much injustice around them. Aside from the typical teenage dissatisfaction, much of this injustice stems from systems in which they live and go to school: poverty, absentee and/or overwhelmed parents, neighborhoods with suspicious police, etc. I want my class to be a vehicle for students to think more deeply about issues and perhaps then do some further digging on their own. This is why literature, both canonical and YA, is so important. And this is why schools need to provide a range of titles for teachers to choose from. Unfortunately, however, that is not always the case. At my school, for example, we have several canonical titles in our book room, but I would argue that many of them are not worthy of whole-class study (see Carol Jago's [2004] *Classics in the Classroom* for a discussion of how to select canonical novels and Groenke & Scherff's [2010] *Teaching YA Lit through Differentiated Instruction* for how to choose YA whole-class novels). I recently spent 30 minutes going through the titles we have, and fewer than 10 are what I would classify as YA. There are only enough copies of one title, *Farewell to Manzanar* (Houston & Houston, 2002), to use with a class, let alone with multiple sections. I really like *Farewell to Manzanar*; I just do not want to use it with my tenth-grade honors students, many of whom I need to prepare to take AP Language and AP Literature. I want a more challenging YA novel, such as *The Chocolate War* (Cormier, 1974), *Feed* (Anderson, 2002), or *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2006).

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Because we do not have young adult novels as choices for our whole-class teaching, I bring in shorter

texts that address issues and themes tackled in popular novels (and in society). I have used articles on the Black Lives Movement, immigration, and censorship. I showed a trailer for the documentary *A Place at the Table* (2015), which shows the hunger problem in America. I used a 16-minute excerpt from the documentary *Laps*, about a marathon for inmates at San Quentin (Lozada, 2016), to study and discuss "tested" literacy skills, such as main idea, tone, mood, and author's purpose and craft (https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/503717/running-marathons-in-prison/). Yes, I covered the "standards," but my primary purpose was to expose my students to texts that might help them see outside themselves and challenge stereotypes, again because I do not have copies of current YA titles to offer the whole class. The class discussions that took place regarding Lozada's text, in particular, were some of the best that happened all year. Admittedly, these efforts are not enough. But it is what I face.

One thing I do to get around the lack of YA novels for whole-class teaching is to incorporate in-class independent reading, and my classroom library contains well over 1,000 YA novels. However, I realize that very few teachers can stock their rooms like this and that even sustained silent reading has been pushed aside in many schools in lieu of more test prep.

So, What Are We to Do?

I am lucky that I teach at a school where I have the freedom to step outside the textbook, where my administration trusts me as a professional in this regard, but not all teachers are in my position. We must fight to reclaim our classrooms and texts, if not for our professional selves than for our students' lives. There are no easy answers for how to do this, and I understand it is easier for some than for others.

I can see some of my former teacher education colleagues raising their fists in protest. I can hear them crying out against the system and stating that they would never compromise. But would they? As someone in the trenches, I can now attest to the fact that it is easy for them to say that. But we know that public school teaching is a yearly contract gig. There is no more tenure in many places (like my district). The average teacher cannot risk losing his or her job. I certainly can't risk it with (still) more than $20,000 in student loans to pay off.

Therefore, I call on my former teacher education colleagues. There are some things you can do to help us. One, stop protesting from afar with easy cries of "don't do it." Not doing "it" is not feasible in many places unless one wants to risk losing one's job. Instead, provide classroom teachers with ways to work around some mandates that will not put their jobs at risk. Two, provide us with class sets of YA novels and ways to teach them and provide administrators with rationales for their teaching. Most of the English teachers I work with did not come from teacher education programs. They do not know what NCTE (or ALAN) is and are unfamiliar with YA literature and how it can be used. Finally, take a year (or two) and go back and teach full time in the classroom. Going back and teaching as a teacher, not as a researcher, has taught me so much. When you are living the life of a teacher without the push to plan, teach, and assess for the next article or book you want to write, you really immerse yourself in the life that your colleagues are living. This experience will change you and perhaps offer more rationales for teaching YA literature than you imagined.

Victor Malo-Juvera *is a former middle school English language arts teacher who is now an associate professor of English Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where he teaches courses in young adult and multicultural young adult literature. He has appeared on NPR's* All Things Considered *to discuss his research on young adult literature and rape myths. His work has been published in journals such as* Research in the Teaching of English, Teachers College Record, Study and Scrutiny: Research in Young Adult Literature, Journal of Language and Literacy Education, *and* SIGNAL.

Lisa Scherff *is a former teacher educator who now teaches high school English and Advanced Placement Research in southwest Florida. Lisa is a past chair of the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award and serves on the ALAN Board of Directors.*

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