Moral Panic & the Struggle for Democratic Education: A Comparative Analysis

Ginney Norton, Missouri State University

Abstract

Education has long served as a central battleground where moral panic is leveraged to enforce ideological conformity, censorship, and exclusion. This paper critically examines how moral panic has historically and currently been deployed in educational contexts to suppress marginalized voices, particularly related to race, gender, and sexuality. Using a comparative historical analysis of two case studies—the Johns Committee investigations in Cold War-era Florida and Section 28 legislation in the United Kingdom—this paper reveals recurring patterns by which schools become instruments of social control, surveillance, and ideological repression. The analysis demonstrates that moral panic disproportionately targets educators and students whose identities or pedagogies challenge dominant societal narratives and established power structures. Situating recent manifestations of educational censorship, particularly as they relate to race, gender, and sexuality, within this broader historical context, the paper emphasizes how current political struggles replicate past cycles of exclusion and fear-driven governance. Concluding with strategies for resistance, the paper underscores the vital roles that educators, activists, and scholars play in recognizing, confronting, and ultimately disrupting moral panic. It calls for reclaiming educational institutions as democratic spaces committed to equity, intellectual freedom, and inclusive dialogue.

***Keyword**s: moral panic, censorship, democratic education, LGBTQIA+, comparative history*

Introduction

In recent years, educational institutions around the globe have once again become central battlegrounds in contentious political and cultural conflicts. From legislative restrictions on teaching racial disparities and gender identity to state-driven historical censorship, educators increasingly face heightened surveillance, public scrutiny, and ideological pressure. However, these tensions are not new. They are contemporary manifestations of historical cycles in which education has consistently been targeted as a site for moral panic, a mechanism used strategically to manufacture fears leveraged by dominant groups to maintain social control, shape public perception, and restrict intellectual freedom (Cohen, 2011; Hall et al., 1978).

For example, in 1959, a Florida educator was interrogated, publicly humiliated, and terminated solely on suspicion of homosexuality. She was deemed incompatible with the "moral stand-

ards" of the community (Graves, 2009). This incident was not an isolated event but was emblematic of the broader Cold War-era persecutions orchestrated by Florida's Johns Committee, which systematically targeted educators, civil rights activists, and other marginalized individuals in the name of preserving moral purity and national security. Similarly, the introduction of Section 28 in 1980s Britain institutionalized fear-driven censorship by explicitly prohibiting the "promotion of homosexuality" in schools, stigmatizing LGBTQIA+ identities amid the moral panic surrounding the AIDS epidemic (Lowe, 2007; Hubbard & Griffiths, 2019).

Today's legislative and ideological conflicts within educational spaces strongly echo these historical episodes. Recent policies in the United States invoking parental rights, censoring curricula around racial history and sexuality, and promoting so-called ideological neutrality mirror earlier efforts to restrict intellectual diversity and silence marginalized perspectives. Once again, educators find themselves in the crossfire, caught between fostering critical inquiry and fearing professional retribution. Their autonomy is constrained by policies that position inclusive teaching as morally dangerous and politically subversive (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Dudziak, 2021). These recurring cycles reveal moral panic not merely as spontaneous public reactions but as intentionally crafted political strategies used to reinforce dominant ideological positions, marginalize vulnerable populations, and suppress dissent.

Moral panic, as theorized by Stanley Cohen (2011) and Stuart Hall et al. (1978), refers to the deliberately manufactured societal fear toward specific groups, identities, or ideas and the framing of these as threats to prevailing moral or social order. Such panics are strategically employed by dominant groups to justify policies of ideological conformity, censorship, and exclusion, particularly within educational contexts. This paper critically examines moral panic as an enduring mechanism of social control through a comparative analysis of two historical case studies: the Johns Committee's persecution of educators during Cold War anxieties in Florida, and the institutional censorship of LGBTQIA+ issues under Section 28 in the United Kingdom. Drawing from these cases, I illuminate the consistent tactics of fear-mongering and ideological control, highlighting their implications for contemporary education and democratic society. This analysis also emphasizes possibilities for resistance. By learning from historical precedents, educators, policymakers, and communities can confront and dismantle moral panic's cyclical recurrence and advocate for equitable, inclusive, and critically engaged education. Together, these two cases offer distinct yet parallel examples of how moral panic functions across democratic contexts to restrict intellectual freedom and reinforce dominant ideologies within education.

This paper argues that education cannot fulfill its democratic promise while entrapped within the confines of moral panic. Democratic education demands unwavering commitment to intellectual freedom, curricular diversity, and the active inclusion of marginalized perspectives. Following Dewey (1916) and Biesta (2011), democratic education is not merely procedural. It rests on cultivating civic participation, critical inquiry, and inclusion as constitutive goods. When policies constrain who can be represented and what can be asked, they undermine those goods and narrow the purposes of schooling. As Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) contend, education must be a space for critical consciousness and liberation. When fear, surveillance, and exclusion become normative, the transformative potential of education is compromised. By clearly understanding the historical patterns and strategic uses of fear and exclusion that shape educational policies, stakeholders can reclaim educational institutions as transformative spaces of empowerment and hope. This ensures that schools remain resilient against the persistent threat of moral panic and committed to the pursuit of a more just, inclusive, and democratic future. These values are directly undermined when moral panics reduce education to a tool of ideological discipline.

Historical Background

As a note on methodology, this study uses comparative historical analysis and critical discourse analysis of policy texts, debates, press coverage, and testimony. The unit of analysis is policy discourse events and their media uptake. Analytic procedures included coding for constructions of danger and deviance, institutional remedies proposed, and targeted identities (Fairclough, 2003; Hall et al., 1978; Cohen, 2011).

Historically, education has been a battleground for cultural values and a barometer for social anxieties. Waves of fear shape the educational landscape by targeting specific groups or ideas as existential threats. Moral panic, as theorized by Cohen (2011) and Hall et al. (1978), refers to moments of intensified social anxiety in which particular groups are portrayed as threats to societal norms, prompting exaggerated responses that reinforce existing power structures. The following case studies illustrate how such panic was strategically mobilized during periods of cultural upheaval, such as the Cold War in the United States and the AIDS crisis in the United Kingdom, to marginalize vulnerable populations and enforce ideological conformity.

The first example takes place in the mid-twentieth century with the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, also known as the Johns Committee. This committee was established in 1956 to combat civil rights activism and, in later years, to target LGBTQIA+ educators as threats to moral and social order (Graves, 2009; Braukman, 2012). Teachers accused of being subversive or morally unfit were subjected to intrusive investigations, public humiliation, and termination, often without evidence. This pattern was not confined to the United States. In the United Kingdom, Section 28 banned the promotion of homosexuality in schools, leading to the suppression of LGBTQIA+ visibility in education and reinforcing social hierarchies (Local Government Act 1988, sec. 28; Weeks, 2007). Although these examples occur in distinct national and political contexts, both rely on vague moral arguments to exclude particular groups and protect dominant norms.

Theoretical Framework: Moral Panic & Intersectionality

Building on Cohen's (2011) concept, moral panic functions as a regulatory discourse that constructs targeted identities or behaviors as threats to social order. Media amplification and state responses work together to discipline deviance, often through policies of surveillance, control, and punishment. These panics are sensationalized in public discourse, where the scapegoat becomes fixed as the root of social decline. Typically, the response is disproportionate to the actual threat and garners public support for increasingly punitive policies. In education, moral panic has resulted in attempts to regulate curricula, restrict teacher autonomy, and surveil marginalized identities. For example, the Cold War-era Johns Committee framed LGBTQIA+ educators as moral threats, conflating their identities with communism and labeling them as deviant and subversive (Braukman, 2012). Similarly, present-day Critical Race Theory bans and rollbacks of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives rely on fear-driven rhetoric to suppress discussions of racial disparities, casting educators as ideological agitators rather than facilitators of critical inquiry.

Stuart Hall et al. (1978) approach moral panic by emphasizing the power dynamics that shape public discourse. They argue that these panics are not spontaneous but are orchestrated by those in power to reinforce or recalibrate dominant social hierarchies. By focusing public attention on deviant individuals or ideas, moral panic diverts scrutiny from systemic inequities and legitimizes state control that marginalizes dissenting voices.

While moral panic provides a lens for understanding societal fear and control, intersectionality elucidates why certain groups are disproportionately targeted. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality examines how overlapping social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. Rather than operating independently, these identities interact in ways that amplify vulnerability and exclusion. In educational systems, the intersectional nature of moral panic is evident. LGBTQIA+ educators targeted by the Johns Committee were often women, whose professional authority was already contested within a gendered and feminized teaching profession (Graves, 2009). Simultaneously, men who entered the profession were questioned about their motives and subjected to suspicion for entering into a feminized field (Graves, 2009). Black educators advocating for desegregation faced compounded scrutiny, accused not only of political subversion but of undermining the moral fabric of white society (Anderson, 1988). For example, Black music teacher William James Neal lost his teaching license in 1961 as a result of the Johns Committee's investigations but later successfully challenged the decision, becoming a rare case of resistance (Braukman, 2012). The broader political context, including the actions of the Pork Chop Gang, led to the revocation of over 70 teaching licenses and intensified scrutiny of Black educators aligned with civil rights activism (Florida Memory, 2014; Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, 1964).

Contemporary bans on classroom discussions about race and sexuality similarly silence those whose identities or pedagogies challenge dominant norms. These actions reflect broader cultural anxieties about social change and emerging demands for equity (Sainato, 2022). bell hooks (1994) emphasized the transformative potential of education as a site for critical consciousness and liberation. When moral panic targets educators at these intersections, it exploits their identities, framing them as threats to societal stability. This approach is not a deviation from the system but an expression of how it maintains itself. Understanding the interplay of race, gender, and sexuality is essential to reveal how moral panic functions as an embedded feature of systemic control. The combined use of moral panic and intersectionality offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing educational exclusion. Sex panic and race panic frequently operate together, reinforcing each other across policy and discourse. Intersectionality helps reveal who is most vulnerable and why.

Together, these frameworks illuminate the cyclical nature of exclusion. Marginalized identities are not only erased from curricula and pedagogy but are also scapegoated as the cause of societal unrest. When organizers fight to reclaim previously held rights and freedoms, media and official narratives often describe these moments as new progress, rather than as recoveries of what was lost in a prior wave of moral panic. This synthesis is particularly valuable for comparative analysis. Historical cases such as the Johns Committee and Section 28 illustrate how moral panic repeatedly targets those at the intersections of marginalized identities, regardless of time or location. Recognizing these intersectional dynamics equips educators, researchers, and policymakers with the analytical clarity needed to disrupt historical cycles of exclusion and support education's democratic potential.

Methodology & Approach

This study employs comparative historical analysis to examine how moral panic has shaped educational policy in two cases: the Johns Committee investigations in mid-twentieth-century Florida and the United Kingdom's Section 28. I follow comparative historical analysis and historical-institutionalist approaches that trace how past policy paradigms structure later outcomes (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Skocpol & Somers, 1980; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson,

2004). I situate contemporary moral-panic-driven policies within a longer lineage of state efforts to regulate marginalized identities in schools, showing patterns of continuity, rupture, and reinvention. Recent work on homophobic populism helps explain why sexuality-focused backlash remains politically useful in the present (Corrales & Kiryk, 2022). While this study focuses on the United States and the United Kingdom, both cases illuminate how sexuality and dissent are framed as threats to social order and how education policy becomes a tool for enforcing ideological conformity.

The study is further informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA), which serves as a methodological tool for examining the ideological underpinnings of policy discourse, legal rulings, and media representations. Drawing on the work of Hjörne and Säljö (2008), this study applies CDA to analyze how moral panic narratives are constructed and deployed to justify exclusionary educational practices. Their research demonstrates how policy texts encode systemic exclusion through language that frames certain identities as threats to social and educational stability. Within this framework, discourse is not merely a reflection of policy but an active force in shaping public perception and institutional decision-making. Peters (2004) extends this argument, illustrating how educational texts are instrumental in constructing moral panic narratives that regulate knowledge production in schools. This study engages with these insights by interrogating the language of legislative debates, policy documents, and curriculum guidelines that have historically framed LGBTQIA+ identities and racial justice initiatives as existential threats to societal order. Such discourse analysis illuminates the ways in which these policies, while framed as protective measures, function as mechanisms of control that restrict intellectual freedom and perpetuate systemic discrimination.

The analysis also considers media and public discourse, recognizing the role of newspapers, court cases, and political speeches in amplifying fear-based narratives. Lester's (2016) work on discourse analysis in education highlights how policy rhetoric constructs threats in ways that reinforce dominant power structures. Examining media coverage and public statements surrounding the targeted policies provides insight into the broader cultural anxieties that fuel and sustain moral panic-driven legislation. By combining comparative historical analysis with critical discourse analysis, this study seeks to move beyond a descriptive account of policy decisions and instead interrogate the ideological forces that drive moral panic in education. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how exclusionary policies emerge, persist, and evolve, offering insights into both the mechanisms of oppression and the potential for resistance within educational systems.

Comparative Case Studies: U.S. & UK

This section examines how moral panic has been operationalized to shape educational policies and practices across the United States and the United Kingdom. Despite different political and cultural contexts, these nations exhibit striking parallels through the use of moral panic to increase state surveillance through exclusionary policies. By comparing these cases, I uncover shared mechanisms of control and surveillance and explore lessons for resisting the impact of moral panic on education.

United States: The Johns Committee

The Cold War tactics of Florida's Johns Committee calcified moral panic as a tool of social control in education. Founded in 1956 under the pretense of combating communism, the committee initially targeted civil rights activists before redirecting its focus toward LGBTQIA+ educators. Teachers accused of *moral deviance* were subjected to invasive interrogations that often led to coerced confessions or implicating other teachers to shift the focus off of themselves (Graves 2009). This environment of fear led to many resignations and normalized self-censorship of countless educators afraid of losing their job, pension, as well as the social death affiliated with the legacy of the committee. One example of this fear-driven approach appears in the 1958 interrogation transcript of a teacher, which reveals the extent of personal intrusion: "Are you now, or have you ever been, engaged in activities contrary to the moral standards of the community? Do you associate with known homosexuals?" (Braukman, 2012, p. 76).

Such questions exemplified the Johns Committee's efforts to frame LGBTQIA+ teachers as both a moral and political threat (Johnson, 2004). David Johnson (2004) argues that this conflation of homosexuality with subversion was deeply embedded in Cold War tactics. Social death, in the form of public shaming, extending beyond hearings leading many to self-censor in order to avoid the coercion and humiliation that emanated throughout circles of surveillance. In one instance, a retired school principal recalled trying to get ahead of the witch hunts by conforming to acceptable norms. In 1953, she broke off her long-term relationship with her lover to marry a man. She explained, "I just thought this is what all nice girls do, you know, get married," and later described lifelong regret (Bath, 2009, p. 2). Escaping the influence of the Johns Committee was not easy. Beyond shaming, the Johns committee had local allies. Several lesbians recounted being pressured by Tampa police officers during interrogations. In one instance, under threat of a three-year prison sentence for "crimes against nature," a woman was forced into unwanted sexual encounters in police cars to prove her straightness (Hull, 1993). This form of sexual coercion was another way the committee could extract names to further tighten the purge network.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, and similar dynamics are evident in contemporary culture wars. Laws such as Florida's "Parental Rights in Education" Act, commonly referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" law, create ambiguous guidelines, based on normalcy and deviance (Florida Senate, 2022) that provoke uncertainty and fear among educators and anxieties around community members. Many teachers report removing books with LGBTQIA+ themes or avoiding discussions about racism to evade accusations of indoctrination (Sainato, 2022). This climate of heightened fear and surveillance mirrors the chilling effects of the Johns Committee Era, with fear acting as the primary apparatus of control. State-aligned outlets amplified "anti-grooming" rhetoric during the HB 1557 cycle, while national wire coverage documented the spread of the "groomer" slur into mainstream politics (Anderson, 2022; AP News, 2022a; 2022b).

United Kingdom: Section 28 & its Repeal

In 1988, the United Kingdom passed Section 28, explicitly prohibiting local authorities and schools from "promoting homosexuality" or teaching "the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (UK Parliament, 1987; 1988a; 1988b; Lowe, 2007, p. 139). Emerging from moral panic amid the AIDS epidemic, this legislation reinforced fear-driven narratives that positioned LGBTQIA+ identities as inherently deviant, psychologically pathological, and threat-

ening to societal stability. For example, the Earl of Halsbury invoked these pathologizing narratives by publicly framing homosexuality as symptomatic of psychological sickness, linking it with AIDS and sexual promiscuity to justify the law (Hubbard and Griffiths 2019, p. 948). Official campaigns intensified this stigma; a UK government AIDS leaflets and TV spots framed sex and risk in stark terms, helping normalize a climate of alarm. The 1987 "Don't Die of Ignorance" campaign mailed AIDS leaflets to every UK household and ran high-profile TV spots with tombstone and iceberg imagery, shaping a climate of fear and urgency around sexuality and risk (The National Archives, n.d.; British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017). Such inflammatory language solidified misconceptions and public anxieties, setting a hostile tone for the introduction of Section 28.

Within educative settings, the chilling effect of Section 28 was profound, suppressing educators' ability to respond to anti-LGBTQIA+ harassment and violence or provide inclusive support to students. Melissa, who attended school under Section 28, provides a vivid testimony stating, "One of the worst things about growing up under Section 28 was that teachers did not really intervene in the violence that was done to me because I was thought to be gay. I think they were afraid too, because Section 28 meant they couldn't really name it" (Birkett, Sandal-Wilson, and Young 2024, para. 5). Educational policy under Section 28 institutionalized homophobia, rendering heterosexuality as the unquestioned norm, thus marginalizing any deviation as deviance (Epstein, 1994, p. 139). Melissa's experience as a student illustrates the demanding silence institutionalized by the law, leaving LGBTQIA+ students and teachers vulnerable and unsupported in hostile educational environments.

The chilling effects permeated across institutions, extending beyond education into policing. Police culture's emphasis on hypermasculinity framed homosexuality as deviance and disorder, forcing LGBTQIA+ officers into a double existence, severely damaging their mental health and professional performance (M. E. Burke 1994, p. 192). Similarly, the cultural and artistic communities felt the impact of Section 28's implicit censorship. Lowe (2007, p. 140), reflecting on this period, highlighted the pervasive self-censorship and chilling effect artists experienced, "The threat of censorship was as effective as actual censorship itself in curtailing a set of visual investigations into identity and sexuality." This narrative underscores how Section 28 forced compliance and curtailed expressions of LGBTQIA+ identity, silencing voices within the arts.

Resistance to Section 28 was spearheaded by coalitions of educators, students, artists, and activists. The emergence of professional bodies, such as the Lesbian and Gay Section of the British Psychological Society, provided institutional counter-narratives that rejected pathologizing discourses that framed LGBTQIA+ identities as deviant. Hubbard and Griffiths (2019) emphasize that this establishment signaled institutional recognition of lesbian and gay psychologists, offering legitimacy and professional authority to the fight against discriminatory legislation. The personal testimonies collected by advocacy groups underscored the urgency and necessity of ongoing resistance. Amy, reflecting on the personal and political struggles surrounding Section 28, urged continued vigilance and activism, "The main message lost of the interviewees expressed was not to be complacent, and to recognize that the fight for LGBTQ rights is ongoing" (Birkett, Sandal-Wilson, & Young 2024, para. 6). Such narratives were pivotal in humanizing the debate and shifting public opinion, ultimately contributing to Section 28's repeal in 2000 in Scotland and in England and Wales in 2003 (UK Parliament, 2023). As these stories attest, the repeal did not fully eliminate the lasting cultural, institutional, and personal consequences of Section 28. Instead, it marked a critical turning point in a prolonged struggle against moral panic, institutional homophobia, and the ongoing stigmatization of LGBTQIA+ identities. The interconnected experiences of

education, policing, psychology, and arts collectively illustrate the multilayered nature of moral panic, highlighting both the devastating impacts and resilience fostered in response. The repeal symbolizes both a significant legislative victory and a powerful reminder of the enduring necessity for vigilance and action against authoritative forces.

Comparative Insights

Taken together, the two cases reveal three recurring mechanisms: targeted censorship, institutional surveillance, and punitive policy design. Across different contexts, these mechanisms enlist educators and schools to police social order. By explicitly targeting educators and students at intersectional vulnerabilities, such as race, gender, and sexuality, these panics reinforce social hierarchies and limit intellectual freedom. Recognizing these patterns is essential not only historically but also in responding effectively to contemporary efforts to legislate curricular exclusion, such as recent anti-Critical Race Theory laws and LGBTQIA+ book bans.

First, the Johns Committee exemplified Cold War anxieties, conflating sexual nonconformity with political subversion and moral degeneracy creating an environment in which surveillance, fear, and self-censorship became institutional norms. These dynamics disproportionately affected Black educators, especially those involved in civil rights organizing. Their demands for desegregation, racial justice, or pedagogical autonomy were often reframed as radical or subversive, making them especially vulnerable to accusations of moral or political deviance (Anderson, 1988; Dudziak, 2021). The intersection of race and sexuality functioned to heighten scrutiny, linking racial justice efforts with broader fears of societal destabilization. Teachers accused of homosexuality faced humiliating interrogations designed not merely to enforce conformity but to produce public examples of deviance. For example, in March 1962 an advisory committee to the Florida Children's Commission urged a school health course "geared toward preventing homosexuality," called for lectures to train teachers to "recognize the symptoms," and discussed notifying law enforcement, with Senator Charley Johns and investigator R. J. Strickland present ("Homosexuality: School course education urged," 1962, p. 16).

Public documents from the Committee framed homosexuality as "a disease which can be spread through the classroom," explicitly aligning queerness with contagion and infiltration (FLIC, 1964). As Braukman (2012, p. 76) documents, interrogations explicitly aimed to equate LGBTQIA+ identities with "activities contrary to the moral standards of the community," creating an environment in which surveillance, fear, and self-censorship became institutionalized norms. This systemic policing of sexuality, under the pretense of protecting youth and community standards, demonstrates how moral panic was leveraged to justify invasive measures against educators, framing them as existential threats to social and moral stability. The committee's 1964 report, *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida*, labeled queer teachers as "moral degenerates," asserting that "the homosexual is too frequently associated with the seduction of the young" (FLIC, 1964, p. 10). Such language framed LGBTQ educators as a danger to children and as ideological subversives. Florida coverage and campaign materials repeatedly cast queer people as a threat to youth, from a 1962 call for schools to "prevent homosexuality" to later Save Our Children messaging in Miami (The Tampa Tribune, 1962; Fejes, 2008). These discourses constructed queer identity as a threat to youth and to national integrity.

Notably, Black educators and students faced compounded scrutiny, as civil rights activism was often equated with communist and sexual deviance, creating a racialized queer panic. Archival records show Black teachers were more likely to be accused of moral unfitness and communism

during this period, reinforcing the racialized nature of moral panic (McGuire, 2010). This pattern aligns with McGuire's account of how sexualized racial terror functioned politically, making clear that sex panic and race panic often operate together (McGuire, 2010). A clear U.S. example is Anita Bryant's 1977 Save Our Children Campaign in Miami, which framed gay teachers as threats to children and helped repeal a local anti-discrimination ordinance; that framing reappears in later Florida school policy debates (Encarnación, 2022; Frank, 2013).

Similarly, the United Kingdom's Section 28 legislation drew on moral panic narratives amplified by the AIDS crisis to stigmatize LGBTQIA+ identities explicitly. As Lowe (2007) underscores, Section 28 did not simply censor educational content; it created an enduring atmosphere of implicit censorship wherein even mentioning homosexuality became professionally risky. Personal testimonies illustrate how the law's chilling effects left LGBTQIA+ students particularly vulnerable, with educators reluctant or unable to intervene in anti-LGBTQIA+ harassment. British tabloids amplified panic with headlines like "Save the Children from sad sordid sex lessons" and "Vile book in School: Pupils see Pictures of Gay Lovers," linking classroom materials to moral decline (Baker, 2022; London School of Economics Library, 2018). Parliamentary speeches leading up to Section 28's enactment referred to homosexuality as "a pretended family relationship" and framed LGBTQ+ inclusion as a direct threat to traditional British values (UK Parliament, 1987; 1988a; 1988b). These harms were exacerbated for racialized and migrant LGBTQ+ communities, who were frequently excluded from both institutional protections and mainstream queer advocacy (Monro & Richardson, 2010). Oral histories and witness seminars suggest that the impacts of Section 28 were particularly acute in schools with high numbers of racialized students, where silence and stigma compounded existing inequalities (Preston, 2001; Bhopal, 2018).

Like the Johns Committee, Section 28 positioned educators as gatekeepers of morality, charged with policing sexual norms rather than promoting inclusive education, reinforcing social hierarchies through fear-based governance. Racialized LGBTQIA+ youth from migrant communities—particularly South Asian, Black Caribbean, and African backgrounds—faced unique forms of marginalization during the enforcement of Section 28. Their experiences were often rendered invisible within both mainstream educational discourses and predominantly white queer movements, leading to a compounded sense of exclusion and cultural alienation (Bhopal, 2018; Monro & Richardson, 2010). This intersectional erasure reveals how race, migration, and sexuality converged to structure silence and invisibility within schools. Parliamentary speeches framed "promotion" in explicitly protectionist terms. Speakers warned against exposing children to "insidious propaganda for homosexuality," insisted there was "no place in any school" for teaching that presents homosexuality as "the norm," and defending the wording "pretended family relationship" (UK Parliament, 1987; 1988a; 1988b). Section 28's language prohibited "the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (*Local Government Act*, 1988, sec. 28), using discourse that framed queer identity as both counterfeit and dangerous. These narratives positioned LGBTQIA+ presence in schools as inherently corruptive, shaping a climate of institutionalized fear and erasure. These impacts were even more acute for Black and Asian queer youth, whose racialized identities compounded their marginalization. Organizations like Black Lesbians and Gays Against Media Homophobia (BLGAMH) challenged both racism and homophobia in school systems, emphasizing how Section 28 amplified intersecting exclusions (Davis, 2020). Scholars have noted that Section 28's effects were compounded for racialized LGBTQ+ youth, who faced both structural racism and cultural homophobia within U.K. schools (Dos Santos, 2022).

These cases collectively reveal critical patterns. Each moral panic emerges during moments of social tension or cultural shift, whether Cold War paranoia or anxieties over public health. Each panic strategically positions educators and educational institutions as frontline defenders of social order, assigning them responsibility to enforce dominant cultural narratives and restrict intellectual and cultural freedom. Additionally, moral panic invariably targets intersecting identities, amplifying vulnerabilities already imposed by systemic inequalities. For instance, LGBTQIA+ educators in the United States and United Kingdom faced intensified scrutiny due to intersecting stigmas around gender conformity and sexual morality (Graves, 2009; S. K. Burke, 1994; M. E. Burke, 1994). The comparative lens highlights that moral panic is cyclical rather than linear. Rather than disappearing with legislative victories or societal progress, moral panic resurfaces in renewed forms, adapting to contemporary anxieties and political landscapes. Today's wave of "anti-woke" legislation, book bans, and curriculum restrictions across the United States reflects historical patterns reminiscent of Section 28 and the Johns Committee's campaigns. The targeting of racial disparities and LGBTQIA+ topics illustrates moral panic's continued effectiveness as a reactionary tool, renewing public fears to suppress progressive educational reforms.

In identifying recurring mechanisms such as censorship, surveillance, punitive policy, and ideological conformity, educators, policymakers, and activists can better recognize and anticipate moral panic. This comparative analysis underscores the necessity of vigilance against cycles of fear and suppression. Recognizing moral panic as inherently political rather than authentically moral equips community members to advocate proactively for inclusive curricula, protections for educators, and meaningful intellectual freedom. Moreover, it emphasizes that resisting moral panic requires not just reactive defense but active reclaiming of education as a site of democratic possibility, critical reflection, and social transformation.

Discussion & Implications for Democratic Education

Strategies for Resistance

The historical case studies of the Johns Committee and Section 28 highlight not only the cyclical nature of moral panic but also successful forms of resistance. Drawing insights from these contexts, stakeholders in education today, including educators, policymakers, and community advocates, can develop proactive and multilayered strategies to reclaim education as a democratic, inclusive, and critical space. These strategies operate across legal, institutional, pedagogical, and community spheres, requiring sustained collective effort.

Legal & Institutional Advocacy

Legal advocacy remains an essential strategy for confronting moral panic and protecting democratic education. Educational institutions have long served as sites where rights are contested or defended, underscoring the necessity of clear legal protections. Educators today need explicit institutional backing, clearly delineating protections against censorship and retaliation. Professional organizations and educators' unions play critical roles by supporting legal actions against repressive policies and advocating for policy frameworks that prioritize academic freedom and inclusivity (Berliner & Glass 2014).

Counter-Narratives & Historical Memory

Central to resisting moral panic is the strategic use of counter-narratives and historical memory. Moral panics frequently exploit collective amnesia or distorted history. Documenting and teaching about historical episodes of repression, such as the Johns Committee hearings and Section 28 campaigns, not only enriches historical understanding but equips students and communities to recognize and challenge contemporary moral panics (Apple, 2018; Zinn, 2005). Embedding these histories into curriculum and public discourse creates continuity between past and present struggles and fosters critical awareness.

Coalition-Building & Collective Action

Collective action remains one of the most powerful tools against moral panic. Historical cases demonstrate that resistance is most effective when coalitions cross boundaries of profession, identity, and geography. Resistance to Section 28 in the UK was amplified significantly through coalitions that brought together teachers, psychologists, artists, and students, exemplifying interdisciplinary and cross-sector solidarity (Hubbard & Griffiths 2019, p. 949). Today, fostering collaborative alliances among educators, students, unions, civil rights organizations, and international groups offers potent strategies against moral panic-driven legislation. These alliances provide mutual protection and resource-sharing, increasing capacity for sustained resistance (Giroux, 2020; Picower, 2012).

In the United States, such coalitions have emerged in response to Florida's "Don't Say Gay" legislation. Even as partisan outlets framed HB 1557 as an "anti-grooming" measure, national reporting tracked pushback against the slur's normalization (Anderson, 2022; AP News, 2022a, 2022b). Groups including the ACLU, Equality Florida, teacher unions, and student-led LGBTQIA+ organizations have coordinated protests, filed lawsuits, and developed inclusive teaching materials to counteract state censorship (National Education Association, 2022; Human Rights Campaign, 2022). These efforts represent the continuity of intersectional resistance and demonstrate how community-led advocacy can directly challenge the narratives and policies underpinning moral panic (ACLU, 2022; Equality Florida, 2022). In Florida, grassroots resistance has been especially visible in response to HB 1557 ("Don't Say Gay"). Students in Orange and Duval counties organized walkouts and public forums, challenging the bill's effects on their mental health, identity formation, and classroom discourse (Turner, 2022). In 2024, Equality Florida and partners secured a settlement that narrowed enforcement and clarified schools' obligations (Equality Florida, 2024; Atterbury, 2024; Najarro, 2024).

Democratic Pedagogical Practices

Classroom practice itself constitutes an essential site for reclaiming education from moral panic. Democratic pedagogies promote inclusive, dialogical environments. Practices such as creating safe spaces, clearly defining respectful boundaries for dialogue, and involving students actively in classroom governance significantly transform the educational experience from authoritarian control to participatory democracy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Educators today must explicitly cultivate democratic pedagogies, embedding principles of critical pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and participatory decision-making. Such approaches affirm classrooms as spaces for critical engagement rather than compliance, directly challenging the logic underpinning moral panic (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Giroux, 2020).

Public Engagement & Community-Based Advocacy

Community engagement is integral to sustaining resistance against moral panic. In contemporary contexts, public forums, community dialogues, teach-ins, and digital media campaigns are essential for counteracting misinformation and promoting informed debate (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017; Giroux, 2014). Schools, museums, libraries, and civic groups must collaborate in public education initiatives, creating inclusive spaces where democratic education is discussed openly and actively defended. Such community advocacy expands the reach of educational resistance beyond institutional walls, directly addressing public misconceptions and mobilizing broader societal support (Apple, 2018; Anyon, 2005).

Protecting Educators & Students from Retaliation

A persistent theme across historical cases is the vulnerability of educators and students who resist moral panic-driven policies. Institutionalized surveillance and censorship were hallmark features of Cold War-era educational policies (Braukman, 2012; Graves, 2009). Modern institutions must establish transparent protections for educators and students alike, clearly outlining disciplinary policies, guaranteeing due process, and publicly supporting educators who face censorship or retaliation for inclusive teaching practices (Dudziak, 2021; Berliner & Glass, 2014). Professional organizations must vocally defend academic freedom and ensure support structures are robust enough to withstand political backlash. Publicly documenting instances of censorship and repression further strengthens resistance efforts, creating historical records that clarify patterns and mechanisms of moral panic (Zinn, 2005).

Conclusion: Reclaiming Education's Democratic Promise

The cyclical emergence of moral panics across educational contexts, from the Johns Committee hearings in Cold War-era Florida to Section 28 in the United Kingdom during the AIDS epidemic, reveals a persistent political strategy designed to marginalize vulnerable populations, control public discourse, and maintain entrenched hierarchies. These cases demonstrate that moral panics are not isolated events but strategic responses to social transformation, regularly employed to suppress dissenting voices and limit democratic engagement in education (Braukman, 2012; Lowe, 2007).

At its core, education serves as a foundation for democratic life. It fosters civic learning, cultural exchange, and critical thinking. However, moral panics disrupt these purposes through censorship, surveillance, and professional retaliation, narrowing what can be taught and who belongs in educational spaces. Such constraints erode the ability of schools to cultivate informed, empathetic, and engaged citizens (Giroux, 2020; hooks, 1994). As this analysis has demonstrated, the persistence of moral panic requires continuous critical awareness, intentional advocacy, and efforts to uphold democratic principles in educational settings.

History also offers examples of meaningful resistance. Even under repressive conditions, educators, students, families, and community allies have mounted effective opposition. From institutional defiance of the Johns Committee to broad coalitions challenging Section 28, collective action has reshaped public discourse and brought about important reforms (Hubbard & Griffiths, 2019). These examples underscore the value of solidarity, policy engagement, and public education initiatives in protecting intellectual freedom and fostering more just learning environments.

Contemporary struggles against curriculum censorship and so-called "anti-woke" legislation reflect earlier moral panics and demand similarly sustained responses. Addressing these challenges involves legal strategies, assertive public messaging, and inclusive curricular practices that counter erasure with visibility (Apple, 2018; Berliner & Glass, 2014).

This comparative analysis of the United States and United Kingdom reveals how democratic institutions can be mobilized to suppress dissent through educational policy. Recognizing moral panic as a global phenomenon emphasizes the need for shared resistance across borders and systems (Corrales, 2018; Applebaum, 2020). Identifying recurring strategies—moralized rhetoric, targeted censorship, and institutional control—helps educators and advocates prepare for and respond to emerging threats. Defending the public mission of education involves confronting these mechanisms and advancing more inclusive, participatory, and critical approaches to schooling.

As bell hooks reminds us, education must remain "a practice of freedom," a space where individuals are empowered to challenge oppression and imagine alternative futures (hooks, 1994, p. 13). The historical examples explored here show that this transformative potential depends on environments free from fear and supported by community action. Through collaboration, advocacy, and a steadfast commitment to justice, education can continue to serve as a vital space for democratic learning, critical reflection, and collective hope.

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Ginney Norton, Ph.D. is an educator and scholar at Missouri State University whose work explores critical perspectives in education, public pedagogy, and cultural texts as sites of learning. Her research and writing draw on critical pedagogy, feminist and posthuman theory, and queer and neuroqueer approaches to curriculum.