The Ethical Foundations of Literature:

An Analysis of the Adolescent's Relationship to Reading

written by: Dominick R. LaBelle

advised by: Dr. Fiona Paton, Prof. Megan Davis-Roberts

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Abstract: This thesis explores the profound influence of literature on the cognitive and emotional development of adolescents, focusing on how literary engagement shapes both individual identities and collective cultural consciousness. Through an examination of generational differences in early childhood literary relationships, the research investigates how shifting societal contexts affect reading habits and preferences. Additionally, it addresses the implications of book banning and censorship on young minds, analyzing how restricted access to literature can hinder intellectual growth and critical thinking skills. The study further evaluates the high school literature curriculum, assessing its role in shaping student interactions with texts and identifying opportunities for pedagogical enhancement. By employing a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and textual analysis, this research aims to highlight the importance of inclusive and diverse literary exposure in fostering a well-rounded education. Ultimately, the findings seek to inform educators and policymakers on the transformative power of literature, advocating for curricular reforms and practices that nurture a lifelong appreciation for reading in the face of contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Adolescence Education, Literature, Adolescence, Reading, Diversity, Curriculum, Banned Books

Introduction

In 1955, the late pioneer of children's entertainment, Walter Elias Disney, presented a speech for the grand opening of Disneyland, where he proclaimed the following:

Children are people, and they should have to reach to learn about things, to understand things, just as adults have to reach if they want to grow in mental stature. Life is composed of lights and shadows, and we would be untruthful, insincere, and saccharine if we tried to pretend the shadows were never there.

Each and every child can cite a youthful memory from a piece of media that challenged their pre-exposed view of the world. For many, this moment came from the House of Mouse itself, such as the deaths of Bambi's mother, or Mufasa in *The Lion King*. These moments expose and prepare our young minds to challenges we must all face at some point in our lives, such as the death of a parent. For me, this moment was the beautifully tragic montage that opens the film *Up*, which later in life, helped me cope with the passing of my own grandmother. For as long as there have been human beings, there have been stories. Stories that captivate the minds of individuals of every imaginable walk of life. These stories, often presented through vocal performance or illustration carved into stone, would translate into the art of writing roughly four thousand years ago, when *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was etched into a clay tablet in ancient Mesopotamia. Ever since that day, humanity has had literature to serve an advisory role in our lives, captivating us, guiding us, and most importantly, teaching us. There is no moment in our

lives that is more consequential when it comes to learning than our childhoods, as J.A. Appleyard explains in his book, *Becoming a Reader, The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*,

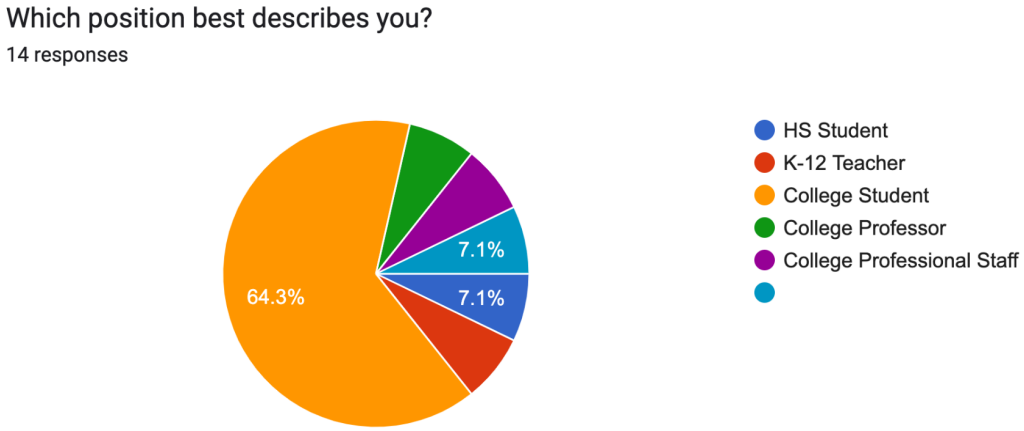
Kindergarten children listening to stories together on the carpet of their classroom and performing in their games what they have heard illustrate one of the crucial elements in the development of a reader: the social construction of experience and its playful expression. They also foreshadow another level of this development, because this kind of reading will shortly tum into the demanding work of learning how to decode language and master the information it conveys. The nursery schoolroom may thus be a poignant image of the transition from play to work, when some part of childhood is forever left behind.

Before we are expected to mature into productive adults who contribute positively to the world around us, we must have a strong foundation of empathy, critical thinking, and kindness. These traits are best instilled in our children through the types of stories we share with them. If we challenge our children and teenagers to explore literature that breaks their status quo and requires them to perceive the world through a new perspective, we will create a generation of caring, considerate individuals who seek to leave the world better than they found it. Therefore, we must prioritize the ethical foundations of literature.

What Influences a Child to Read?

My mother wanted to ensure that I knew how to read prior to entering primary school. My earliest memory associated with reading is her teaching me to read *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn. A few months later, when my elementary school librarian, Marlayne Sick, read out

the book to my Kindergarten class, I beamed with excitement because I recognized the book and was able to recite the words based on memorization. (This librarian passed away a few months ago, and her memory is a major influence on this paper). I'm sure the rest of my class has no recollection of this moment at all; it was a random book read out on a random weekday in the winter of 2009, but I can recall it clear as day. I am far from the only person to have an early memory of a time where reading ignited the spirit. Dramatic as that is, this launch point is essential in hooking young minds by providing them with a gateway into the immense world of literature. Throughout this paper, I will refer to a survey I sent around to my fellow peers and educators from both my high school, as well as SUNY New Paltz. This survey contained questions pertaining to the content this paper will explore, and each and every respondent provided me with valuable memories and cherished experiences of their relationship to reading. Pasted below is a visual representation of the demographic of my respondents based upon their age and occupation within an educational environment.



When asked to recount a memory that ignited their love of reading, one respondent wrote:

My entire childhood, I had my nose buried in a book. I read books like they were oxygen and I needed them to survive. I went through stacks and stacks of books on a weekly basis. One

particular memory features "The Secret Series". My mom was cuddled in bed with me, reading the book aloud. This was a nightly tradition up until I was in kindergarten or first grade. She was working long hours, and often fell asleep during our reading time. I began reading ahead. I said she could read the chapters to catch up and then we could regroup. Well, what I did not understand was that she was an adult with adult responsibilities and that I had much more free time than she did. She did not catch up, and I began reading on my own more. This was a catalyst to my reading to myself, and my pace of completing books increased dramatically.

I chose to highlight this response because it emphasized just how important a role parents or guardians play in introducing children to reading. In this particular case, the respondent's mother opened the door to literature by introducing her child to a routine of reading at night, which the child then continued to fulfill once their mother became too busy, as life often does get in the way. The Pacer Center explains, "From the moment babies are born, they start developing literacy skills through their relationship with their parents. By talking, reading, singing, and playing with your infant or toddler, you provide the foundation your child will need to develop language and reading skills." It would be a grave mistake to assume a child can wait until primary school to begin developing literacy skills. They require a supportive foundation at home that encourages learning, making it an exciting part of a child's routine. An example of such a foundation comes from another respondent, who stated: "When I was very young my sister and I participated in our public library's 1,000 book challenge. In pursuit of reading 1,000 books in a year-span, we would go to the library with our blue bags, and exchange our old picture-books with ten new ones. We'd be cuddled up in bed, or taking a bath, with my mom or dad reading them to us. That, or we'd read them to one another. It was what made me a reader." This response highlights yet another substantial aspect of ensuring a productive foundation for early

childhood literacy: the contributions of community resources, such as a public library. Providing a goal to young children to reach such a momentous milestone as 1,000 books in one year incentivises them into developing a healthy routine by engaging with literature. When I was a first grader, my elementary school held a “book charm challenge”, in which everytime we completed a book, we would tell our librarian, with our parents’ signature of course, and receive a book charm to include on our necklace. By the end of that school year, I won the challenge, having read 64 books. I pin-point this event as the moment that I fell in love with reading. I still have my book charm necklace somewhere in my house fifteen years later. Marjeta Bejdo of *EducationWeek* comments: “I teach in a school where we are blessed with a wonderful school librarian who works hard to diversify our school library’s catalog, create a resourceful and welcoming environment, and advocate for our students. Unfortunately, her resources are limited. Although the school library is a great place for students to explore books, it is just for students in our school and is only open during the school year.” This quote does an excellent job stressing the importance of both school *and* public libraries. School libraries are extremely vital in the development of young children. School librarians play a quintessential role in ensuring students explore and are exposed to a diverse variety of children's literature. Their hard work and dedication to their students absolutely cannot be understated, just as the wide assortment of literature of varying genre and perspective held within them cannot be ignored.

The Genres Found Within a Childhood

In my survey, I asked my respondents of varying ages what genres of literature they were most likely to gravitate towards in their childhood and adolescent years. Within their responses, I

arrived at a fascinating observation. My older respondents, who I am categorizing as those thirty five years old or older, typically responded that they most enjoyed the genres of fantasy, adventure and romance in their youths. On the other hand, those younger than thirty five, gravitated more towards young adult, commonly abbreviated as YA, and dystopian literature as they grew up. While dystopian literature is a subgenre of fantasy, it is a subgenre that takes the typical elements of a fantasy story, such as the clear distinction between the forces of good and evil, a traditionally happy ending, and an overall optimistic view of the world, and tweaks them to paint a dimmer portrait of society, while providing commentary on the real world as well. A notable example of this would be *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, which certainly takes elements from a traditional fantasy text, such as a society as far removed from our own as Oz, but also features morally grey characters and an ambiguous ending that *could* read as the protagonists meeting a grim demise. Based upon my results, it would appear that the aforementioned genres are typically more associated with adult readers due to their tendency to view the world under a more critical lens. This shift in genre of preference for developing readers suggests the presence of a shift in public opinion as to what young readers can and should be exposed to. In his seminal piece of writing, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim comments, "When all the child's wishful thinking gets embodied in a good fairy; all his destructive wishes in an evil witch; all his fears in a voracious wolf; all the demands of his conscience in a wise man encountered on an adventure; all his jealous anger in some animal that pecks out the eyes of his archrivals—then the child can finally begin to sort out his own contradictory tendencies (66). When children explore the fantasy genre, they are searching for some sense of an escape from their real-world stresses and anxieties. When children engage with texts such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll or *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, they often find a sense of

comfort and relatability in the struggles of the protagonist, and can even be instilled with a new sense of confidence that they too can confront the dangers of their lives. This point was corroborated by an educator and respondent in my survey, who stated, "Since virtually everything that I read showed that good always overcomes evil, the literature that I read reinforced my sense of morality, that one should always endeavor to do the right thing regardless of its convenience." For a child, this can be anything from moving to a new school, dealing with a bully, or having a difficult time developing a new skill. If Alice can stand up to the Queen of Hearts and her court, and Dorothy can defeat the Wicked Witch of the West, what is stopping a child from now confronting their own challenges? Children take the faces, challenges and settings familiar to them, and reflect them back on the stories they are exposed to. Suddenly, Wonderland, Oz, Never Land, Narnia and Hogwarts do not seem so foreign after all. However, this naturally poses the question of why my research deviates from the findings of Bettelheim? Why does the audience, typically categorized as Generation Z, stray away from traditional fantasy and adventure and align their experiences more commonly with dystopian novels? While the two genres do share a bit in common in terms of genre, the popular dystopian novels of today take the extra step of being overtly political in message. Let me be clear, reading has always been a political act, but it is evidently becoming increasingly revolutionary with time. What dilemmas does this suggest about the modern society children are brought up in today? In the article, "Why Kids Can't Get Enough of Dystopian Novels and Movies", Steven Schlozman comments, "In the brutal displacement that dystopian and apocalyptic tales afford, we are able to grapple with the "what if" scenarios that speak to our most primitive wishes and fears with regard to growing up". According to Schlozman, modern children seek out literature such as the widely beloved *The Hunger Games* trilogy for the same reason children of the past found comfort in *Wonderland* or

Oz. Boiled down to its core message, Dorothy Gale and Katniss Everdeen experience similar notions of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" archetype within their texts. They both face adversity and obstacles that seek to halt the protagonist from accomplishing their goal of returning to normalcy at home. Bettelheim would likely view these two novels under a similar light as well.

What this comparison suggests is that the children of yesterday and today seek the same relatability in text, but the children of today desire texts of a higher stake, with more complex and existential threats. In a world where racial violence, misogyny, and violence against the LGBTQ+ community are on the rise, today's children and adolescents require access to texts that can serve as a helpful hand to navigate these contemporary challenges. Where Dorothy or Alice dreamt of witches and evil queens, Katniss lives through the collective punishment of her people, and ultimately goes toe to toe with the corrupt government that exudes power and control over her. So why do today's children gravitate towards literature with more mature themes? According to the Pew Research Center, "Our previous research on younger Americans' reading habits has shown that the youngest age groups are significantly more likely than older adults to read books, including print books; reading and research required for schoolwork contributes to this, along with a decline in overall reading rates for adults ages 65 and older" (*Younger Americans' Reading Habits and Technology Us*). The article shows that respondents between the ages of 16 and 19 believe the unlimited stream of information available through access to the internet is primarily a benefit to overall knowledge. So, perhaps my generation's early exposure to the unrestricted worldwide web enabled us to seek out mature literature that former generations were more hesitant to share with the youth. However, the point should be clearly made, that literature has *always*, and will always be, a political art, no matter how you look at it.

For example, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is commonly accepted to be political commentary on the 1896 United States presidential election, but a critique of Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity measures may present it as an example of a "non-woke" children's book as opposed to an option such as *The Hunger Games*. Media literacy, I must say, exists at an all time low in spheres of conversations of book banning, as we will explore at length later in this paper. Every book is political if you pay attention.

Literature as Means to Develop Identity

It should not serve as much a shock that the literature we are exposed to as we develop can have a profound impact on our identities. Ask anyone in your life to recount an experience in which they felt they were "changed" by a piece of literature, and they will have a story to tell you. It could have occurred when they were five, twenty-five, or ninety-five, but it happened. As an aspiring educator, I am a bit biased on the matter, because I firmly believe every book I read influences my identity in one way or another, but if I could boil down my entire history of loving literature to one moment that truly shaped my identity, it would be the first time I read *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins. I believe the core explanation as to why these novels impacted me so deeply is because of Collins' ability to capture social issues and government corruption in such a devastatingly vivid manner. They helped me form a social voice and recognize abuse of power in the real world. Now, when I see an altercation like the genocide occuring in the Gaza strip, I reflect back to Collins' work, and wonder to myself why everyone recognizes that President Snow, Darth Vader and Lord Voldemort are the villains in their respective narratives, but when it comes to real world powers committing the same acts, suddenly the situation is not so clear. In his investigation on the influence of fictional literature

on ethical development, Jonah Dunch concluded, "Novels like *Outline* and *Gilead* influence the ethical development of their readers by inviting them to unseat and revise their ethical commitments in light of radical alternatives that the narrative has instructed them to entertain. In this way, fiction has the power to unmoor us from our default attitudes and send us out into a sea of uncharted worldviews" (Make-Believe Spelunking: The Influence of Fiction on Ethical Development in Outline and Gilead). According to Dunch, a work of fiction allows the reader to view the world through a portal of sorts, granting them access to view social reality through a foreign pair of eyes and observe the world through their lived experience. This is how literature influences an individual's perception of self. As George R.R. Martin explained in *A Dance with Dragons*, "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one" (*A Dance with Dragons*). Of these thousands of lives that a reader has the chance to explore, many of them will be from a perspective different from their own, whether that difference be social, cultural, or otherwise. As I stated above, everyone has this moment. For some, this moment can help a child connect to their culture or identity and see themselves reflected back in a text. For instance, one respondent reflected, "In many ways, the literature I consumed allowed me to connect with my queerness and my Jewish identity. Reading allowed me to not feel so alone". For this individual, reading texts that featured Jewish or LGBTQ+ characters provided them with comfort and confidence in their identity. That was their moment, and it is one that can never be taken from them, no matter what legislation is passed in the future. When asked to recount a specific text or collection of texts that impacted their sense of identity or the world around them, my respondents answered in a substantial pattern. We might observe it as you read through three of their answers:

1) “In 12th grade AP English Literature, I read *The Handmaid's Tale*. It left a strong impression on me. It opened my mind to how fragile our personal autonomy, especially as women, can be. It made me value the rights I had, and it made me understand how important it is to work to keep them. With the current climate and changes in the world now, it seems even more relevant”.
2) “*To Kill A Mockingbird* played a big role in my life. I read it for the first time when I was in the third grade (it was what my siblings were reading for school so I stole it). I can't quite explain how, but to this day I know that it had a profound impact on my life”.
3) “*The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger. The questions around innocence preservation and the inevitabilities of growing up (the carousel scene with the golden rings! the cliff! the cube!) -- I found the images all so powerful and evocative, representative of the turmoil many of my peers and I felt”.

What do these three texts have in common? According to the American Library Association, they were amongst the fifty most banned books in the United States in the 2010s, as was *The Hunger Games*. Why are so many of the most influential novels of our time also amongst the most censored, banned or challenged? What topics or perspectives are promoted in these texts that outside forces wish to keep away from adolescent readers? In the article, “The Importance of Literature in Modern Society” Sophie Austin muses, “The impact of literature in modern society is undeniable. Literature acts as a form of expression for each individual author. Some books mirror society and allow us to better understand the world we live in” (The Importance of Literature in Modern Society). Literature is the most prolific form of expression there is. You can find literature inside of a book, by listening to your favorite songs, playing story-driven video games, etc. These are the essential mediums of creative force for today’s children. They light the

spark of individuality in developing minds that allow us to become *individuals*. What happens when that fire is put out?

Diverse Students Require a Diverse Curriculum, But Do They Receive It?

At the time of writing this paper, I am freshly twenty years old. I was born in the early-2000's, the era of *Harry Potter*, Britney Spears and the War on Terror. In the field of education, I was born under President George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" policy, which ironically left many students in lower income school districts behind. The Common Core State Standards impacted my small, rural New York school district when I entered the third grade. In my middle and high school years, I was consistently in my grade's honors level classes, especially my English classes. Shocker! They were my favorite, despite their admittedly bare list of assigned canonized texts. Based upon the enrollment data from the 2024-25 academic school year, the demographics of my former high school, according to the New York State Education Department, or NYSED, are as follows:

- **By gender**: 51% male, 49% female.
- **By race:** 58% white, 29% hispanic, 7% black, 3% asian and 3% multiracial
- **Other categories:** 1% English Language Learners, 14% students with disabilities, 36% economically disadvantaged

Considering these demographics, one could expect that my school district would carry an English curriculum with roughly equal or at the very least, similar ratios when it comes to the representation found within the texts taught. Unfortunately, that would be incorrect. Upon reflecting on my GoodReads account, which I use to methodically log my reading activity, I began to graph a statistic of my own. Of the eight full length novels I was required to read during

high school, 2018-2022, the *only* text that did not center a caucasian, straight male protagonist was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who centers a caucasian, straight *female* protagonist instead. I believe Scout is the primary protagonist, but I can also very easily understand how one would place her father, Atticus, above her in importance, which would then place this text alongside the others. While on the topic of *Mockingbird*, it also stands as the sole text that addresses an experience of racial minorities, in this case African-American individuals. Of course, this address is completely indirect. The stories of characters such as Tom Robinson or Calpurnia are told through the perspective of the white characters in the foreground. They exist more so as devices to move the plot forward, and their oppression is used not to explore a diverse perspective, but to add fuel to the fire to motivate the Finch family. I do not intend to suggest *To Kill a Mockingbird* shouldn't be taught in schools. It absolutely should,
as it tells an uncomfortably relevant story that contemporary readers can resonate with as well as those who read it upon its release. However, it in no circumstance should ever be the *only* text in a curriculum that discusses racism or features black characters, as it was written by Harper Lee, a white woman, primarily concerning white characters. It is a socially relevant novel, just not one that could encompass the African-American experience. If you have one single narrative that depicts a minority, you run the risk of only incorporating representation in your curriculum through tokenization, or in an effort to avoid criticism for having a primarily white-centered curriculum, especially in a case like this, where the author of the text is not even reflective of the experience she is attempting to portray.

I must say that this bland curriculum was not the fault of my teachers. I extensively emailed two of my high school English teachers for this project, and came to some disheartening conclusions. The first, my tenth grade English teacher, told me, "My current district has a long

and arduous process for getting new texts of any kind approved by the board. Even texts like math books must be 'vetted' and have forms filled out. It has become very tedious over the past few years, and oftentimes texts are denied because they may be considered 'controversial.'" This statement blew me away. For reasons I will soon explore, I know my former district is not one to provide teachers with free range over text selections, but *not* to this degree. Math textbooks? What could be contained within a math textbook that is so controversial it needs to be extensively vetted? It may be for pedagogical purposes, but it goes to show how difficult the process for introducing new textbooks can be in your common district.

Likewise, I had the pleasure of writing back and forth with my now-retired, eleventh grade English teacher. When I began brainstorming for this research project, this particular teacher stood at the top of my list of individuals to speak with, due to one very special event that occurred in his classroom. In the early spring of 2021, I had recently returned to in-person instruction at school after the initial wave of COVID-19. When I walked into English, my teacher passed out copies of the brand new book we were about to begin reading: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. He proceeded to explain that the subject material covered in the novel was quite mature, but that he had no concerns, as we were his Honors section, and we could handle it. We were all handed copies of the novel, and asked to read the first and second chapters of the text for homework that night. We returned to class the next day, discussed the content we read the night before and exited class. The following day, we walked into class and suddenly and with little fanfare, my teacher explained that we were swiftly shifting gears and that we would be reading *MacBeth* by William Shakespeare instead of continuing *The Handmaid's Tale*. This dilemma has stayed with me for the four years since it happened. I would often ponder why this had happened, as in my personal opinion, the opening to *Handmaid's Tale*

was far more intriguing and interesting than the vast majority of texts I was required to read at the time. This was a much harder feat at the time, as I was not the avid reader I am now, then. So when the switch-up happened, I was honestly angry, and barely participated in poor *MacBeth*, despite being unwillingly cast as the titular role in my class' read through. Upon asking my former teacher to explain the debacle, he replied:

Long story short regarding *The Handmaid's Tale:* Supposedly a parent was concerned about "the ceremony," the graphic recounting of the monthly ritual rape of the handmaid involving the commander, his wife, and the handmaid. I forget how far into the book this is -- maybe about a third of the way. Not sure if you read the whole novel; I didn't collect them right away in case people wanted to finish the book on their own. I reminded the "powers that be" of the protocol for challenging books on the APPROVED book list; however, this fell on deaf ears, and I was directed to cease using this book.

I finally had my answers, which unfortunately left me with even more complicated questions. We shall explore the implications of the actions committed by school boards in regard to censoring literature a little later, but it does not surprise me in the slightest that my former district censors texts that are already approved to be taught as a preventative measure, especially considering the disaster that occurred the following year.

I come from a rather small, conservative area in New York, so when my school district hired a gay man to serve as superintendent in the summer prior to my senior year, I knew to anticipate a clash of culture and political ideologies. A few months into the school year, my district held a battle that occurred all around the country that winter. Conveniently, the son of the president of my town's chapter of the right wing Moms for Liberty group took the memoir *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe out from my high school's library. According to their website,

their mission statement reads: “Moms for Liberty is dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government”. I am not surprised at the vague nature of this statement. Their true mission entails demanding the removal of any curricular aspect of a school that may be considered, “woke”, “critical race theory”, a “DEI measure” or whatever buzzword is popular that week. When the president of my local chapter of Moms for Liberty got her hands on *Genderqueer*, my district entered a vicious, four month battle fighting for, or against, the presence of diverse texts in a school environment. My eleventh grade English teacher was able to provide me with his perspective on this predicament as well:

“The following year, I was happy to serve on a committee that was reviewing a challenged library book, *Genderqueer,* a graphic memoir that deals with diversity. This time around, since we had different "powers that be," the protocol was followed and the book was allowed to remain in the library collection. Unfortunately, there are people who are determined to decide not only what their own children will be able to read, but also what everyone's children will be able to read. This frightens me. Once a group is marginalized and labeled as "bad" or "other," then it is easier to hate and maltreat them”.

In this specific case, my school’s Board of Education, with the aid of the superintendent, decided to remain consistent with their own standards, and uphold the inclusion of the memoir in my school’s library, which evidently contrasts with the fifty-six school districts that banned the text in 2022, becoming the single most frequently banned book in the country. Why is that? In my district, the book was not present in any teachers’ curriculum. It was not mandatory reading for any student. It was on a shelf in the school library, for students who are interested in the text to loan out, and for students who are not interested to continue walking by. For those students

who do want to read the text, and perhaps do not have the means to get their hands on the book otherwise, it can be the difference between finding a sense of belonging and comfort in one's own identity, or continuing to feel isolated and confused. In an interview with Pen America, author Maia Kobabe says, "I think if I had been able to find a book like *GenderQueer* as a teenager, it would have meant the world to me. Because I was just so desperate to figure out who I was and to find the answers to the questions that I had. And I really couldn't find them until I was much older" (Now the Most Challenged and Banned Book, Gender Queer Was Written to Give Teenagers the Guidance That Author Maia Kobabe Never Had). What parental rights groups such as Moms for Liberty fail to recognize is that removing a text such as *GenderQueer* will not stop the existence of gender non-conforming children. However, they will succeed in their goal of demonizing minority groups. My district may have won the battle of keeping *GenderQueer* on the shelves, but a few months later, they lost the war, badly. During my first semester at SUNY New Paltz, the Board of Education at my former district held their reelection, and many of the members who supported *GenderQueer*'s inclusion in the library were unseated by right-wing extremists in the community titled "Team Florida", many of whom are members of Moms for Liberty. Secondly, my district's gay superintendent was bullied out of his office and practically forced to resign after months of non-stop protesting from conservative parents that suggested he was a pedophile implementing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion measures into school curriculum in order to corrupt the students with a left-leaning political agenda. The same parents argued that the Bible should be mandatory reading in my school district, would this too be indoctrination? Or does it fulfill an agenda and negate the worry altogether?

I had the pleasure to survey my former superintendent for my research. At first, I was reluctant to reach out to him, as I did not want to force him to recount painful experiences for the

sake of my paper, but I was quickly reassured by his passion and support for my subject. His kind words truly proved how much passion belongs in the fight for diverse literature. Regarding his experience as my superintendent, he wrote:

As the former superintendent, I faced significant challenges during my tenure, largely due to a campaign by the Moms for Liberty hate group. The controversy centered around issues like the removal of books, including *GenderQueer* by Maia Kobabe, and broader accusations of me promoting a "woke" agenda. Moms for Liberty, a conservative hate group known for its performative focus on parental rights and educational content, accused me of bias against white Christians and criticized my efforts to address topics related to gender and inclusivity. They also objected to my reading of *Pink Is for Boys* to kindergarten students, framing it as part of an agenda to influence children's views on gender and sexuality. I described the harassment I faced as a relentless and organized effort fueled by misinformation and public attacks on social media. These pressures, coupled with the election of Moms for Liberty-aligned candidates to the school board, ultimately led to my decision to resign after just 15 months on the job. Following my resignation, Moms for Liberty celebrated my departure on social media, while groups like Defense of Democracy, which opposes their agenda, accused the community of failing to protect me from targeted harassment. Social media played a significant role in amplifying misinformation throughout my tenure. I was shocked by the level of hate and the sheer volume of lies being spread. It became impossible to address every outrageous falsehood that was shared. I absolutely believe that my situation was part of a broader national crisis for public education and how such campaigns erode trust in educators and administrators. We as educators must lead the fight for what is best for students rather than being reactive to external pressure from hate groups like Mom's for Liberty.

What message does it send to a diverse student population when leadership that fights for inclusion, as well as for diverse literature, is sacked out of their positions? The *GenderQueer* debacle was a difficult time for me personally. At the time, I was slowly but surely coming to terms with my own sexuality. I'm not gender queer, so I couldn't specifically relate to the content of the challenged book, but it certainly hit me close enough to home. Ultimately, the Board of Education sided with freedom of speech, and *GenderQueer* was permitted to remain on my school library's shelf, but the damage to my community had already been done, and the ripple effects are still present to this very day. I first came to terms with my sexuality roughly one or two years prior to when the new superintendent entered my district. It was 2019, and being a high school sophomore in a small, conservative town, during the midst of the Trump presidency were all contributing factors as to why I remained in the closet for the next three years. During my time in high school, I had no access to queer literature, and the moment my district received a queer staff member, and the *GenderQueer* panic arrived, I knew I was right to keep my identity safeguarded away. Listening to the hateful homophobic rhetoric from parents and the suggestion that LGBTQ+ educators or literature are pedophilic significantly impacted me. To this day, I am very fearful of being subject to a witch hunt when I become an educator if the wrong parent finds out I am a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I needed a diverse text such as *GenderQueer* when I was growing up, but I could not get one.

Throughout my studies, I have been countered with the argument that, "topics such as the LGBT issues need to be left out of the classroom". Why? If we are maintaining a focus on the literature taught in English classrooms, this argument is rather problematic. As of 2022, roughly six percent of the United States population is Asian, while eight percent *publicly* identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. You are statistically more likely to have a queer student in

your classroom than an Asian student. LGBTQ+ literature *must* be in your curriculum. “But it’s too inappropriate! My children will be indoctrinated into thinking they’re gay!”. Yes, just as reading *Lord of the Flies* increases the likelihood that teenage boys will beat each other to death, or re-enacting *MacBeth* will influence children to commit regicide. Queer students require school to be a resource they can confide in when they cannot at home, and that should include having the right to discuss your identity in the classroom. The existential hate and fears of the modern day are knocking on the door of every youth in this country. By refusing to expose adolescents to these challenging concepts in a safe environment that fosters discussion and communication, they will learn them through mediums with less than favorable intentions, such as falling down the alt-right pipeline on YouTube or TikTok. Ignorance is very much not bliss in this scenario. Perhaps the true indoctrination children need protection from is the hateful rhetoric they hear from their parents within the confines of their homes. In the *New York Times* article, “A Frenzy of Book Banning”, written by Michelle Goldberg, Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, is interviewed, and says, “What we're seeing is really this idea that marginalized communities, marginalized groups, don't have a place in public school libraries, or public libraries, and that libraries should be institutions that only serve the needs of a certain group of people in the community,’ said Caldwell-Stone. The fight about who controls school libraries is a microcosm of the fight about who controls America, and the right is on the offense.”Why should only one or two religious or cultural backgrounds be respected and represented in a public school library? What message does that give to minority students? According to a report concerning what topics are present in each banned book in the United States, conducted by Johnathan Friedman, director of Free Expression and Education Programs, and PEN America in 2022:

- Among the 1,648 unique banned book titles in the Index,
    - 674 banned book titles (41 percent) explicitly address LGBTQ+ themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQ+ (this includes a specific subset of titles for transgender characters or stories—145 titles, or 9 percent);
    - 659 banned book titles (40 percent) contain protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color;
    - 338 banned book titles (21 percent) directly address issues of race and racism;
    - 357 banned book titles (22 percent) contain sexual content of varying kinds, including novels with some level of description of sexual experiences of teenagers, stories about teen pregnancy, sexual assault and abortion as well as informational books about puberty, sex, or relationships;
    - 161 banned book titles (10 percent) have themes related to rights and activism;
    - 141 banned book titles (9 percent) are either biography, autobiography, or memoir; and
    - 64 banned book titles (4 percent) include characters and stories that reflect religious minorities, such as Jewish, Muslim and other faith traditions.

What do these percentages tell us about what topics are considered indoctrination? What world do we live in when books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Between the World and Me* are challenged in districts as a result of what is essentially white guilt? Referring back to the PEN America article:

In Lexington-Richland School District Five, these educational gag orders resulted in the school board and principal instructing an AP English Language teacher to remove Ta-Nehisi Coates's National Book Award winning memoir *Between the World and Me* from her curriculum in June 2023 because some white students said it made them 'ashamed to be Caucasian' and 'incredibly uncomfortable.' One student claimed that the removals were justified under law, remarking, 'I am pretty sure a teacher talking about systemic racism is illegal in South Carolina.'

What some lawmakers suggest is the removal of historical texts that feature white characters filling the roles that are unsavory to contemporary audiences, typically those that are associated with themes of racism or systemic abuse, such as a slave owner or a Nazi official. It's almost as if that's the entire point of learning history. If we coddle our children to not acknowledge atrocities like slavery or the Holocaust, we are dooming the next generations to a fate of ignorance. We already reap the consequences of platforming Holocaust deniers in the present; imagine what the historical literacy of today's children will look like fifteen years removed from "the white guilt indoctrination books". One respondent to my survey noted:

I believe that unfettered access to diverse literature is essential for adolescents. It introduces them to a variety of cultures, perspectives, and experiences that they might not encounter in their everyday lives—especially those living in small, rural communities. Diverse literature fosters empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of our complex, interconnected world. It also allows adolescents to see themselves reflected in stories, which can be empowering and validating, while encouraging them to grow by engaging with perspectives different from their own.

As an individual who did grow up in a small, rural community, this excerpt mirrors my personal relationship to diverse literature quite perfectly. It wasn't until I began my English

major at SUNY New Paltz that I was finally introduced to notable diverse literature, such as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, which blew my mind upon first reading. It set off two, separate alarms in my head. One, that literature is a medium that is entirely limitless in its scope of topic, and two, that I was conclusively failed in my K-12 education. *Beloved* opened the door for me to expand my reading palette, which now includes Morrison's other works, and the works of James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Sandra Cisneros, Tommy Orange, et cetera. This list is ongoing, I am always looking for new texts that I can use to broaden my personal framework. Each and every text I read helps me personally by providing me with a clear vision for the teacher I hope to become, teaching the diverse books I never had access to. I am actively completing a "Young Adult Bibliography", a collection of eight YA texts published within the past decade, an opportunity which has allowed me to venture into foreign territory, and explore texts from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. Such texts include *On Earth, We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo and *Crying In H Mart* by Michelle Zauner. In addition to the examples I have mentioned above, my respondents listed texts such as *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika Sánchez, *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, and *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nein Cheng. It is heartbreaking then, that nearly *all* of these texts have been banned or challenged in school districts throughout the United States. Almost every single text featured in my Young Adult Bibliography has been restricted or outright removed throughout the country. What will be left to teach by the time I enter the field?

Looking Towards the Future

According to Emma Hulse of the New York Civil Liberties Union, "Without explicit guidance, school staff may feel pressure to pull books off shelves as soon as a complaint is filed. Doing so denies students access to a book without any assessment of whether the complaint is valid simply because the school wants to avoid conflict. Silencing someone because of concern about how others will react is called a "heckler's veto" and it is forbidden by the First Amendment." As explained earlier by one of my high school English teachers, some districts restrict or ban texts the minute a complaint is filed by a parental rights group in order to avoid community outrage and controversy. It was an effective policy for my district, as we had Hudson Valley news programs lined out of our front doors in the early months of 2022 when *GenderQueer* was challenged. My local Board of Education did not anticipate the level of controversy this potential restriction would cause, a sentiment I anticipate will be felt around the country as we transition into Donald Trump's second presidential term.

I began primary research for this thesis in early October, a few weeks prior to the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election between former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris. As optimistic as I would have liked to have been that Harris would secure the presidency, I had an unfortunate premonition that aspiring educators were about to endure four years of political upheaval and distress as an aspiring educator. Trump's policy proposals promise to challenge the status quo for educators in ways that will effectively dismantle the guard rails that protect equity motivated ideas, such as the need for a diverse book cannon. Trump details his education platform for his second term on his website, stating:

Rather than indoctrinating young people with inappropriate racial, sexual, and political material, which is what we're doing now, our schools must be totally refocused to prepare our

children to succeed in the world of work, and in life and the world of keeping our country strong, so they can grow up to be happy, prosperous, and independent citizens.

We will empower parents and local school boards to hire and reward great principals and teachers, and also to fire the poor ones. The ones whose performance is unsatisfactory will be fired. Like on The Apprentice, you're fired.

We owe our children great schools that lead to great jobs, and lead to an even greater country than we're living in right now. Right now we're living in a failing nation because of Joe Biden and these people running it. They're Marxists. They're communists. What they're doing to our country is incredible, but we'll take care of that for our children.

And one other thing I'll be doing very early in the administration is closing up the Department of Education in Washington D.C. and sending all education and education work and needs back to the States. We want them to run the education of our children, because they'll do a much better job of it. You can't do worse.

There is a lot to unpack here, so let's dissect this statement one passage at a time. Firstly, the terminology of categorizing education concerning what seems to be *any* minority group as "indoctrination" is extremely dangerous rhetoric. As my former English teacher explained, "Once a group is marginalized and labeled as "bad" or "other," then it is easier to hate and maltreat them". If discourse focusing on the past and present of racial and sexual minorities becomes taboo, the national topic on these topics will never again be respectful or productive. Rather, hate and mockery will be instated as the national norm. Trump states that a teacher's level of success in their field is dependent on how parents and local school boards feel, operating on what I gather is some twisted reward system, where the "woke" teachers, whose classroom

contains a diverse curriculum will be punished and fired, doomed to be replaced with a Trump bootlicker. Why should teachers, principals and superintendents need to worry that teaching students about the world around them will result in their termination? Trump continues to explain that educators nowadays are influencing their students to identify with a Marxist ideology, a topic my Republican family members have discussed at many holiday dinner tables. This is a long stemming talking point rooted in the Republican party's opposition to speaking critically about the past or present of the United States. They would prefer a strictly nationalist consensus, where the United States serves, and always has served as the inarguable golden standard of the world, and anyone who feels otherwise is a traitor or a commie, whether they can properly define communism or not. As a result, countless books and materials that critique the United States in any form, whether it be in foreign policy, institutional racism, colonization, et cetera, are challenged and restricted on principle that the analytical content of these texts will impact the students' sense of pride in their country. My personal belief has always been that one cannot be prideful of where they are from while turning a blind eye to a past filled with black and white, ups and downs. You must absorb all of the history in order to fully understand the identity of your country. That is how you show pride, by being critical. It shows you care, and wish for your place of origin to be the best it can be, rather than putting your hands over your ears and proclaiming that there is zero improvement to be made. Finally, Trump goes on to promise that, within the first few weeks of his return to office, he will strike down the Department of Education, insinuating that parents must outrank actual school officials in terms of choice of material in classroom, a change with major implications that would bring out political upheaval. Think of every single, unique book that has been challenged, restricted, or outright banned in the United States in the past five years. There have been upwards of 1,600 in

total. Under this new, hypothetical policy, each and every single one of these books will be removed from shelves and units in a school in a heartbeat. There will be no Board of Education hearing, there will be no debate. One respondent to my survey worded it flawlessly, saying, "Book banning is a tactic used to politicize and whitewash history, and is about valuing power and control over education, cultural competency, and critical thinking." In an effort to appeal to parents and limit controversy, the safety rails that protect diverse literature have been outright removed. My former English teacher elaborates:

In my last years before retirement, parents and administrators of my district began to micromanage the titles of books that were used in the English curriculum. Even though the books were on a list that had been adopted by the Board of Education for their recognized literary value, when a parent would complain about something objectionable (usually of a sexual nature), administration would go against its own adopted BOE policies and censor what would be used in the class. Every BOE has a policy about how to challenge books; in my district, it was easier for the administrators to appease the parents by banning books. Unfortunately, a very vocal minority was able to dictate what ALL students would read.

Is there no hope for the future then? Are we as educators and students alike doomed to endure a future of political suppression of ideas and demonization of minority topics? The future may be sorrowfully dim, but I believe there is a spark of hope that education and literature will prevail.

At this moment, I would like to share a few responses to the final question I asked the respondents in my survey: What advice would you give to educators or policymakers regarding the selection of literature in schools?

Think about the world you want your children or future children living in. How do you want them to react towards social issues, do you think they'll be prepared for issues that will face them beyond high school? Do you think they'll be able to see other points of view besides their own? If not then maybe schools reading selections should be revisited.

Select literature that creates discussion, that explores the human condition. I tell my students, and would tell educators and policymakers, that when we read and discuss literature it is not necessarily to change your mind. It is to open your mind to the views of others, and to help us understand why people may feel or believe the things they do. By doing this it allows us to consider other viewpoints and situations. It can create a respectful and peaceful dialogue that demonstrates empathy despite different views.

It is our responsibility to give our children access to diverse literature and literature about difficult topics because we can help them to make sense of the issues that they will encounter later when nobody is there to explain, contextualize, support, etc. We cannot afford to be ostriches with our heads in the sand. Mark Twain is credited with saying that "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." Not all can travel in person to different places, but literature allows everyone to travel and, therefore, have open minds.

There *are* fresh ideas and perspectives concerning how to best approach our mission to provide each and every student with the well-rounded education they deserve. There always will be, as long as we do not lose the hope and ambition we hold within ourselves to embody the

change we want to see in the world. It is our purpose, and we cannot lose sight of it, no matter how dark the shadows blocking the path ahead may seem. It's just like Walt Disney said, "Children are people, and they should have to reach to learn about things, to understand things, just as adults have to reach if they want to grow in mental stature. Life is composed of lights and shadows, and we would be untruthful, insincere, and saccharine if we tried to pretend there were no shadows."

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