



The Darkest Themes: Perceptions of Teen-on-Teen Gun Violence in Schools as Portrayed in Teen Literature

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the perceptions of librarians and teachers on the use of teen literature (also known as young adult literature [YAL] or adolescent literature in education scholarship) that portrays school shootings with teens. The researchers conducted both focus group interviews and an online Qualtrics survey to collect data, as well as group discussions from an online class for education graduate students on teen literature with school shootings as central to the plot. Both professional populations investigated supported the use of this literature with teens but lacked direct experience using literature with this subject matter and voiced a hesitancy in knowing where to begin in the selection of texts and planning for implementation.

Introduction

There were 110 school shootings in the United States in 2019, despite the best efforts of activists such as the student-led March for Our Lives movement, which formed after the Parkland shooting in 2018.¹ In an age of lockdown drills and a “hardening” of public schools, teens increasingly display anxiety about their own safety—and with good reason, as news and discussions of school shootings pervade the daily media. According to a recent PEW Research

Center study (2018), 25% of teens reported being very worried that a shooting could happen at their school, and 32% were somewhat worried.ⁱⁱ A Gallup poll conducted in 2018 corroborates similar results, with 20% of parents saying that “their child has expressed concern to them about feeling unsafe at their school.”ⁱⁱⁱ This amounts to roughly one in five students expressing concern about their in-school safety. Reflective of current fears, contemporary realistic teen fiction has seen a rise in central plot lines that focus on teen-on-teen weaponized school violence. In July 1999, “school shootings” was added as a new term to the Library of Congress Subject Headings, a system of controlled vocabulary used for indexing in libraries throughout the world. The broader terms include “school violence.”

This study specifically examines the perceptions of librarians and teachers who work professionally with teens and their beliefs regarding teen literature about school shootings. The research was guided by several key questions including a desire to know if librarians and teachers share perspectives on the use of teen literature about school shootings with teens, the potential uses for these texts, and perspectives on how, if at all, this literature has changed their professions.

Literature Review

Perception in Media

Media saturates teen culture and identity formation. It can control and craft narratives surrounding events for teens to adopt. The media framing of school shooting incidents has broad-ranging implications: from policy changes, to parent, student, and education professional perceptions. The impact of a school shooting ripples across the country. Muschert explains that “consumers of the news are influenced by the aspects of stories that news producers highlight or downplay. In choosing to highlight certain aspects of an issue, the news media influences public discourse agendas about public and political issues. To maintain salience of a news story, the mass media will shift its focus to examine various attributes over the life cycle of a news story.”^{iv} Hawdon et al. come to a similar conclusion, noting that media is “a primary source of the information upon which frames are created, reinforced, rejected, or modified.”^v This framing fuels fear of and anxiety about a potential school shooting.

Muschert points out that the news media’s distortion of school shooting events at the turn of the millennium promoted the perception that “school shootings were a new form of violence occurring with increased frequency and intensity.”^{vi} This perception had less to do with any change in violence in schools and more to do with media coverage that “contributed to the general impression that there was an emergent and increasing social problem of school shootings.”^{vii} This media framing has now become an established rinse-and-repeat script as school shootings persist and as more recent and well-known events such as Parkland and Sandy Hook have joined Columbine in a tragic legacy. Even at the time of writing this article, yet another shooting has entered the national discourse.

As Pittaro suggests, “The widespread fear that followed the Columbine incident surged through the nation as students, parents, librarians, teachers, school officials, law enforcement, and community members frantically searched for answers as to how this could have occurred and what, if anything, could be done to prevent it from reoccurring in the future.”^{viii} The discourse of fear is played out repeatedly in the news when a school shooting event occurs, capitalizing on the realization that it can happen anywhere and that there is no single profile for a school shooter. Altheide identifies a key source of fear in that “parents’ fear for their children’s safety shoots up whenever school violence receives mass media attention.”^{ix} The authors of this article argue that the fear for safety does not solely belong to parents but is inclusive of all adults who work closely with youth. Those fears are rooted in a questioning of the security and safety of one’s own school.

While considered rare by those researchers who compare the number of school shootings to the rate of other gun-related homicides, the authors of this article agree with activists and others that even a single event is one too many and that our country has entered a point of crisis in relation to gun violence in our schools. The cultural script in the United States that shooters are aberrant young people victimized or outcast by their communities is a script that is reinforced not just through news media but also in popular media such as in teen novels, film, television, and through sharable content including political cartoons or memes on social media that document the cultural framing at the time of the incident. These popular media sources create an archive of the impact that these events have on the shifting educational landscape and create a record of the fears that manifest and are recharged after every additional shooting.

School Shootings in Teen Literature

There is a compelling drive to have teens read literature with teen-on-teen gun violence as it can provide a vehicle to explore personal feelings and fears in a safe way.^x Consequently, there has been more publication of teen literature with a focus on school shootings as a plot device to propel the narrative. As the emerging theme of violence in teen fiction continues to grow, discussion centered around school shootings is increasingly prevalent. This literature can serve as a tool to explore the fears and realities of gun violence in our schools. Even for those teens who do not experience violence on a frequent basis, contemporary realism in teen literature can provide a glimpse into the lived reality of their peers who do, which aligns with the seminal work of Emily Style, who discusses how literature can serve as both a window and a mirror for readers.^{xi}

According to Wortley, “In young adult literature, the school massacre is implicated in various ways in the representation of the adolescent search for identity. Investigating the depiction of school massacres and teenage gunmen in young adult literature can shed light on the way the genre engages in cultural meaning-making.”^{xii} The framing of a novel shapes the interpretation of the text by adolescents even when guided by educators. The current concourse of literature available for teens on the topic of school shootings generally follows some established patterns by authors in portraying the normative understanding of school violence (white male teen shooter acting in aggression due to mitigating circumstances such as being a victim of bullying). However, there are a few titles that challenge those cultural scripts with varied skill and benefit to the classroom. It is important to note that educators and librarians should also take into consideration the literary merit of the texts when making selections and not focus solely on the content presentation. Literature is a valued tool for educators, utilizing sociocultural interpretation. This theory approach to both literature analysis and research is based on the work of Lev Vygotsky in which researchers have consideration for both social and cultural developments that shape an individual’s belief systems and framework for knowledge assimilation. This theory can be applied to assist students in making meaning of the world. Franzak and Noll believe that teen literature “should serve as a lens to help us see how violence functions in our collective imagination.”^{xiii}

Jurkowski claims that “identifying with book characters offers two potential outcomes: emotional, in which the reader discovers that he or she is not alone, or informative, in which the

reader learns about specific solutions.”^{xiv} Fiction can serve as a safe space to process difficult emotions or topics. It can also provide opportunities for growth, allowing teens to empathize, learn, and challenge preconceived notions surrounding situations they have not yet nor may ever encounter in their isolated teenage world.

Library and Classroom Connections

Both libraries (public and school) and classrooms are typically portrayed as “safe spaces” for teens in tandem with the belief that librarians and teachers are authority figures to whom students can feel comfortable reaching out about sensitive issues. While both libraries and schools may carry safe space identification, the expression of it is quite different. As Jones states, “Librarians provide an important supportive role in the community. Likewise, the library is an organization that can impact many teens because it is open and available to all community members regardless of income, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.”^{xv} School librarians are unique in their opportunity to connect because they work more closely with students on an individual level to help them find information that is academic and personal.^{xvi}

Teachers, very much like librarians, have an impact on the lives of youth regardless of one’s background or demographic, and they also “play an important role in fostering a positive school culture.”^{xvii} Choi states that “one of the most important roles of a teacher is to be a role model for social guidance.”^{xviii} Given this understanding of the role of teachers, the pressure to protect students is often placed at the feet of those closest to students. As a result, it is often seen as a failure on the part of the educational system that warning signs are not identified by school personnel in advance of a shooting. Public sentiment is often that the safe space of the school is violated when these atrocities occur. Often, once a school shooting has occurred, a narrative of a culture of bullying within the school is spun by the media. The shooting is seen as motivated by this culture, and schools are often faulted for not stopping or intervening beforehand. As noted in Baird et al., “The young people who commit acts of large-scale violence are all collectors of injustices, and these injustices tend to revolve around the perception of being ignored or put down by teachers and peers in their school and by feelings of anonymity and lack of support.”^{xix}

As past rampage shooting experiences have shown, students do not always reach out to school officials about known threats, and the reason why is often complex and layered.^{xx} To protect themselves, “students monitor the information that their teachers have access to and try to

dam the flow of ‘data’ that could be harmful. Either way, through subterfuge or self-censorship, information that could trigger alarm bells fails to reach adults who might be able to intervene.”^{xxxi} It isn’t until a teacher has earned trust that students feel comfortable approaching them.^{xxii} While adults may work to create a welcoming and respectful environment, it does not mean that all teens view it this way, as a culture of silence pervades student behavior. Students often do not speak out about bullying and threats of violence because “kids have a variety of social and even physical sanctions that they apply to those who break ranks.”^{xxiii} In reviewing texts published since 1998 for a secondary study not discussed in this paper, the authors found that a consistent theme in many of the current teen novels about school shootings is the character who speaks out or regrets not doing so when violence is threatened. Using this literature in libraries and classrooms may reinforce the need for students to break this code of silence.

Librarians and teachers may find that using teen literature that focuses on teen-on-teen violence is problematic or polarizing. Some parents and administrators may determine the work to be unsuitable for teens and may try to challenge its use or may outright ban it from the school. This fear of literature challenges is well-founded, as illustrated by the school shooting novel *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult making the ALA’s Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books list.^{xxiv} Alsop argues that “while the contextual and bureaucratic restraints of teachers in high schools cannot be ignored,” there is fear in the “proliferation of ‘self-censorship’ whereby teachers do not introduce books into their classrooms based on a fear of what retributions might occur, not what actually has occurred.”^{xxv} The same could be said for library collections development. Cart identifies librarians and teachers as “adult gatekeepers” who “bring their maturity of judgement and their greater experience of reading to the process of putting teens and excellent books together.”^{xxvi}

While there may be challenges to bringing teen literature about school violence into the library and the classroom, the challenge is one that must be undertaken in order to avail adolescents to the many opportunities for frank discussion that this type of literature may bring. Franzak and Noll stress that “probing the problem of violence in young adult literature is best done in a dialogic classroom where students make meaning in a variety of formats for a variety of audiences and purposes.”^{xxvii} These types of books provide an opportunity for adolescents to work through problems and find alternative avenues for self-expression, and they may serve to bring a teen back from the edge.^{xxviii} As Cart warns, “Today it’s not locked closets and cases we

need to worry about; it's locked minds—minds that are impervious to alternative points of view and terrified of telling young people the sometimes thorny truth about realities of the world.”^{xxxix} Teens exploring these themes in literature can unlock their minds, or become “critically conscious,” and have a tool to help them think about the real-life world around them.^{xxx}

Given the importance of engaging in meaningful conversation with adolescents about their fears of school violence and the potential power of teen literature to serve as a vehicle for opening such dialogue, this article documents a research study conducted for the purposes of investigating librarian and teacher perceptions on the rise of school violence literature and the potential benefits of these books. As Cart states, a hopeful message for librarians and teachers is that “for life, even at its darkest, can hold the promise of hope and positive change—especially when we read about it with open minds and hearts, with intellectual attention and emotional empathy.”^{xxxi} We seek to establish current perspectives by librarians and teachers with the understanding that those perspectives reflect the work currently embraced in the classroom and the library, and may direct us toward a better understanding of how to encourage more acceptance and use of school violence literature with teens to help them make meaning of their world.

Methodology

This research study was designed to explore the perceptions of both librarians and teachers regarding the use of teen literature to explore the media-saturated and emotionally charged topic of school shootings. The key research questions that drove the study were as follows:

- a. Do librarians and teachers share perspectives on the publication trends and use of teen literature about school shootings with teens? How might they differ? What limitations do they place on this use?
- b. What perceived uses do librarians and teachers see for teen literature about school shootings with teens?

This inquiry focused on the perceptions of both librarians and educators who work primarily with teens (grades 7–12) about the portrayals of school shootings in teen literature. The study was completed by a team of three researchers. The researchers opted to focus on two different populations that both work with the same literature and age range in order to maximize

the opportunities to identify similarities in perception within the individual populations and to allow for comparison across the two groups.

This study incorporated multiple layers of data collection for triangulation. Three focus groups (two live discussions and two textual discussion threads that were combined) were utilized to collect perspective statements on the use of teen literature about school shootings. The statements were later used for a card sort survey of a wider pool of participants.

The study opened with two focus group interviews: one for librarians and one for teachers. These were structured using feminist methods in which the researchers asked open-ended questions to spark conversation from a group of participants.^{xxxii} The focus group interviews were facilitated with a loose structure of non-scripted, dialogue-prompting questions that allowed for more natural conversation to develop rather than following a strict interview protocol. Interviewers were able to “show their human side and answer questions and express feelings,” and the focus group interviews became negotiated between all participants.^{xxxiii} This method of leading a focus group allowed the researchers to move away from a more traditional “hierarchical relation, with the respondent being in the subordinate position.”^{xxxiv} This gendered interviewing founded in feminist methodology allowed for some “give-and-take and shared empathetic understanding,” which the researchers found particularly beneficial as they recognized their own membership within the group of studied participants as practicing teachers and librarians.^{xxxv} This method also allowed for the recognition of the teachers and librarians as the experts of their own perceptions by avoiding the traditional hierarchical structure.

A range of experiences were included in the groups, but a large majority of participants identified as white, and the participants were mostly female. Participants for the focus groups were invited through the personal contacts of the researchers. The teacher focus group had one male (mid-career) and two females (one early career and a veteran), and the librarian focus group was all female, with one representing public school librarians (mid-career) and two representing community public libraries (one veteran and one mid-career). This participant pool represented similar demographic patterns (mostly white and female) as in the subsequent survey and is reflective of the population involved in the work of librarianship and teaching English. According to a 2016 national data set, 77% of teachers are female, and 80% of teachers are white.^{xxxvi} Another national data set from 2017 indicates that 84% of librarians are female and 74% of librarians in the United States are white.^{xxxvii} The small pool for the focus group was not

intended to be representative of all teachers and librarians. They are case-study informants who provided perspective statements for the later survey. The focus group conversations were held digitally through a conferencing platform that allowed for the recording of both video and audio. The transcripts from each focus group were examined using open coding, and perceptions that emerged from this coding were recorded for use in a subsequent survey.

A third focus group was comprised of two sets of early career teachers who were enrolled in a graduate-level teen literature course and who teach grades 7–12. There were two iterations of this collection (one in 2018 with nine students, and one in 2019 with thirteen students). The asynchronous textual discussion from both groups was examined collectively as one focus group. While this group did not have the unique role of only discussing for the purposes of this study, the process was similar to the other live focus groups in that no scripted questions were shared to spark dialogue. The early career teachers participated in an online module on teen literature centered on school shootings in a Blackboard thread, and each student read at least one novel about a school shooting. The module was not designed specifically just for the purposes of the study, and participants would have still engaged in the discussion as part of the course content and learning goals. Participants had a different set list of books to select from each semester (included in the suggested list of texts in Appendix A) and were able to self-select the novel of their choosing to read. The discussion text was open coded. The benefit of examining this collection of data was twofold. The first iteration aided in the development of perspective statements for the subsequent online card sort survey, and the second iteration aided as a verification of the findings as consistent from both the focus groups and the online card sort survey. The triangulation of this data aided in establishing trends of thought.

In examining the data from the focus groups, the researchers utilized open coding. Codes were named and “abstracted from the language of the research situation” using grounded theory.^{xxxviii} The researchers benefited from a three-person team in that they coded first individually and then came together as a team to resolve codes, each “contributing to the development of a shared conceptual analysis.”^{xxxix} The researchers used a constant comparative analysis by team coding after an initial examination of the transcripts and then, after agreeing on a code set, systematically applied that code set to a reread of the transcripts in order to narrow down the perceptions to be pulled for the survey. The same method was used for the reading of a literature review to develop additional perspectives and counter-perspectives. The coding of the

transcripts included some level of reflexivity as the researchers did rely on their own intuition and personal judgment, as informed by their own practice and reading of a literature review to analyze the data collected. When possible, the researchers used in vivo coding, in which the names of the codes were pulled from participant's own language as descriptors.

Following the focus groups and coding, statements connected to the perceptions of participants regarding the use of teen literature about school shootings were culled and synthesized to be added to a statement list of twenty-two potential perceptions (see Appendix B) about literature on school shootings. Perspective statements were also pulled from the literature review materials and the first graduate student online discussions mentioned above. After reaching saturation, the list of statements was revised for parallel language and the researchers removed redundancies. The statements were then used for a card sort survey employing the digital tool Qualtrics in which the statements were presented to anonymous participants. This style of survey allows for much flexibility for participants as they align with the multiple perspectives. The visual nature of this style of survey also lets participants view their responses and revise easily on-screen. The directions for the survey asked participants to place the statements in boxes identified on a Likert-type scale of "I agree strongly," "I agree," "I disagree," "I disagree strongly." After placing each statement, participants were asked to rank statements within each of the sorted boxes (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree), starting with the first statement being most strongly aligned with the Likert scale category. Participants were also asked to provide a narrative about why they placed their top-ranking statements where they did. The participant placements were examined by the researchers with regard to various comparison categories such as age, regional location, and professional career to look for similarities.

Participants for this survey were invited from within the pool of focus group individuals, researcher personal contacts, multiple Listservs, and through social media. Participants were encouraged to share the digital link with others who fit the target audience (teachers and librarians). The Qualtrics survey had a total of 114 participants. The responses to the card sort were categorized by employment of respondent (librarian or teacher). The percentage response for each indicator (the card perspective statements) were compared to note similarities and differences between the two respondent groups (teachers and librarians) as they placed each into the Likert rankings.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants*Gender and Age*

Gender				Age				
Male	Female	Other	Prefer not to disclose	21–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60 or older
9	103	1	1	28	28	24	22	12

Race

White	Black or African American	Native American or American Indian	Asian or Pacific Islander	Hispanic or Latino	Other	Prefer not to disclose
105	1	0	0	1	3	4

Occupation and Place of Work

Occupation		Place of Work		
Teacher	Librarian	Public School	Private School	Public Library
54	60	79	5	30

Years in the Field

Veteran: 1999 or prior	Mid-Career: 2000–2012	Early Career: 2013–2019
31	34	49

Grade Range of Instruction

Kindergarten–Fifth	Sixth–Eighth	Ninth–Twelfth
34	59	78

Limitations

This study was limited in scope in regard to the participants who engaged in both the focus groups and the card sort survey. This cross-sectional study included participants as a representative subset of the population. The majority of respondents in the Qualtrics survey sample were white women, which is reflective of the population engaged in the work of both librarianship and teaching; however, it does limit some understanding of the perceptions evidenced through the findings. While respondents in the online graduate discussion reflected

more gender balance, the respondents (who had all read at least one teen novel about a school shooting) were all early career teachers across different disciplines.

Data Analysis

Fear-Mongering Literature and Imitative Behavior

The professionals agreed in their ranking for almost all statements except two glaring differences. When asked if the use of “literature about school shooting promoted fear-mongering,” 26% of the teachers agreed with this statement, compared to 5% of librarians who agreed. This statement also split the respondents within the profession of teachers, as 56% either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. In this case, those disagreeing with the statement were in alignment with librarians in that 75% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. The qualitative statements that were collected asked respondents to explain their placement of indicators, and results highlight some of the disagreement with strong language. One early career public librarian who agreed noted that she would not “use this type of book because school shootings are a real fear that students have that in many ways [are] caused by adult failures” and that she “would not want to induce any extra anxiety for students.” A veteran K–8 teacher who agreed went as far to say that she has “never used it [teen literature on school shootings] and would be appalled at any educator who thought differently.” Another veteran teacher noted that she “never would use this. I think any educator who [would] is irresponsible.” She went on to say that students already dealing with trauma would just experience more if given this literature and that it “would give them ideas, yikes,” indicating that she felt imitative behavior was a possibility.

Table 2: Data for Selected Analysis

		% of Responses			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>Fear-Mongering</i>	Teacher	26%	30%	26%	7%
	Librarian	30%	45%	5%	5%
<i>Imitative Behavior</i>	Teacher	11%	31%	43%	6%
	Librarian	13%	57%	10%	3%
<i>A Tool for Discussion</i>	Teacher	0%	2%	17%	76%
	Librarian	2%	2%	12%	80%

<i>Reflective of our (Adult) Fears</i>	Teacher	6%	9%	48%	24%
	Librarian	3%	17%	37%	27%
<i>Reflective of Student Fears</i>	Teacher	2%	17%	44%	28%
	Librarian	0%	5%	62%	18%

One statement that was provided for the respondents to place in the digital survey responded to the belief that this literature “is capable of producing imitative behavior.” Here, too, the respondents did not agree, with 43% of the teachers responding that they agreed and 31% responding that they disagreed (the remainder split between strongly agreed/strongly disagreed). In contrast, only 10% of the librarians agreed that teens reading this literature are capable of participating in imitative behavior, and 57% of librarians disagreed, believing that using this literature would not encourage imitative behavior. Comments from participants who agreed included one veteran male teacher who said that he “wouldn’t use a novel on school shootings” and continued on to state that he “agreed with the ‘capable of producing imitative behavior’ [statement]” and that it was “not likely, but possible.” One respondent, a veteran high school teacher, noted that there is “no reason to put ideas in young minds if one does not have to. No need to spread fear.” A veteran librarian in a public school said that “middle school kids tend to imitate behavior that attracts attention. We don’t need to put ideas in their head.” Another respondent, a veteran librarian in a public community library, agreed, noting that “copycat behavior is a worry.”

These beliefs were in direct opposition to the majority of respondents, both librarians and teachers, who viewed the use of teen literature about school shootings as a potential tool to open discussion and to teach empathy and compassion for peers.

Tool for Teens and Teaching about Warning Signs

Several statements that respondents were asked to place in the digital card sort survey aligned with the broader concept of using teen literature about school shootings as a tool in the classroom. These statements included “as a tool for discussion,” “bibliotherapy,” “a tool for motivating change agents,” “a tool for strengthening empathy and compassion,” and “a vehicle for activism.” The responses to these statements were consistent between librarians and teachers, and were in favor of this concept. The highest response rate was to the statement that this

literature is “a tool for discussion” in the classroom, with 76% of the teachers strongly agreed, and 80% of librarians strongly agreed. This belief was echoed in the qualitative responses to the survey, and nearly all respondents noted the use of literature as a tool in the classroom in some way. Respondents included comments in the qualitative open-ended prompts about the use of teen literature as a tool to teach empathy, develop compassion, spark discussion, provide emotional support, alleviate anxiety, and assist in making students take drills more seriously. As one teacher put it, “To ignore the power that literature can have in helping students deal with and process these events would be negligent on our part.” The first qualitative prompt asked respondents to explain their reasoning for the placement of the top three items that they most strongly agreed or disagreed with, and of the 109 comments submitted for this question, 68 were coded as “use as a tool in the classroom” in general (with most of those subcategorized as for discussion) or for “empathy and compassion” in the classroom.

Many of the respondents noted that this type of literature can be most helpful in teaching the warning signs that students can look for in their peers. As one respondent noted, “This [use of literature] would hopefully lead to students feeling a strong sense of urgency in preventing school shootings,” and another noted that this should be “more seriously addressed among our students to try to prevent behaviors that would trigger these shootings.” A teacher respondent also noted that this literature can “have a proactive impact on students and their awareness of others.” One respondent pointed out that this “allows students to recognize the patterns” of potential school shooters.

This concept of using the literature as a warning tool also emerged multiple times in one of the online focus group discussions comprised of early career teachers. As one early career teacher noted, “I believe literature like this would be an eye-opener for students. It would teach them that if they hear something or see something, they should report it.” Another male graduate student (an early career teacher who is not an English language arts teacher) noted that “teaching students warning signs and expressing the need to report this kind of information is an essential part of school safety.” In response to his comment, a female graduate student in the same comment thread noted that when teaching novels like this, “warning signs and opportunities to take proactive responsibility need to accompany a reading.” Another stated that this work “entails teaching coping skills when times are difficult, problem-solving skills to ensure all students feel safe, and identifying behaviors in students that are concerning.” Another early

career teacher in this thread noted the pressure felt by both adults and students to respond to warning signs when he stated that “every day I hear someone slam a door or drop something loudly and my heart skips a beat for a moment. . . . Not only am I now responsible for protecting my children against guns, but I am also responsible for finding every single warning sign and making the correct decision every single time I try to help a kid I think is in emotional trouble. It is mentally and physically exhausting, but now is a reality for most of us.”

Reflective of Fears—Students and Adults

One indicator pulled from the literature review was in relationship to the increase in publication in teen literature on school shootings as a response to increased adult fears or student fears. Both the librarians and teachers agreed that this increase is reflective of both adult and student fears. Of the teachers surveyed, 72% agreed or strongly agreed that this increase is reflective of adult fears. They also believed it is reflective of student fears (72%). Of the librarians surveyed, 64% believed it is reflective of adult fears, and 80% believed it is reflective of student fears. As one respondent noted in the qualitative feedback to this survey, “Literature always reflects culture.” Another teacher noted that it is reflective of student fears and is “reflective of the times.” Yet another expressed that they believed “this type of literature capitalizes on people’s fears.” It was also noted by a respondent that they believed this literature is “written by adults, I feel like they reflect how adults feel about the situation,” a statement echoed by another, who responded, “Most of these books are written by adults, they [the books] frequently reflect the fears of the authors.” One respondent expressed this view, noting, “As a teacher I have seen firsthand students being more vocal with expressing their emotions and adults expressing more fears for their job as violence becomes more preminent [*sic*] in the community [where] I teach.”

One of the graduate students (female, early career) pointed out that “it is understandable that the darker themes of these novels can easily have them marked as being for adults only, but it is important to note that the reading age for these is fitting for high school students. It’s also important to keep in mind that some students already deal with some of these darker themes in life.” Another student picked up this thread and continued by stating, “This problem [school shootings] is now, unfortunately, an unpleasant reality for teenagers. . . . [W]e must continually update the literature being taught in our classrooms to meet the needs of our students.” In contrast to this, another student, while advocating for the need to teach this literature, did so from

the viewpoint that we need to counter the new cultural norms and engage in conversation to acknowledge unspoken fears. In doing so, she stated that we are “too accustomed to this” and quoted a novel about a school shooting in which the author has the main character voice, “The word ‘gun’ floats all around me before the crowd silences, stills. I don’t feel panic or shock. There’s just a sense of defeat. This is it.”^{xl}

Discussion

Asking Students to Break Codes of Silence

The qualitative (free response) survey results included support from both the librarians and teachers in favor of teaching literature about school shootings as a preventative measure. Respondents added to the qualitative comments embedded at the end of the card sort survey, noting that teaching literature centered on school shootings could help teach about warning signs and the patterns of behavior of potential shooters. One male mid-career teacher summed up the general sentiment by stating, “Books that especially focus on the causes of shootings (mental illness/bullying) should be taught because they can immediately have a proactive impact on students and their awareness of others.” A female mid-career public teacher echoed this, saying that teen novels about school shootings “allow students to recognize the patterns, discuss their apprehensions, and may [lead them to] become activists for stronger gun control laws.” For this teacher, the benefits went beyond just awareness for warning signs in recognizing patterns of behavior, but extended to encouraging students to become agents for change—a belief that was less prevalent in the other participant responses. While a few participants mentioned activism, most who responded qualitatively only extended the benefit as far as detecting warning signs. The belief that novels can teach people to recognize warning signs was echoed by the early career education graduate students in their online discussions with regard to the novels they read about school shootings.

Greguska notes that the “value of . . . [these books] is their ability to teach kids about warning signs, what could lead to violence in schools and how to prevent it.”^{xli} Teaching literature about school shootings may also help break codes of silence or what Newman et al. call “the concealment game,” in which teens hide their actions and the actions of others as “the price kids pay for coming forward can be high.”^{xlii} The authors note that teens who come forward

suffer a variety of consequences (both social and physical) and that schools in the past have not effectively responded (such as not protecting the identity of a student who came forward or taking the information seriously). The authors further explain, “For those who buy into the adolescent code completely, telling is not even an option; even for more mature and reflective students.” They go on to state, “When students see that adults cannot be completely trusted with their secrets or fail to take serious action in the face of a reported threat, they file this information away and act with it in mind. They remain silent.”^{xliii} As Ames points out, most adults forget how much “kids hide from adults and how much dissembling they do.”^{xliv} In asking teens to report behaviors, adults will need to break an entire culture of silence that is well established in teen behavior.

While it is an admirable goal to ask adolescents to look for warning signs and to speak out, it is also a task that comes with some cautions. There is no single profile of a school shooter. As Ames notes in his research, an exhaustive study by the Secret Service’s National Threat Assessment Center report “Safe School Initiative” found “that no profile of a school shooter was possible, except perhaps that the attacker would most likely be male.” Ames states that the student would be rather ordinary and from what he describes as the “invisible middle.”^{xlv} A risk is that in teen literature on school shootings, the shooter tends to fit a stereotype profile (usually a white male teen with a history of being bullied). As the cultural script is reinforced, this may develop into a situation in which peers are unjustly identified.

Asking adolescents to look for warning signs may also create a heightened sense of anxiety and a feeling of guilt if a sign is missed. As noted earlier, teens are increasingly worried that a shooting may occur at their school,^{xlvi} and lockdown drills and active shooter drills can create anxiety in youth.^{xlvii} While the authors of this study advocate for the use of these novels, the purposes for doing so are not inclusive of the singular goal of teaching adolescents the warning signs or profiles of shooters, as we do not want to place an unwarranted burden on teens. Rather, the authors of this study support the use of this literature as a tool for the development of empathy and as a vehicle for discussions to aid students in processing fears. It is also reflective of our current times; literature should reflect the lived reality of our students, something most of the respondents from this study also agreed with when asked if this literature is an “accurate portrayal” and “reflective of our times.” While we want to encourage teens to break codes of silence, we do not want to create a situation where they feel as if they must be on

high alert at all times looking for warning signs of a potential shooter. The authors of this study prefer the motto “if you see something, say something” promoted by Homeland Security. We want to encourage adolescents to share if they hear a threat of violence or know of someone possessing weapons, but we don’t want them to feel pressure or anxiety to catch all warning signs. As one of the teachers responded to this study, being on alert for warning signs “is mentally and physically exhausting.” This is a level of exhaustion that the authors advocate insulating teens from when seeking to develop safe spaces in our libraries and classrooms.

Range of Experience and Risk Taking as Professionals

As previously noted, both librarians and teachers lean heavily in favor of utilizing this literature to open dialogue on the topic of school shootings. Many of the comments culled from the interviews, survey, and online discussions expanded upon this notion by providing examples of ways it could be beneficial, such as teaching empathy. The researchers acknowledge that the roles and goals of teachers and librarians in working with literature are different and took that into consideration when examining the data culled about selection and use of texts. While most of the teaching participants responded favorably with the idea of using literature about school shootings in the classroom, upon further reflection in the comments section, many have little to no experience of actually using it in the classroom. The little experience they did have was usually allowing students to choose a book on the topic matter as an independent read. The librarians’ experience was a bit more varied. Some respondents only shared titles as recommended reading, while others, as one indicated, used it “daily as a high school librarian. Lots of bibliotherapy.” One librarian used a selection in a teen book club and said that the “discussion evolved nicely as we transitioned from the story to current affairs.”

There were librarians and teachers who either disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was inappropriate for grades 6–8 and grades 9–12. Even though librarians and teachers may find the topic appropriate for those grade levels, the comments reflect a larger hesitancy to use it in everyday practice. While it is understandable that certain topics may make librarians and teachers uneasy, it is imperative that they not be shied away from. Groenke, Maples, and Henderson argue that it is not “enough for adolescents to simply read about these issues as presented in young adult novels; they need opportunities to consider and discuss them with teachers and peers.”^{xlvi}

Engebretson and Weiss make it clear that “traumatic events are part of the current educational landscape. Both students and teachers live through and with these traumas daily.” The authors of this study agree that it is important for librarians and teachers to use these texts “to help understand themselves and their experiences. The only way this can happen is through bravely opening the curriculum to topics that are personal, troubling, and inherently human.”^{xlix} The authors urge librarians and teachers to be fearless when speaking on these themes and topics, even though they may feel ill-equipped to tackle controversial issues. The sad fact of teen-on-teen gun violence in schools is a daily reality with which we must contend. To ignore it is to silence a part of our lived experiences.

Why Perspectives Matter and Future Considerations

It is important to consider the perspectives of current professionals in the field. As noted in the findings, many of the librarians and teachers surveyed had a desire to include teen literature on school shootings in the curriculum, but for a variety of reasons had a hesitancy to do so in actual practice. The authors encourage librarians and teachers to collaborate when addressing this topic to provide support for one another. Professional development organizations and teacher preparation programs must consider the new challenges that librarians and teachers face in the field when considering literature that tackles contemporary issues such as school shootings. As evidenced by this study, librarians and teachers across all stages of the career arc are interested in more support as they include these texts in both the library and the classroom. Some of this preparation is already being addressed, as the researchers have seen some opportunities for professional development for librarians and teachers in this area of concern. More work is yet to be done for librarians and teachers to feel confident in addressing school shooting literature in the classroom.

Appendix A

Suggested Titles for the Classroom and Library

This list of novels was curated from a multipart selection process. The initial step included a search in library literature (i.e., *School Library Journal*), English literature (i.e., ALAN), and well-known online teen literature venues (i.e., *BookRiot*, *Goodreads*, etc.) for titles that had a plot line involving a school shooting. This determination of titles involved analyzing the subject headings of the individual book's Library of Congress Cataloging information or, if that was not available, an extensive look at multiple descriptions about the novel. As part of a different study, the authors have read and coded over thirty novels that fit the selection criteria from the initial step. The authors have used their expertise as librarians and high school English teachers to select a sampling of seventeen novels and one play that they would recommend for use in a library or classroom for teens.

Aftermath (2018), by Kelly Armstrong

Bang, Bang, You're Dead (1998), by William Mastrosimone

Breaking Point (2002), by Alex Flinn

Endgame (2006), by Nancy Garden

Give a Boy a Gun (2000), by Todd Strasser

Hate List (2019), by Jennifer Brown

Jamie's Got a Gun (2014), by Gail Sidonie Sobat and Spyder Yardley-Jones

Lockdown (2008), by Diane Tullson

Mercy Rule (2018), by Tom Leveen

Nineteen Minutes (2007), by Jodi Picoult

Quad (2007), by C. G. Watson

Shooter (2004), by Walter Dean Myers

Shooter (2016), by Caroline Pignat

Silent Alarm (2015), by Jennifer Banash

That's Not What Happened (2018), by Kody Keplinger

This Is Where It Ends (2016), by Marieke Nijkamp

Underwater (2016), by Marisa Reichardt

Violent Ends (2015), by Shaun David Hutchinson

Appendix B

Qualtrics Card Sort Perception Statements

Directions:

Please slide each individual statement into the box that most aligns with your perceptions [Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree]. Once you have placed each item, please place them in rank order within each box with 1 being the most compelling item in the box.

Do you feel Young Adult Contemporary Realistic fiction focused on a theme of school shootings is:

Statements

1. Accurate
2. Fear-mongering
3. Bibliotherapy
 - Harmful
 - More frequently published
 - A tool for discussion
 - Useful in curriculum/programming
 - For pleasure reading only
 - Realistic
 - Inappropriate for grades K–5
 - Inappropriate for grades 6–8
 - Inappropriate for grades 9–12
 - Appropriate for all grades
 - An accurate portrayal of bullying
 - A portrayal of bullying as a motivator for gun violence
 - A tool for motivating change agents
 - Is capable of producing imitative behavior
 - A tool for strengthening empathy and compassion
 - A vehicle for activism
 - Reflective of the times
 - Reflective of our (adult) fears
 - Reflective of student fears

Notes

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