Combating Banned Books and Censorship in the English Classroom

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family.

Mom— You have always pushed me to do more than I thought I ever could. You wanted me to exceed the expectations of both myself, and others, and... Here I am. Life hasn’t been simple for you, but you have always given me your all, wishing for me to have an easier journey than you have. You will never know how much I appreciate you for that, but hopefully these few sentences will shed some light.

John— Thank you for being the best little brother I could ever ask for. Your antics always have me smiling, and I could not have gotten through college without those visits home to hang out with you. I started this journey when you were just seven years old, and you’re a teenager now! I hope one day you can look at all my hard work and use it to propel yourself to wherever you dream.

Ripley— I genuinely do not think I could have written this thesis without you, pooch. Through all 2020, you have been there. Through multiple COVID scares, several quarantines, illnesses, and stress, you were right there, giving me your signature stare and puppy love. You deserve your own immortalization on this document.

Thank you all for always being there.
Abstract

Censorship is a societal struggle that treads into all aspects of life and the classroom is no exception. Real-world, lesson teaching novels of all genres and types are being banned and challenged across the country, simply for containing (what is deemed to be) “inappropriate topics”—including sexuality, gender, violence, mental health, religion, and racism. Even if novels have been shown to be educational on the topics, they are still removed from the hands of youth in order to shield and protect them from the subject.

“Banned Books” have a wide array of effects on students in the classroom. Student learning is being stunted as conversation topics are being prohibited. Information is being restricted, causing an influx of stress on both student and teacher as they tread the line of what is “acceptable” to learn about. All in all, this causes students to have a skewed perception of the world at large, with gaps in their learning.

There are still steps that can be taken, however. Educators can approach the issue of censorship in the classroom in many ways. They must work to educate themselves and their peers in order to tackle this subject. Through diversification of the classroom and a changed perception on student capabilities, changes can be made.

*Keywords:* Banned Books, challenged books, censorship, education, English, ELA
# Table of Contents

List of Figures........................................................................................................................................2

Chapter One: Introduction................................................................................................................……3
  Description........................................................................................................................................3
  Personal Draw................................................................................................................................3
  Classroom Relationship and Censorship............................................................................................4
  Common Banned Books and why they are Banned............................................................................5
  Societal Stigmas.................................................................................................................................7
  What the Future Holds......................................................................................................................8

Chapter Two: Literature Review...........................................................................................................9
  Extending the Narrative....................................................................................................................9
  Why are Books Banned?...................................................................................................................9
    Challenging v. Banning...................................................................................................................10
    Themes that Cause Books to be Banned.......................................................................................10
    What Books are Banned?..............................................................................................................12
  What are the Negative Effects of Banned Books in the Classroom?.............................................13
    The Restraint of Information........................................................................................................13
    The Flow of Stress.........................................................................................................................14
    Narrowed Eyes of Youth..............................................................................................................14
  How can Educators Approach Banned Books?...............................................................................16
    Teach about Censorship...............................................................................................................16
    View Students Differently............................................................................................................17
    Diversify the Classroom...............................................................................................................18
  Visions for the Future.......................................................................................................................20

Chapter Three: Contributions to the profession..................................................................................22
  Op-Ed piece.....................................................................................................................................22
  Professional development presentation............................................................................................25

References.............................................................................................................................................48
List of Figures

Figure 1: Challenges by Reasons.................................................................11
Chapter One: Introduction

Description

Throughout history, bodies of power have worked to mute the masses and stop the spread of information. Historically, this held many purposes: to pause rebellion, keep the populace subservient and uneducated, to hold secrets, etc. In modern days, the average individual would not think that the world is filled with as much censorship as there once was, but this is not entirely correct. We mock countries such as North Korea for their strict worldview, but little do we know, we are living in our own forms of censorship every day. These forms take many shapes, but they start early in life, often with children. Banning books is just one of these many forms of censorship that affects individuals for, potentially, their whole lives, as their development is impacted. The ALA, or the American Library Association, fiercely opposes the concept of banned books, and actively fights to maintain freedom in the library and the classroom—“Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions. It is the one un-American act that could most easily defeat us” (“Banned Books FAQ”).

Personal Draw

I have always been a free-thinking and openminded individual. Growing up, I was the ‘weird’ student, who wore all black and challenged the people around me. I disliked the status quo of the rural school I was in, and had a hard time fitting in. Reading was one of my saving graces. Always a good student, I was reading at a college level while in high school, but I vastly preferred YA genres that challenged thoughts about individuality and society. I devoured novels at an alarming rate at my local library, and often had (quite literally) dozens pulled from the shelves and in my bedroom every week. It was not until I started reading novels by a woman
named Ellen Hopkins that I was introduced to the idea of banned books. She wrote real-world free verse poetry novels based off of hot and difficult topics that teenagers face, including drug addiction, religious confliction, and suicide. One of her novels, titled *Tricks*, was about teenagers that were exploring sex, their sexuality, and even prostitution and drug addiction. As I tried to check out this novel in my library, I was told that it was not allowed in school, and it was taken and tossed right in front of me. Upon further review, I discovered she was a frequently challenged author, who had events cancelled before she showed up, and who experienced extremely harsh parental criticism.

I didn’t understand the concept of banned books at this time. Why someone would not want to educate the next generation was beyond me, but this experience prompted me to research banned books and write a paper on them in my ELA class. Years later, I met Ellen Hopkins and was able to discuss my experiences. As someone who’s favorite genres fall into the banned books category, I oppose the censorship without second thought, and would like to use these experiences to fuel my passion in the classroom for my own students.

**Classroom Relationship and Censorship**

I have limited personal experience in the ELA classroom as it stands. I have student taught and observed many times in classrooms, however, they were definitely more liberal leaning, and fought banned books with a passion. There are large movements across the country to fight banned books and improve the education of our students and next generation. The “We Need Diverse Books” organization, or WNBD, strives to see a “world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book” (“About WNDB”). They fight banned books in order to allow classrooms to hold books that have diverse sexualities and genders, people of color, people
with disabilities, and all types of minorities. While they are not connected with the banned book movement explicitly, they go hand in hand in educators’ eyes.

I do, however, have experience with censorship in the classroom. During my time in classes, I was told to avoid any and all conversation that discussed sexuality and student identity. If a student came to me to confess something, I was to refer them to a counselor. I had limited talking points I could use when discussing identity (because, as we all know, identity is so much more than just what your favorite color and favorite genre of movie is). The way I needed to interact with my own students was censored far past where it should have needed to be.

It is commonly known that schools are one of the largest harbors of censorship in the country, with “book banning [being] the most widespread form of censorship in the United States” (Webb, 2009). Children’s literature is the primary target of these bans, as people in authority fear that children will be swayed and “ask questions” that they regard as dangerous. “They commonly fear that these publications will present ideas, raise questions, and incite critical inquiry among children that parents, political groups, or religious organizations are not ready to address or that they find inappropriate” (Webb, 2009). This is the same reasoning behind my limited scope of conversation during my time teaching—questions are feared. Anything that could break the status quo, any wandering mind who observes a little too well, can ruin the censorship that has been laid out for hundreds of years. There are all too many books that are banned that would raise good, healthy questions in future young adults, however, older generations simply don’t know how to handle them.

**Common Banned Books and why they are Banned**

The American Library Association releases information detailing the ten most commonly banned books of each year. In 2019, there were 566 books targeted and tracked, with ten that
came up the most (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”). Eight out of ten of these novels were banned simply because they included LGBTQIA+ content, with the other two banned for vulgarity and anti-Christian mindsets. Many of these books discussed the transgender experience, with five being picture books for young children. Looking in past years, the common reasoning for a banned book is simply sexual content. However, this content is not following the general idea of sexually explicit, but is instead educational about sexualities, anatomies, safe sex practices, and genders. Novels that address anti-religious mindsets, suicide, and politics also frequent these lists. Award winning and classic novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Kite Runner* are also banned due to vulgar words or religious content (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”).

Some books are banned simply because the district is afraid of parental intervention and opposition. Brianna R. Burke and Kristina Greenfield of the NCTE discuss the steps that need to be taken in order to work with one of these books in class.

“We recommend several proactive steps before the first implementation… First, teachers need to consult with their principals. They should email parents an outline of the lesson, a justification for its inclusion, and list the state and national standards the lesson fulfills…” The principal should confer with the superintendent and possibly consult the district’s lawyer to anticipate any problems that arise.” (2016)

It’s alarming the hoops that teachers need to go through to properly educate their students in today’s cultural climate, but they need to be jumped regardless. The most important thing in this scenario is education students, followed by preventing further issues in the classroom. Some schools simply do not want to put up with it, and it is easier to just get rid of the books and pretend it never happened.
Societal Stigmas

One of the largest issues that banned books face is the idea that they promote intelligence about concepts that the larger community may not agree with. In the U.S., it is commonplace for all ‘negative’ societal aspects (sex/sexuality/gender, hedonism, drugs, death, racism, etc.) to be hidden from children. This causes an implicit bias in students and adults, where they know that there is intrinsically nothing wrong with, for example, sex and sexuality, but the concept still makes them uncomfortable and avoidant. Alyssa Niccolini (2015) discusses this concept in the context of her own classroom:

After finishing a quiz early, Erica, one of my strongest and sweetest students, recently pulled out *Fifty Shades of Grey*. My knee-jerk impulse was to want to make her to put it away. Taken aback by my inclination to censor reading, I asked myself if the novel offended me more for its explicit sexual content, what I deemed its low literary status, the imagined reaction of a teacher or administrator seeing that now-notorious silver tie, or because of the preconceptions I had of Erica as a “sweet” (and thus innocent) student.

(22)

Alyssa goes on to state that she considered this to be a ‘critical incident’ in her profession, or an incident that challenged her mindset as a teacher. The stigma in this particular instance is about a female student reading romance novels, especially one that is notorious and explicit. However, exploring sexuality is a part of adolescence that we all know and have experienced, however, our society has created this façade that children are/should be numb and immune to everything ‘dirty’ in the world. I do not believe that this is just or right, especially in the classroom. We should be able to explore these concepts with students and allow them to explore them
themselves. Adolescence is a time of learning and creating who you are going to be, paving your own path, and the banning books coupled with a small-minded society is restricting that.

**What the Future Holds**

My hope is to see diverse books in the classroom through the rest of my teaching career, no matter where I end up. I desire to see open-minded classrooms where students can grow up to be well-rounded and educated adults who know who they are and what they stand for. As NCTE authors Brianna R. Burke and Kristina Greenfield state, “teachers have a civic duty to help their students become critically aware and informed citizens. Creating active citizens means fostering critical thinking skills relevant to the political issues of our students' time” (2016). I find it reassuring to know that the next generation of teachers largely feels the same. In studies, it has been shown that teacher candidates “conceptually appreciated the notion of exploring controversial citizenship issues with students” (Lycke & Lucey, 2019). Culturally responsive teaching is a growing ‘trend’ in the educational profession, and newer generations are adopting it in troves. Perhaps this is because with each year we become more open and diverse, and the social justice warriors want to keep it that way. Regardless, I hope that this trend continues, and fighting banned books and censorship in the classroom is part of my contribution.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Extending the Narrative

Institutions of power are notorious for limiting the spread of useful information for the individuals who live under them. Unfortunately, the educational institution is no different. Censorship is a plague of the growth of society, a leech that sucks away the actuality of the world, leaving a skewed reality in its place. In the educational system, there is a sizable effort to white-wash the past, and PG-13 the future. History books are disreputable—filled with images of smiling Black people in fields as they are enslaved for nothing but their melanin, written from the perspective of some group of white men who refuse to face the realities of their countries history. Novels in the English classroom are often not any better. Stories of the past, written through the eyes of a white men, attempting to teach morals and lessons about something they know very little about. Meanwhile, those same institutions censor and ban novels from their premises, worried about the ‘effects’ that they might have on the youth. In the eyes of these institutions, speaking about gender, sexuality, violence, history (the true history), racism, prejudice, etc. will damage the minds of the youth, traumatizing them.

There should be no censorship in the classroom. Topics should be faced head on, with no blame game played in the background. Education is a teacher’s career. Students rely on teachers to help mold them into well-rounded, prepared individuals, and this is impossible if something as simple as a controversial novel is not allowed in school. The goal of this research is to investigate the scope that banned books have on the classroom (specifically focusing on why books are banned, what books are banned, and what experts say teachers can do about it in the future) in order to create a product to entice change.

Why are Books Banned?
**Challenging v. Banning**

Many books that fall under the “banned book” movement are not banned in the truest sense of the word. Some schools simply *challenge* books. By definition, “a challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials” (“Research Guides…”). In purest of form, books are supposedly challenged in order to protect children from certain themes and from receiving information—such as sexually explicit texts, offensive language, or violence. However, even with the best of intentions, it is no one’s right (aside from the parents, and the student) to decide what is and is not acceptable material for that student to read.

Many individuals of power claim that the banning and challenging of books goes against the first amendment rights of a student. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., states: “If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable” (“Banned Book FAQ”). There are books that are being challenged or banned simply due to themes like witchcraft (*Harry Potter* series)—but, in the end, wouldn’t this be a denial of religion? Why are books about witchcraft or Islam being banned, when the Christian Bible frequently lives on the most-read shelf in the school’s library?

**Themes that Cause Books to be Banned**

The Butler University library shares an article on their website that compiles some of the top reasons that novels are banned. Their list includes: racial issues, encouragement of ‘damaging’ lifestyles (including homosexuality), blasphemous dialogue (using ‘the lords name in vain’), sexual situations, violence or negativity, witchcraft, unpopular religious affiliations, political bias, and the ever so generic ‘age appropriateness’ (“Banned Books”).
The Butler library also compiled statistical evidence based off of challenges to books. See Figure 1:

![Challenges by Reasons](image)

(Fig. 1, Challenges by Reasons, “Banned Books”)

This figure demonstrates the number of challenges for certain themes of books between the decades of the 90’s and the 00’s. It is clear from the graph that not much progress has been made—the same themes are getting challenged decades later and are even still being challenged today. Top themes include offensive language and sexually explicit situations, with vague follow-ups such as “unsuited for age group” and “other objections”. The issue with these bans is that just about anything an individual dislikes can fit into any of these categories. This is going past the concept of protecting the youth, straight into censorship of the next generation. Censorship and the limiting of information is a fantastic way to ensure compliance and the maintenance of the status quo.
What Books are Banned?

Some of the most popularly challenged books may surprise the average person. According to the ALA, eight out of ten of the most banned books from 2019 were banned simply due to LGBTQIA+ themes (“Top 10…”). The other two were banned for vulgarity, sexual situations, or witchcraft. Looking through past years, these trends are consistent, as seen in figure one.

The top banned book of 2019 is titled George by Alex Gino. The ALA states the reason for the challenge/ban/restriction is: “to avoid controversy; for LGBTQIA+ content and a transgender character; because schools and libraries should not ‘put books in a child’s hand that require discussion’; for sexual references; and for conflicting with a religious viewpoint and ‘traditional family structure’” (“Top 10…”). Out of all of the reasons that this novel is banned, one stands out—“schools and libraries should not ‘put books in a child’s hand that require discussion’”. This statement is what banning books boils down to. At the end of the day, all that is being avoided is a conversation. Students face challenges in these books every single day. They are not unaware to the issues. However, people in power would prefer to live in blissful ignorance and pretend that issues simply do not exist, especially if those issues go against their own narrative.

There are also many classic canonical texts that are banned frequently, such as, The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which is banned for its sexual themes and suggestive themes, including rape (“Banned Books”). The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum is banned due to violence and witchcraft. Catcher in the Rye is anti-white, and To Kill A Mockingbird has too many depictions of racism. The question that these banned books all raise is—who’s narrative are the banners protecting?
What are the Negative Effects of Banned Books in the Classroom?

The Restraint of Information

The most obvious and clear effect that banned books have on students aligns with the repercussions of censorship in society: the limiting of information—that is, clearly, the point of censorship. The public can apply cute titles such as “banned books” and “challenged books” all they want, but when it is boiled down, it is still censorship. In society, censorship is considered a negative aspect of the world due to its ability to slow down social progress. By limiting what ideas people have in their minds, they are easier to control and fit into molds.

This is even more intense when it comes to students. These are individuals who are still learning their place in the world, forming their opinions, and discovering who they are. Limiting the information that is accessible to them, whether or not it is deemed as ‘inappropriate’, is doing nothing but harm to the student. Susan Webb, from Middle Tennessee State University, writes about the violation of student’s rights through this movement to challenge and ban books. She states:

The supreme court in Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico (1982) ruled 504 that public schools can bar books that are “pervasively vulgar” or not right for the curriculum, but they cannot remove books “simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books. The Court’s decision was, however, narrow, applying only to the removal of books from school library shelves. (Webb, 2009)

Information is the pathway to growth. Knowledge is the sharpest tool in the kit for building an upstanding individual. Educators know this—and that is why many of them harshly oppose banned books. The supreme court decision in this case was a victory in itself, but the war is still being waged.
The Flow of Stress

Every student will attest to the fact that when teachers are having a bad day, students are having a bad class. It is difficult to put on a happy face and work through the day, especially when the stress of the world is lying on tired shoulders. Unfortunately, this demonstrates one of the negative effects that banned books can have on students. This concept of censorship can weigh on teachers and trickle slowly down into the lives of students. Elizabeth Noll, a writer for The English Journal, discusses her experiences on this. She briefly describes a situation in which a “local high school teacher-of-the-year” had received permission to use a challenged play in her class, only to discover that that permission was retroactively revoked after the unit was over (Noll, 1994, p. 59). This teacher was forced to resign for violating district standards.

There is more to the concern of losing a job than just the damage done to a teacher’s career. While losing a good teacher to a superficial reason is heartbreaking enough, this has an effect on students. They need people in power who are going to fight for them, not remove their resources. However, when teachers are afraid of their livelihoods being taken away, they are forced to adjust their curriculum, therefore unwillingly taking part in this toxic censorship. Noll also writes on other teachers she had heard of—one who had to “carefully [edit] out the brief glimpses of nudity in in Zefferelli’s Romeo and Juliet”, and another who felt the need to “white-out certain words” (Noll, 1994, p. 61-62). While they may not want to act in compliance of these standards, they hardly have a choice. It is a toxic and systematic issue that affects all individuals involved—from teachers, to students.

Narrowed Eyes of Youth

A widely known goal of education is to open the eyes of students to everything that comprises the world. Unfortunately, there are some aspects of the world that we inhabit that are
unfavorable. This does not mean that they should be avoided or ignored as if they didn’t exist; rather, these issues should be faced head on and discussed thoroughly, just as any other topic would. The issue with censorship is that these topics do not even have the chance to be discussed as they are banned and removed from all curriculum. The institution is succeeded only in narrowing the eyes of its students. Educators must remember who their audience is and strive to always teach through the lens of youth.

Alyssa D. Niccolini, from *The English Journal*, describes her concept of the youth lens. In her article, she describes her discomfort and struggle upon discovering that a student was reading the infamous *Fifty Shades of Grey* in class. She later discovers that her mental image of this student was shattered by that scene. Her concept of what was “appropriate” was challenged, and she was then spurred to consider the youth lens.

A youth lens… invites us to challenge these cultural discourses and to think about their dense entanglements with the curricula we select and the books we invite in our classrooms. If I censor a racy scene or an erotic book, how much is my decision motivated by the implicit notion that my students aren’t mature enough or ready to handle the content?... By desiring to censor it, am I … already ruling out that they might bring critical perspectives and creative approaches to these materials? What we don’t or refuse to include in our curricula—or what we are prohibited from including---speaks as loudly as what we do include. (Niccolini, 2015, p. 23)

Niccolini then goes on to describe the many themes that are banned nationwide, and the issues involved with them. All of her points resolve around one concept: by censoring this information, we are stunting the growth of students, and not even allowing them the chance to rise to an occasion and grow. She states, “The reality is that young people live in and read about—as we
adults also did—a decidedly complex world where sex, violence, intolerance, and profanity are a reality” (p. 27). Educators are not trying to teach about a fantasy world where everything is perfect and happy—they are trying to teach about reality.

The LGBT+ community and all that goes with it is one of the most commonly censored topics in classrooms today. The educational system (paired with the legal system) is attempting to wipe this community off the face of the planet by promoting sheer ignorance and disdain. This, however, can be combated. Curwood et al. promotes the idea that we must teach our students about this community—by doing that, we are teaching about everyone. They say: “One of the first steps every educator can take is to acknowledge that books with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning characters aren't about ‘the other,’ they're about us - all of us… They're about the world every teen… inhabits, and literature is one way to challenge readers to think critically about that world and their place in” (Curwood et al., 2009, p. 39).

**How can Educators Approach Banned Books?**

**Teach about Censorship**

Not all teachers are in a position to actively fight against the banning of books, and not all are willing to risk their professions. All teachers, however, can educate their students on the issues that censorship and banning books creates, and hope that the pieces fall together. Lisa K. Winkler delves deep into the concept of educating on censorship with a thorough analysis of lessons that she has done with her class. In summary of her activities, she writes: “Students gain an understanding of censorship through engaging in a mock trial, reading a freechoice book, responding to reading in journals, and extending their thinking in the persuasive letter. Through discussion with classmates about the books, they get ideas for their next free-choice selection” (Winkler, 2005, p. 51). The activities that Winkler describes are fantastic for promoting agency
in the classroom. Not only are the students learning about a huge issue in education, but they are engaging themselves in ways to approach and handle the issue in their own lives.

Maxwell and Berman have a different approach to teaching about banned books in their classrooms. They developed a project, dubbed the ‘Book-Banning Project’, that spanned over the course of four weeks. They developed a unit where students had to read a controversial novel at home, only to come to school and learn that they are separated for a debate. “Then we divide the students randomly into pro-banning and anti-banning ‘law firms,’ instructing them to simulate the activity of lawyers who have been hired by factions in the school district” (Maxwell & Berman, 1997, p. 93). Those students spent weeks writing arguments and preparing for their future ‘hearings’. This activity is amazing for the high school classroom. Students are learning about censorship/banned books while working on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, all while teachers are tackling an issue that hits close to home.

**View Students Differently**

It’s easy as an educator to find oneself stuck in a rut of thinking of students as children who must be protected from certain concepts and ideas. Niccolini’s article discussed this early with the idea of the educator’s discomfort in knowing that her student was reading an infamous erotica in class. However, students must be seen in a different light. These are young people, future adults, and soon to be independent humans. They must be seen as capable. Susan Fanetti discusses this in length in her article in *The Alan Review*. She states that the concept of childhood must be changed. If teachers think that students are “incapable of understanding complex and challenging ideas, [then] we will attempt to protect them from such ideas and, by preventing them from gaining knowledge of and experience with those ideas, we will make them incapable of understanding them” (Fanetti, 2012). She goes on to describe that students cannot be protected
forever, and they must be taught these tough concepts eventually. They are capable of being taught these concepts, but the educator must first be willing, and confident. It is extremely important for students to be subjected to a wide variety of literature, and this is only done if they are seen as able to handle it. Fanetti states:

When we deny children access to stories about people who have faced struggle and trauma, who have felt different and alone, we deny them the chance to learn about—and talk about with their teachers, their peers, and their parents—struggles from a place of safety, and we deny them the chance to learn that the struggles they themselves have faced are shared… When we believe that children are capable, they are. And capable, thoughtful children become capable, thoughtful adults. (Fanetti, 2012)

It all starts with the teacher—change the mindset, change the classroom. As Brianna Burke and Kristina Greenfield said in their article, “In working with students on social justice issues, they continually astound us with their humanity. They are much more ready to take on the controversial issues that will dominate their lives than we think” (Burke & Greenfield, 2016, p. 50). Students are already exposed to these realities, now, they can be fine-tuned.

**Diversify the Classroom**

When facing the issues of censorship and banned books, the concept of inequity is being fought head-on. Inequity is the root of censorship, and a plague on the classroom. As educators, one of the most difficult parts of the job is ensuring that all students have opportunities that promote the idea of equity. This can be seen in a classroom where students are given proper modifications and assistance in order to be on the same playing field as their classmates. Students should be given the resources they need to succeed. In order to have a classroom that demonstrates equity, it must be diverse.
Students come from all different backgrounds and walks of life. All students face their own struggles, many of them battling home lives, identity issues, peer issues, and much, much more. Diversity in the classroom (in materials, curriculum, novels, etc.) allows teachers to approach these issues in an impartial way to educate students on all different aspects of the world. Gone are the days of reading the same twelve novels written by middle aged white men—the classroom needs novels of all different kinds. This is the foundation that led to the creation of WNBD, or the We Need Diverse Books movement. The WNBD movement recognizes “all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities*, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities (“About WNDB”). By accessing the resources through this organization, educators can get the materials and framework that they need in order to increase diversity in the classroom and fight censorship.

One staple suggestion for increasing the diversity in the English classroom is allowing students to choose what they are reading. Students are much more likely to be engaged with a text of their choosing. Furthermore, the diversity represented in these novels can be appalling. Students want to read about topics that they are invested in, whether it is just a passing interest or something that pertains to their lives. If the concept of a “choose any novel” situation is too stressful, a diverse and specific list can always be given out. Luckily, ReLeah Cossett Lent delved into this topic already, and discovered that:

As students take responsibility for their reading within the boundaries of their family's standards, the burden shifts to the reader-where it rightly belongs. Often, parents are much more reluctant to challenge a book if their child is not required to read it, especially
when selections are offered by teachers who know students' interests and abilities. (Lent, 2008, p. 62)

This method of student choice is a sure-fire way to subtly fight banned books while increasing diversity in the class.

**Visions for the Future**

By slowly removing the stigma of banned books, teachers are given more of an opportunity to fight against the system that is oppressing students. Generally, “teachers appear to lack the willingness to publically challenge the social power structures that guide and censor educational practice” (Lycke & Lucey, 2019, p. 9). There is a pervasive ‘code of silence’ that dictates teachers to be quiet and subservient, pretending that these issues are not occurring. When the stigma changes, however, this subservience loses its power. The more individuals speak up, the more others will rise up as well. The banned book movements of the last decade are making giant leaps, but there is still more work to be done.

Banned books deserve their space in the English classroom. They are vital tools of education that allow teachers to tackle difficult concepts with these young people. These are novels that relate to the lives and struggles that students face every single day, and students deserve to have their issues represented in the classroom.

Banned books often raise topics that don't yield easy answers, such as addressing racism, dealing with systemic or physical violence, or navigating the complexities of sex and sexual identities. Banned books are often complex, surprising, and confounding. They shake up expectations, challenge norms, and at times raise interminable questions. They're complex and should be valued in our classrooms, like the adolescents we teach. (Niccolini, 2015, p. 27)
Gone are the days of morose classrooms filled with G-Rated depictions of the past, written for the average white person to absolve themselves of blame. Gone are the days that students will not be represented in the classroom, left isolated and confused by how ‘other’ they feel. The power to change this cycle lies in the hands of the next generation of teachers, and the un-banning of books.
Chapter Three: Contributions to the Profession

Op-Ed Piece

OPINION

The Life-Changing Thing they Never Taught in Schools

*How I changed my life, and how, together, we can change the lives of the next generation through the educational system.*

I learned the most astounding, incredible thing yesterday. To be quite honest with you, it changed my life. My whole perspective of the world around me is different—and I want to share it with you, so you can change your life as well. You see, I learned that if you [____], you can easily [____]. To get rid of my [____], all I needed to do was [____]. It took me [____] minutes, and I am infinitely happier. How did no one ever tell you about [____]? Have you not heard of it?

It is astonishing to me that schools have not taught about [____] yet. However, that is why I am writing this piece. All you have to do to change your life, to [____] your [____], and [____], are these four steps:

1. Make sure you [____] whenever you [____] [____].
2. When that is [____] you have to [____] the [____].
3. Afterwards, [____] must quickly [____].
4. Finally, to cure your [____] you simply [____].

Confused? Frustrated? Feeling lost?
Imagine knowing that something incredible was out there—something that could change your life, cure your depression, give you relief, and expand your horizons, but never being able to receive that information. No matter how hard you look, how hard you try, it is simply inaccessible. Many students in the current educational system feel this way every single day, due to censorship in the classroom.

Censorship is a plague on the spread of information, and we are faced with it every day. Nudity, violence, mental health issues, sexuality, racism, non-Christian religions—all of these things are blocked from students in our country. At first thought, this seems like a good idea. We are protecting them, right?

Wrong. By closing this information off to students, they are lost when they achieve independence. Their knowledge of what is occurring around the globe is stunted. They do not understand themselves, others, or the world at large—yet they still must enter the world and experience all that it has to offer, positive or negative, with scarce information to guide their minds. Many teachers know this, but they are placed under restrictions from parents and school officials. They are left to forced feed outdated information to young people who desperately want to know what is happening in the real world, and how to handle it.

It is easy to feel alone in a world of censorship. One in five young girls, and one in twenty young boys are victims of child sexual abuse—but we do not teach about sexual abuse. Young black children are called names, made fun of, and abused—but we do not educate about the truths and history of racism. Nearly 700,000 children are abused each year—but we do not teach them about abuse, or how to seek help. Instead, we offer our students a glossed-over view of the world. When young people enter school for the first time, they receive their locker number, their agenda, and rose-colored glasses.
Censorship affects more than just the classroom. When we deny students stories of people who have felt alone, who have struggled, been abused, and been hurt, we take away the space for them to grow, learn, and heal. We are limiting an entire generation of children and forcing them to learn everything the hard way. Even if they are not taught, one way or another, they will learn. Whether it is as an adult, alone, trying to find their way in the world, or as a child, or a victim, trying to process what is happening to them—they will learn.

Stop viewing students as children who need to be protected. View them as young people, as future independent humans. View them as capable.


Let teachers teach!
BANNED BOOKS—HOW TO ADDRESS CENSORSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM

Jenna Caskinett
EDI 791
Fall 2020
WHAT IS, AND WHY IS THERE, CENSORSHIP?
Censorship is: 
the suppression of information in parts of media that are politically unacceptable

This includes:
- Nudity
- Crass language
- Violence
- Sexual activities
- Talks of political uprising

Examples in daily life:
- Beeps in songs to hide “inappropriate” words
- Glossing over of events in history to protect children
- “Banned” books
Is there censorship in the classroom?...
Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!
Censorship in the classroom:

■ There are many examples!
  - Christopher Columbus “discovered” the United States
  - Americans “saved poor Africans” from their country and put them to work
  - Not being allowed to read “To Kill a Mockingbird” as it has a racial slur in it
  - All conversations about sexuality, especially “deviant” sexuality, being banned from the building
  - And finally... “Banned” books

This is a fantastic resource about the inaccuracies that many students are taught.
Banned books?

Banned books are exactly what they sound like—books that are not allowed in any educational setting!

Some books are just “challenged” meaning that there is an active attempt to remove these materials from schools (“Research Guides...”)

This is because many educators think that this is protecting students from uncomfortable topics

However, who gets to make that decision?
Types of banned books:
("Banned Books")

The Butler University compiled many top reasons that books are banned. This list includes:

- racial issues
- Encouragement of ‘damaging’ lifestyles (including homosexuality)
- Blasphemous dialogue (using ‘the lords name in vain’)
- Sexual situations
- Violence or negativity
- Witchcraft
- Unpopular religious affiliations
- Political bias
- ...And the ever so generic ‘age appropriateness’ ("Banned Books").
THIS DOESN’T SEEM TOO BAD, UNTIL YOU SEE SOME OF THE TOP BANNED BOOKS...
BANNED
All these books...

- Have “adult” (according to society) themes in some sort of way, even if they are childish in nature
- Teach lessons!
- Through these books, students learn about:
  - Sexuality
  - Lifestyles
  - Racism
  - History
  - Fantasy worlds
  - Coping with trauma
  - Love
  - Loss
THIS BEGS THE QUESTION: HOW DOES CENSORSHIP AFFECT THE CLASSROOM?
“... BY DESIRING TO CENSOR [NOVELS], AM I ... ALREADY RULING OUT THAT THEY MIGHT BRING CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CREATIVE APPROACHES TO THESE MATERIALS? WHAT WE DON’T OR REFUSE TO INCLUDE IN OUR CURRICULA—OR WHAT WE ARE PROHIBITED FROM INCLUDING—SPEAKS AS LOUDLY AS WHAT WE DO INCLUDE.”

(NICCOLINI, 2015, P. 23)
By restricting classroom materials, we are:

| Restraining | Restraining information from students  
|             | • These individuals are learning who they are and what they believe in—they need access to information  
|             | • How can information be “inappropriate”? You cannot censor something out of existence |
| Narrowing   | Narrowing the lens of our classroom  
|             | • How can you explore and educate about racism, if you cannot read books with racism? |
| Passing     | Passing on the flow of stress  
|             | • The stress of doing everything right and pleasing everyone falls on most teachers' shoulders  
|             | • This worry impacts the classroom, and then the students |
ADDRESSING CENSORSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM

TIPS FOR MOVING FORWARD
How to spot censorship:

1. Analyze your community:
   - What are the goals and ideals of your area and the people living in it?

2. Visit your local and school library:
   - Do you notice a certain genre of book to be missing?

3. Examine curricula, especially ones that are given to you by others, with a critical eye:
   - What books are missing?
   - Can you make adjustments?

4. Vary your teaching materials:
   - Are you told not to teach a certain novel? Why?
Look at your students *differently*:

**Understand that students are capable**
- These are not “children” but future young adults. They need to learn this information one way or another, and they are able to handle it.
- Most students face struggles that teachers will never see or understand. They must have the skills to face these situations

**Understand that every class is different and has different needs**
- Perhaps this semester, your classes are filled with many students of one culture. Would it be prudent to adjust your materials to educate them better?
- More times than not, educational materials are not multi-cultural or diverse. Diversify your classroom!
Talk to librarians and school officials:

- Find your librarians stance on banned books—they are often an extremely underused resource
  - There are many activities surrounding Banned Books week (usually end of September) online
  - See if you can hold an event during the week to support the cause.
  - Paper bag books are always fantastic!

- If you believe that censorship is happening in your place of employment, be active
  - Approach school officials and have conversations
  - Educate yourself and others to make a change
Develop Yourself:

Censorship applies to everything...

- Educate yourself on your community and the censorship your students may face outside the classroom

Expand your horizons as an educator:

- Take advantage of your employers' educational opportunities
- *Education brings awareness*

Expand your horizons as an individual:

- Confront your implicit biases, and work to change them
- Remember your students are *capable*
Talk to your coworkers:

- Censorship cannot be fought by one person, in one classroom, in one school
  - One may start a movement, but it takes many to push it to fruition

- One of the most important things YOU can do to address censorship is to speak to, and educate, peers
  - Many educators do not realize that this is happening right under their noses

- As with most movements, communication is key. Spread your knowledge!
Consider your curriculum:

- This is perhaps the most difficult step in the journey... Confront yourself.
  - Where do your biases lie?
  - Where are the gaps in your curriculum?
  - Are you representing your students?
  - Are you providing a wide array of materials and resources, no matter the topic?
Change is difficult:

- But we must address ourselves and others in order to provide for our students
- As a professional community, we have what it takes to contest the world of censorship that we work in
- It starts with you!
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