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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

To Read or Not to Read: How Book Censorship Affects Students and
Undermines Different Worldviews

Honors Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements of HON 420

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By

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Abstract

The past five years have seen an unprecedented growth in book challenges across the nation. The American Library Association announced in March 2024 that 2023 saw a ninety-two percent increase in challenged titles, making it a record year for book bans and challenges (American Library Association 2024). States are seeing increased government inference into these issues. Namely, Florida remains a leader in book challenges with over forty percent of all book bans in the 2022-2023 school year (Meehan 2023). This project examines the effect of book challenges and bans on adolescent readers, with an emphasis on how frequently challenged books, while containing sensitive subject matter, positively impact students and need to be protected in classrooms and libraries. There is a focus on how book challenges have looked historically, how perceptions of childhood and adolescence play a role, and the most common reasons as to why books are challenged, while also acknowledging qualifications to this issue. This project examines how students benefit from challenged books by understanding other worldviews and developing their own social and emotional learning (SEL). This project concludes with examples of frequently challenged book recommendations for educators and why each book has academic merit for classrooms.

Keywords: book censorship, book challenges, diversity, adolescents, honors thesis, social and emotional learning, education

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
History of Book Challenges and Today's Political Climate	2
Perceptions of Childhood and Adolescence	6
The Scrutiny of Diverse Literature	11
Understanding Rationale for Challenges	15
Social and Emotional Benefits of Frequently Challenged Materials	19
Qualifications: The Protection of Mental Health	22
Examples of Challenged Books and Their Literary Merit	24
Works Cited	33

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Introduction

The past five years have seen an unprecedented growth in book challenges across the country. Educators and librarians alike fear backlash for even including a controversial book in the curriculum or library collection. Increased government interference has combined with national attention on this epidemic of book challenges, causing fear and panic among teachers and librarians who have opted to remove books to err on the safe side (Bertoni 2023). This heightened sensitivity with certain texts reveals a new age of soft censorship, where many librarians, teachers, and school administrators admit that they decline to order certain books out of fear that someone might find the content objectionable (PEN America 2016). Educators should not be afraid of losing their jobs for teaching controversial books, and fear should not be instilled in spaces meant for learning.

The American Library Association (ALA) announced in March 2024 that 2023 saw a ninety-two percent increase in challenged titles, making it a record year for book bans and challenges. The ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom documented 1,247 demands to censor library books, materials, and resources in 2023 (American Library Association 2024). Based on these numbers, librarians and educators should expect see a dramatic increase in challenges throughout 2024. But how much longer can these challenges grow? Educators are becoming

more sensitive to controversial texts as it is, and if these challenges do not slow down, English teaching will be scandalized instead of prioritized for students.

For clarity, a distinction can be made between the terms “challenge” and “ban” and they should not be used interchangeably. Not all books that are challenged become formally removed from a collection. The term “challenge” refers to the process of formally requesting that a book be in some way removed from a school curriculum, school library collection, or public-school collection. A ban is when a title is completely censored or removed from a curriculum/collection (Knox 2019). This process usually begins when a parent, community member, or sometimes even a student files a complaint about a book. In most cases, the complaint is reviewed by a school board or a special committee to determine the book’s future availability (PEN America 2016).

Those seeking to challenge or even ban certain books might have sincere objections concerning the impact of sensitive subjects on students’ mental health, especially if a book’s content features tough subjects like suicide or self-harm. However, works with complex and diverse perspectives in classrooms positively impact students’ emotional and social learning. Including such texts, which are often controversial, is imperative for students’ understanding and development. Educators should be supported in their efforts to retain challenged books in their curriculum.

History of Book Challenges and Today’s Political Climate

Historically speaking, book challenges have existed since books have existed. Since humans could write down ideas, those beliefs would be objected by someone else. In ancient Greece, Homer’s works were edited to “prevent those without the requisite maturity reading the

poet's works" (Pickering 2). Thomas Daniel describes the Nazi book burnings as a notable example of censorship in recent history. Nazi students burned books that were labeled as "un-German" or not synchronized with German ideologies (Daniel 2). In America, the McCarthy era is thought to be the inspiration for Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, which is still banned in parts of Germany today (Daniel 2).

It should not be surprising that polarizing, socio-political upheaval from the past five to seven years has greatly influenced the rise of book challenges. Conservative policies, seen with the Trump administration, have clashed with progressive social movements like Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ rights. While political movements of the past similarly influenced censorship, book challenges today have risen exponentially. Grace Pickering examines the state of book bans today in her article "'Harmful to Minors': How Book Bans Hurt Adolescent Development." Pickering emphasizes how book challenges today are larger in scale compared to those from even a decade ago. According to the ALA, there were 1,269 demands to censor library books and resources in 2022. This is up from almost 75% from the 729 reported challenges in 2021 (Pickering 3).

Pickering also acknowledges how politics are playing a bigger role in book challenges today. Besides local objection to certain books being in libraries or curriculums, states are seeing increased government interference into these concerns. More legislation is being passed to regulate these texts in school systems and public libraries. For example, the Attorney General of Louisiana launched a hotline to tip off the government about librarians, educators, and anyone else who was sharing books about sexual and gender identity. Passed in 2022, Florida statute HB1467 requires a "media specialist" to approve any books in a school or its library before they can be shelved. They are now reviewing entire school collections of books (Pickering 4).

Florida remains a leader in book challenges and regulating texts in school curriculums and public libraries. The state had over forty percent of all book bans in the 2022-2023 school year (Meehan 2023). On top of HB1467, other laws have been passed and more executive decisions have been made within school districts. To comply with the “Don’t Say Gay” law, the state has limited access to certain topics in characters in K-3 and this has expanded to K-12, placing limits on full readings of Shakespeare’s plays. In Manatee County, principals can pull books from shelves even if district review committees have approved said books (Masferrer 2). These decisions have caused chaos and confusion for educators in these districts.

This scrutiny and associated attempts to remove books has not gone without opposition from educators and community members alike. *The New Yorker* highlighted a case in Iowa in which a law known as Senate File 496 was met with a federal suit. The law requires that public school libraries contain only “age appropriate” books which immediately excludes any book with a sex act. The law also prohibits instruction that deals with gender identity and sexual orientation (Bertoni 2023). This opens discussion to how the Supreme Court would rule on book banning today as previous decisions set weak precedents.

Specifically, the monumental book banning case of *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* in 1982 declared it unconstitutional to remove books simply because someone dislikes the ideas being presented in certain books. Justice William Brennan asserted that to “prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion” would be condemned (Thimakis 2022). Titles can be removed, however, due to vulgar content or educational unsuitability. Preceding the case, members of the Island Trees district’s school board removed nine titles from their library collection after conservative parent groups sent in many complaints. The school board tried to justify this decision by claiming these novels to be anti-

American and anti-Christian. Students in the district sued and the case eventually went to the Supreme Court (Kim 1). Though the decision stated that school boards cannot favor one viewpoint over another, it sets a weak precedent for future book challenges. “Educational suitability”, however, is a very flexible loophole for challengers to argue that certain books do not fit educational requirements as it can be used as a disguise for personal bias.

A book challenge case in Louisiana is just one example of how Pico set a rocky precedent for future book bans that occur in schools. *Campbell v. St. Tammany Parish School Board* reflected an attempt to ban under the guise of educational suitability. The novel *Voodoo and Hoodoo* by Jim Haskins explores African tribal religion in the United States, and a parent complained that the book would influence children to invest in the supernatural. It was shelved in the “8th graders only” section of the library and later removed completely. But there were concerns raised over whether the decision to remove the book was constitutional, and whether it was removed because of educational unsuitability or to suppress certain ideas (Kim 3). While the book was eventually returned to the “8th grade only” shelf, it opens many questions for how book challenge cases should be assessed regarding educational suitability. It also poses questions about whether or not certain cases are within a school’s discretion. What books are considered appropriate for educational purposes, and which ones are not? How can school districts better handle cases where personal bias is making an appearance?

Even before Pico, however, was another significant case known as *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* from 1933. Like Pico and many other book challenges, educational value vs obscenity was weighed. *Ulysses* is a novel by James Joyce told as a stream of consciousness and featuring subject matter like infidelity, blasphemy, and more notoriously, a masturbation scene. A young girl discovered the masturbation scene, and one thing led to another before the

book was banned completely in the United States. Importation guards were even instructed to search packages arriving from Ireland. Questions rose as to whether this novel, which was recognizably great by many, was beneficial for its intellectual gain or if it was hurtful for its obscenity. Eventually, a case was brought forth and a judge declared that obscenity is simply expression of free speech (Daniel 2).

While political differences play significant roles, the issue of book censorship can still be largely attributed to cultural differences. Senate File 496 from Iowa is an example of how a conservative region is pushing back against books that do not promote traditional values, especially as it concerns sexual content. Parents and citizens' groups have dominated many challenges in school districts and libraries. The United States hosts many traditional, Christian communities that want to shield their children from content that goes against their ideology. This is seen in the fact that rarely any Christian based, heterosexual novels get challenged (Bickford et al. 7). Parents especially see their children as highly impressionable to different beliefs and principles, so they fear that their children will become indoctrinated if they read from different canon.

Perceptions of Childhood and Adolescence

Since book challenges take place mostly in classrooms and libraries, they reflect ongoing determination to "protect" youth from adult content. Perceptions of childhood have changed drastically within the last century, with the concept of being a teenager not being fully realized until the twentieth century. The term "adolescence" was first publicized by G. Stanley Hall in 1904 (Cohen 2). Throughout the twentieth century, the growth of mass media like radio and television encouraged adults to censor content from adolescents that was deemed inappropriate

for their age. Political movements like the Red Scare sought to protect traditional values and viewed the nuclear family as sacred, thus creating a need for adults to preserve a specific lifestyle for youth. Besides communism, perverse content was targeted to purify society and maintain a level of control over youth. Anything related to youth culture was heavily scrutinized for whether it represented traditional, American values.

Comic books became a heavily targeted medium during in the 1940's and 50's. Frightened adults denounced how the content encouraged violence and led adolescents in the wrong direction. Space, crime, and horror comics did not promote family values and encouraged violence. To elaborate on these claims, psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham argued that popular comics of the time featured no constructive work or ordinary family life (Cohen 8). Through the pressure of citizens' groups, publishing companies had to submit comics for approval. The words "horror" and "terror" could not be used in any titles (Cohen 9). The censorship of anything outside of traditional, Christian values is deeply rooted in the desire to maintain control over youth. In that time, the fear of communism, or anything deemed anti-American, was reflected in censorship efforts.

These same sentiments are seen today with social media. Because information is so easily accessible now, adolescents are being exposed to all different kinds of content at a younger age than in the past. People can share their political opinions on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc. and adolescents can access this content easily as long as they have an internet connection. Parents and citizens' groups with strong values and beliefs would undoubtedly be threatened by the amount of free expression found on social media. Parents do not want their children to have access to views that contradict their own, as to not "corrupt" their children with different ideology, much like the backlash to comics in the fifties. Book challenges can be seen

as a way for adults to take control of what children have access to in an age where social media has such a large presence in everyone's lives.

There are two dispositions in these attempts to censor material from adolescents. One is that there is an age in which content is inappropriate, and the other is that media has the power to influence those who consume it. Whether or not certain content is appropriate lies in how adults view healthy adolescent development and what content should be exposed at each stage. Alyssa D. Niccolini asserts that educators should engage in a "youth lens" to challenge predispositions of adolescents. Cultural constructions of youth tend to be focused on notions of teens as predictable and hardwired for certain behaviors. Censoring racy material could stem from the belief that most students are not mature enough to handle sensitive content (Niccolini 2). This also dismisses the educational value in explicit content. Young people live in and read about a decidedly complex world where sex, violence, intolerance, and profanity are a reality. Uneasiness can be used to generate, not shut down, conversations in the English classroom. (Niccolini 6).

Integrating challenged books in a classroom makes it easier for adolescents to approach sensitive topics. The idea that English courses are the best places to explore controversial subjects is shared by many. High school English teacher Jennifer Rossuck offers a detailed unit on censorship, where her students work on lessons and draw specific conclusions related to challenged materials. One student presented on how censorship is a form of denial from parents who wish to shield their children from controversial issues in the media (Rossuck 3). Many parents have this idea that if young audiences read about disobedience, then they will be inspired to act in a similar manner. This is why parents develop a need to "protect" their kids from content they deem inappropriate and fight to censor certain materials. But in today's world, it is

becoming harder than ever to “shield” anyone with internet access from what is going on in the world. Just one scroll on Twitter or Facebook will present various news stories and opinions from all over the world. If anything, it is more important than ever for students to understand and process the abundance of information they are being exposed to daily.

Expanding on this, another student in Rossuck’s class discussed how censorship disrespects students’ abilities to think critically and form their own conclusions (Rossuck 3). A vital part of being a teenager, or transitioning into adulthood, is learning how to think for oneself, and this is not as black and white as many challengers would believe. Not many adults would say that *Harry Potter* inspired them to practice witchcraft and cast spells against their parents or superiors. This is because there are so many takeaways from the series beyond what is presented at face value, giving readers the chance to interpret underlying themes and connections to the real world. Exposure to challenged books allows readers to reflect on why difficult topics are so scrutinized in literature and how they can dictate meaningful conversations both inside and outside the classroom. Students should be given the opportunity to read these books in an academic setting so they can discuss the subject matter with others and reflect on their own responses to it. Young adults are products of many environmental factors, and reading a certain book cannot necessarily dictate specific behavior. But reading these books in the classroom provides a space for students to develop critical thinking skills regarding current topics.

While books targeted towards teens and adults have always been challenged, recent years have seen a rise in children’s and young adult books being challenged. The most frequently banned book titles of the 2022-2023 school year were largely young adult novels (PEN America 2023).

One explanation for this phenomenon is that the concept of childhood being a highly impressionable time is a relatively new concept in Western culture. Before the age of Enlightenment, children were essentially “playthings” as a source of entertainment. A person was a child until they could marry and have children, so the distinction between each stage of life was rigid. Someone was a child and then they were an adult without a transitional phase in between. Eventually, children were conceived as an image of innocence to be molded by experience and relationships to the social world. John Locke’s theory of tabula rasa inferred that children start off as a “blank slate” to be molded by their surroundings (Miller 3). This era saw governance and control over books with potential to influence children in the wrong direction. After this new concept of childhood arose, children’s literature became inseparable from the idea of identity-shaping potential in books (Miller 5).

There are several common themes among frequently challenged children’s and young adult books, but themes of sexual content remain at the top. In many ways, this can be attributed to parents trying to regulate information about human reproduction and heteronormative worldviews to police social boundaries (Bickford et al. 6). Books that include homosexuality have been targeted for promoting a lifestyle that conservatives deem corrupt. Since children’s literature is now characterized as highly influential on personal growth, parents and community members do not want to see their children reading about characters with different belief systems from their own. *Heather Has Two Mommies* was published in 1994 and immediately met with backlash from anti-gay groups. Right-wing senators denounced the book for portraying same-sex relationships in a positive light (Miller 8). *And Tango Makes Three* is a highly controversial book for its reference to homosexuality between two male penguins. This award-winning novel focuses on a real case concerning two male penguins that raised a chick together in the Central

Park Zoo. Challengers have viewed this story as being part of the “gay agenda” and assert its unsuitability for young readers. Complaints rose in many school districts across the country and requests were made to remove the text from libraries (Miller 10).

The authors of *And Tango Makes Three*, Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, expressed their desire to promote a broader cultural agenda (Miller 9). But their motivations were not fueled by the prospect of indoctrinating children, which is how many challengers felt about the book’s subject matter. Their motivation stems from the fact that today’s world is constantly evolving, and parents have a greater need to have conversations about LGBTQ issues with their children. Children’s books open the opportunity to have conversations with children over real-life issues. This medium simplifies important issues in a way for children to comprehend easily. *And Tango Makes Three* uses animals to appeal to children and get an important issue across in a palatable manner. However, this can be an area of concern for parents who do not want to have uncomfortable conversations with their children. Parents might not want to raise the potential of their child finding out about a sensitive topic to where they would need to have a conversation about it. Parents with strict, conservative values might not want to have conversations with their children about homosexuality. This is what could lead children becoming ignorant towards these issues in the real world, which is why being able to have those conversations with books is a great place to start.

The Scrutiny of Diverse Literature

Frequently targeted books like *And Tango Makes Three* also reflects a broader pattern of challenges that aim to censor diverse and multicultural stories. Besides sexuality, books with themes of racial and religious diversity are often challenged (Bickford et al. 7). It is not just

classic novels that are being targeted; literature with diverse characters is being targeted at a disproportionate rate. Normally, it is easy to think of diversity as anyone not white or straight. But the definition of diversity is constantly evolving to be more inclusive towards underrepresented populations. Diversity, according to the We Need Diverse Books campaign, can be defined as “LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.” All but one book on the Office of Intellectual Freedom’s 2017 Most Challenged Books List featured a diverse protagonist (Knox 2019).

It is also important to note that classrooms and libraries already lack a wide variety of diverse literature. Books with diverse protagonists do not get published as frequently as it is. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) found that out of 3,700 books for children published in the U.S., about 25% had main characters or subjects who were people of color or where people of color were prominently featured (Knox 2019). This makes book challenges of today even more problematic because the small number of diverse books being published is threatened. These diverse stories are already fighting to be told in the first place, and they are being targeted more often than books with Christian, white, heteronormative canon. According to 2018 research, 81% of librarians consider it “very important” to have diverse book collections for children and teens and some have adopted diversity as part of an institutional mission (Ishisuka 2018). Similarly, those in the educational sphere find it extremely important for diverse texts to be included in classrooms. High school teachers Brianna Burke and Kristina Greenfield raise awareness for this issue in their article for *The English Journal*. They argue that the lack of LGBTQ literature in high schools fosters an environment in which these issues are not understood and supported (Burke et al. 1). If more diverse books were included in the curriculum, students would be more aware of the issues faced by minorities. But to get to that

point, more diverse books should be available for educators to incorporate into classroom discussions.

Burke and Greenfield also include which diverse texts could be introduced into high school curriculums and how these stories could be studied in a way to benefit all students. For example, they promote picture books to ease into topics surrounding LGBT matters. *And Tango Makes Three* has been introduced in high school classrooms to discuss the issue of censoring children's books. Introducing these books can explore the issue of banning LGBT books and start conversations in the classroom about LGBT tolerance. Students can respond to questions about how family units and sexuality is represented, and whether it should be included in school libraries (Burke et al. 3). Introducing LGBT issues will make conversations easier as more students become comfortable enough with this content to think critically about its implications. Students can reflect on how representation is important and what it means when minorities become censored. The goal for educators is to prepare students to become model citizens, and gaining empathy for people of different backgrounds is part of that process.

Additionally, Burke and Greenfield include ways for educators to introduce difficult texts in the classroom. The first step in this process would be teachers consulting principals with what LGBT book they want to include in the curriculum and the standards it fulfills. This step gives teachers the opportunity to explore LGBT works that they have always wanted to include in the curriculum but could not comfortably do so. Teachers can also discover works that they are unfamiliar with and research how it fulfills standards for the class. This would allow many undervalued stories to gain attention for their academic merit, and students would be introduced to more unique titles as opposed to the classics that are typically taught in English classrooms.

The next step, while controversial, is for students to be given a choice in whether they want to read that book or not. To those who support the inclusion of LGBT texts, this can be seen as problematic because it could allow some students to hold a homophobic position (Burke et al. 2). However, this part of the process gives students the opportunity to exercise freedom. Having the choice to read an LGBTQ centered text like *And Tango Makes Three* allows students to reflect on their own beliefs and regulate emotional maturity. To challengers and educators alike, this could raise more questions, however. Should every controversial book in the classroom be optional? Would it be better to make the reading required and risk a challenge from parents?

Other educators respond to such a question with an enthusiastic yes. Without the inclusion of LGBTQ stories, the topic stays taboo and remains “somebody else’s problem” in a sense. Students stay ignorant to these issues and are not educated on the lives and struggles of LGBTQ individuals. Even worse, some students could use ignorance to perpetrate violence against the community and the cycle of prejudice continues. Many teachers have used their experiences in teaching to argue that one of the biggest ways to condone homophobia is to silence LGBTQ literature in the curriculum.

Jen Curwood is one of these educators that has denounced the lack of diversity in her school’s curriculum, especially LGBT centered works. This addresses the larger issue of k-12 schools across the country still experiencing homophobia. In 2008, 73% of students reported hearing homophobic slurs in their schools (Curwood et al. 1). She was surprised to find out that her school district’s curriculum had barely changed since her time in high school. Curwood gave her students an independent reading list, which included many LGBT centered works. *The Kite Runner* was put on her reading list, but it was denied due to a rape scene. However, the novel

Speak, an integral part of the curriculum, has rape as a central theme. Curwood questions why *The Kite Runner* is banned, along with other books with diverse characters, for focusing on similar themes. To Curwood, stories like *The Kite Runner* are considered more taboo and easily targeted simply for featuring diverse characters (Curwood et al. 2).

Educator Megan Schliesman is even more assertive in her support for LGBT works in curriculums, arguing that other supporters should not focus on the “what if’s” from challengers (Curwood et al. 4). While there might be questions about how parents and students will react to controversial texts in the curriculum, educators should stand firm in their efforts to include diverse literature. For LGBT works to become more supported and normalized in high schools, educators should not worry about what others might say, including parents and other administrators. What is more important is including LGBT books to introduce students to different worldviews. These stories reflect the human experience - so it is not just about one person.

Understanding Rationale for Challenges

For educators, librarians, and school administrators to protect books in classrooms and libraries, they should first research why books are commonly challenged to understand the best ways to advocate for them. According to the ALA, the top three reasons for challenging materials is for sexually explicit content, offensive language, and being unsuitable for a specific age group (American Library Association 2016). Motivations also vary between the individuals/organizations that are requesting certain books be removed. Christian Right political groups, such as Focus on the Family and The American Family Association, have attacked the Harry Potter series for promoting the occult and conflicting with traditional family values. These

challengers argue that the characters defy parental authority, which could promote young readers to rebel against authority figures (Jenkins 5).

English teacher Alyssa D. Niccolini reflects on the motivations for censoring certain books in her classroom. Her article, published in the *English Journal*, challenges the conception that adolescents must have a stream-lined journey to adulthood. Niccolini notes how this transitional period is characterized by unflattering terms like “ignorance, hormonal, and angsty” (Niccolini 1). How can English teachers challenge these preconceived, stereotypical view of teens in the classroom? Teachers have the opportunity to reflect on why certain texts are deemed as uneasy in the classroom. There is a tendency to censor materials to protect the innocence of youth, a sentiment that has presented itself time and time again with book challenges. Adults want to prevent instability and risk in teens for a linear arc to adulthood, thus avoiding any literature that contains violence, sexuality, or offensive language. However, Niccolini argues that uneasiness can be used to generate, rather than shut down, conversations in the classroom (Niccolini 6).

Emily Knox also builds on the idea that challengers do not want children exposed to certain themes that are commonly presented in controversial books. She analyzes two common themes among books that have been challenged: “Unsuitable for age group” and “something else would be better” (Knox 2019).

In line with the first theme, one challenger argued that Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is inappropriate because of its portrayal of slavery. The challenger argued that their complaint was not to shelter disturbing events that have occurred throughout history, but to address graphic scenes involving infanticide, sexual content, and profanity found in the novel. The complaint referenced depictions of violent rape and sexual organs as being problematic for high-school

students (Knox 2019). However, silencing diverse and true stories that involve slavery misses the point entirely in how we must understand our nation's complex history. Students are supposed to face the uncomfortable parts of history to think critically about how it has affected the present day. It would be difficult to discuss the horrific aspects of slavery without including some of the inappropriate content referenced by the challenger. A book like *Beloved* can open discussion for students about how slavery is presented and how censoring certain books can affect readers' understanding of that time period.

The second theme found by Knox argues that specific stories are fine, but the way they are told is not. Challengers assert that another book could convey the same story. However, this is problematic in how it suggests there is only one true experience in any diverse story. The point of reading books, especially diverse books, is to learn about the lived experiences of other people. This in turn will help students evaluate their own worldview.

Similarly, the graphic novel *Maus* has been banned from classrooms because "something else would be better". Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus*, expressed his disbelief with the graphic novel being banned from a Tennessee school district. The book was voted against unanimously by the school board. Their reasoning? Language and nudity. The issue at hand with the board was that there were curse words and a nude woman. However, the nudity was not sexual in any way as it portrayed Spiegelman's mother's suicide. Johnathan Pierce, the board member who initiated the removal, said that another holocaust book would be better: he had said during the board meeting that "the Holocaust should be taught in schools, but this is not the book to do it" (Hernandez 2022). But how are students to learn about the atrocities of the Holocaust if certain stories are censored?

The desire to censor materials can also be based on anti-intellectualism rhetoric. Some challengers reject certain texts because they include ideas different from their firm belief systems. Emily Knox argues in her article “Books, Censorship, and Anti-Intellectualism in Schools” that book challenges in classrooms is rooted in anti-intellectualism. Challengers believe that each book contains a truth, and that including books with ideas they do not agree with will circulate said bad ideas in young readers. Usually these “bad ideas” are just beliefs and cultures that do not align with their own. Knox includes a case from Tucson, Arizona in which challengers perceived the books in the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program as tools of indoctrination. The complaints with the program included accusations of the content deprecating anything European or of European culture (Knox 4). Despite the fact that there are huge, growing Hispanic populations in America, especially in areas like Arizona, these challengers do not think that a MAS program is relevant. What makes these kinds of complaints appear so anti-intellectual is that they disregard any academic merit from cultures outside of white, Christian, or Western dogma. Learning from different cultures is how students respect people from different backgrounds. Sentiments like these appear to be more than just “protecting” children from sensitive content. It reveals deeper motives of preventing children from being exposed to different cultures that people do not agree with or respect.

Challengers and supporters of controversial texts agree in the power of books, but the disconnect lies in how students should approach these stories. To challengers, intellectualism is a dangerous threat to western canon, seen in the case in Tucson. Supporters see these texts as just one version of the truth to be explored: “Teachers should give students many books to read because each book reveals something that gets one closer to the truth, not because one particular book contains all truths” (Knox 5). One specific book is not going to indoctrinate an entire

population as long as there are other books to learn from, which is why having a variety of perspectives is so important. This allows students to compare different texts and analyze how their own responses have influenced their thinking. If diverse books continue to be challenged and censored for providing different perspectives, there will only be one ideology left. Promoting just one belief system is more dangerous than a MAS book ever will be.

There are a multitude of reasons as to why books are challenged, but the literary value of targeted books should be advocated for despite the presence of sensitive subject matter. If anything, the sensitive content in commonly challenged books can actually be of great academic merit for students. In the case of the MAS program, books that feature diverse populations provide different worldviews for students to examine, which will consequently develop empathy and understanding for different cultures that the world has to offer beyond what is familiar.

Social and Emotional Benefits of Frequently Challenged Materials

In addition to learning about different populations and cultures, students should have access to a variety of books even if they are controversial because they provide social and emotional benefits. Educators should be supported in their efforts to retain controversial texts in their curriculums as these stories give students the opportunity to develop empathy and understanding on different perspectives. Efforts to “shield” children from sensitive material may actually be counterproductive (Ferguson 2). A study was done on adolescents to analyze the relationship between reading banned books and outcomes related to civic behaviors, mental health problems, grade point average, and violent and nonviolent crime. The results from this study do not indicate that banned books present a significant behavioral problem. In fact, reading banned books was positively associated with civic and volunteering behaviors (Ferguson, 6).

Though further research could be conducted to see how these results compare to larger sample sizes, it is significant to see how banned books can be positively correlated with civic behaviors. Exposure to different worldviews can be understood as a contributing factor to becoming more engaged with volunteer work and civic behavior.

Expanding on this, educators Kimberly Rivera and Ellen Flynn argue that adolescents should have access to a variety of books to teach what they refer to social and emotional learning (SEL). In their article published in *Education*, they analyze the relationship between controversial texts and SEL of adolescents. Reading controversial literature helps students connect emotionally to certain characters and situations that exhibit the human condition. English literature is an essential component of SEL, as reading certain texts, followed by class discussion and reflection, contributes to personal engagement with global issues.

Flynn and Rivera also discuss certain methods that can be used to introduce literature in classrooms. Some of these include “literature circles” which contribute to critical thinking and argumentative skills. Whole-class discussions and reflective essays are other methods of engaging with these texts and hearing from others’ perspective of the book in discussion. Literature helps students understand different perspectives and behaviors so that they can express empathy towards people of different backgrounds. Banned books that introduce difficult conversations are necessary to engage students with global issues and expand worldviews.

With so many growing subcultures and minority populations in the U.S., it is more important than ever that students read diverse literature and to develop media literacy skills to combat stereotypes and develop empathy. Media literacy can sensitize students to methods of propaganda, challenge stereotypes in literature, nurture a greater appreciation of the power of language, and promote reading and writing (Schwarz 3). Today’s political climate is the

foundation of a plethora of misinformation and propaganda, especially as it relates to different subgroups and ethnicities. Reading works from different perspectives is essential for students to avoid being manipulated by one-sided perspectives.

Additionally, controversial texts allow students to engage with characters that allow them to understand their own identities. Coming of age stories that address sensitive topics allow young readers to reflect on their own values and life choices. This can be seen in Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Alice*, a young adult book series that follows a girl named Alice throughout her adolescence. The books address several controversial subjects in Alice's life, including sexuality, drunk driving, teen pregnancy, and religious inquiry. The book series ranked second on the 2000–2009 American Library Association's top one hundred list of banned books, frequently being challenged for its sexual content (Heinecken 2). But it is clear that the series has had a profound impact on girls all around the world. The Official Alice Blog was created in 2008 for readers to post questions and responses to the series.

Based on the participation on the blog, young adult series like *Alice* are not just stories written for shock value. The content in these novels is relatable for many people, especially the young girls who took it upon themselves to share their stories on the blog. Since the online forum provides an anonymous, judgement free space, girls can share their feelings about the ways they appreciate the subject matter of these books. Responses indicate that many readers connect with the experiences of Alice and praise Naylor for discussing topics that other others are afraid to, like divorce, molestation, life-threatening illnesses, and death. These tough experiences are the reality for many young readers. The fact that Alice endures these things too helps the readers feel less isolated and more understanding that these things happen. Alice also has storylines surrounding relationships and sex where readers can reflect on how they feel about the

relationships in their own lives. Since so many readers can identify with Alice's experiences, it is important that adolescents have access to stories that they can connect with.

Alice is not the only young adult series that has been targeted over the years. Elle Hopkins' *Crank* was targeted for drug use. It would be a common strain that Hopkins would hear in years to come—her stories were too “gritty” for young ears, despite the fact that young people experienced these issues and more. Hopkins noted that the committee did not even regard the message of her works, which says, “the choices you make as young adults will affect you for the rest of your life” (Damron 4). To Hopkins, her books are not to promote drug experimentation and abuse, but to advertise the ugliest aspects of drug addiction.

But the controversy with Hopkins' novels does not just reflect the fact how misunderstood the message is. It more so supports the idea that approaching these issues in an academic setting is a much more effective way of communicating the author's intentions with a specific work. The message behind her other novel *Crank*, for instance, is that drug addiction will completely wreck your life and hurt your loved ones. Students can interpret how the writing of Hopkins' novels reflect this message and how she emphasizes the complexities of drug addiction. For students who have dealt with these issues in their own families, *Crank* is a yet another message saying, “you are not alone”, something many kids never may have heard before.

Qualifications: The Protection of Mental Health

While censoring books is a dangerous slippery slope, there are valid concerns for some graphic content. It is reasonable for parents to be concerned about what their children become exposed to, and many feel the need to protect against content that could be potentially triggering. Suicide is a sensitive subject, especially with the increasing awareness of mental health issues.

Some students may not feel comfortable reading about suicide or self-harm because they have similar struggles themselves. This concern was illustrated with the release of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a popular book that became even more popularized by the Netflix show of the same name. The story follows a teenage girl who commits suicide and leaves behind thirteen tapes detailing why she ended her own life.

The release of the TV show brought about complaints against the show and the book for its graphic portrayal of suicide and how it is associated with suicide rates increasing. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, *Thirteen Reasons Why* was associated with a 28.9% increase in suicide rates among US youth ages 10-17 in the month following the show's release (NIH 2019). Seeing these numbers, combined with the outrage of the novel's content, it is easy to understand how parents would see the novel as a glorification of suicide, not to mention other sensitive elements like drug use and sex. There is also the issue of desensitization of self-harm. Concerns around the novel and TV show demonstrates a common fear that young adults will become desensitized by blood and gore, especially when a show or novel describes self-harm in such detail.

The more important issue, however, can be attributed to how sensitive topics like suicide are portrayed in media. Since adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the media, the conversation should be focused on how sensitive topics can be presented in a way that is realistic and informative for that age group. Suicide and mental health problems are unfortunate realities for adults and adolescents alike, so it is important that younger audiences are aware of these issues so that they can approach them thoughtfully if they encounter them in the real world. Teachers should approach the issue with questions on how young adults can benefit from having conversations about the issue of suicide and how this topic can be portrayed in written media.

The problem with censoring topics related to suicide and mental health is that these issues are already taboo as it is. Depression can be extremely shameful for some people, especially young adults whose struggles might not be taken seriously by adults or even peers. It is already difficult for those struggling with mental health issues to reach out for help, so engaging with novels that approach these issues is a way for students to connect with people who reflect similar struggles. These books let students know that they are not alone and that there is someone that can help them if they are struggling.

Examples of Challenged Books and Their Literary Merit

To combat impending book challenges moving forward, current and future educators should first research what books they would like to include in the classroom. Do not just look at what has already been included in the curriculum but look beyond at other books that are often underappreciated. While commonly studied texts like *The Great Gatsby* or *Of Mice and Men* are certainly valuable and considered essential to the western canon, it is also imperative that teachers explore different topics that expand students' worldviews. Research how those books can meet educational requirements while also being relevant to today's world. Principals and school boards may disapprove of texts immediately because of intense subject matter, but it is important for educators to first advocate for how these texts can be beneficial instead of controversial. The recommended texts in this section provide several frequently challenged books and how they can be integrated into the classroom. Topics such as sexuality, racial discrimination, mental health, the Holocaust, and sexual violence are featured in these novels that introduce these themes in constructive ways for classroom settings.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood has been challenged since its publication in 1985 (Thomas 3). The story features a dystopian future where fertile women, known as handmaids, are tasked with bearing children for their society. The handmaids are subjected to sexual assault once a month when they are forced to become impregnated by wealthy, married men who need children. Unsurprisingly, this book has been targeted for its sexual content for its depiction of the sex scenes with the handmaids. But the sexual content is imperative for understanding the gravity of the handmaids' situations because these handmaids have no control over their body. They are not seen as people but rather wombs bringing more children into their society. This leads into more broad discussions that relate to the world we currently live in where reproductive rights are being challenged every day.

To integrate this novel into the classroom, several questions can be used to guide students into a discussion. These questions can be related to themes like gender roles and power, or they can address the format in which the novel was written. What does it look like when women have no bodily autonomy? What would be the consequences of a society where women only have one path, and what have societies like that looked like in the past? Why is the book written in letters (epistolary form)? Discussions will help students grapple the heavy subject matter and reflect on their own responses to the novel.

Additionally, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky presents both academic merit and relatability for students. This novel is also written in epistolary form, as the chapters are organized as letters from the main protagonist, Charlie. As Charlie makes new friends and becomes accustomed with high school, he moves beyond being a "wallflower" to becoming more involved with life. The reader follows as he navigates his personal relationships and mental health struggles. The LGBTQ content and sexual references in this book has made it a target for

being challenged (Niccolini 2015). Charlie's friend is openly gay, and sexuality is a topic brought up multiple times between the characters. Charlie himself struggles to understand his views on intimacy, relationships, and sexuality.

Like Charlie, adolescents struggle to navigate social awkwardness, mental health issues, and relationships. The novel speaks to so many young adult readers and this is why its inclusion in high school classrooms is so valuable. Students can imitate Charlie's letters by doing a journaling prompt during class. This will have students empathize with Charlie by voicing their thoughts and feelings into writing much like he did in the novel. Teachers can also show the movie adaptation to the class and students can write a film analysis. Students can respond to how the film translates the book to the screen, focusing on how directorial elements like casting or character portrayal impacts the story.

Another commonly challenged text that should be integrated in classrooms is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. This autobiography centers on Maya Angelou's childhood and early adult years as she faces discrimination, sexual abuse, and struggles with her self-image. The book has been challenged for its graphic depictions of sexual assault that Angelou endured as a child. One superintendent from a school district in Moulton, Alabama thought that the graphic descriptions of sexual assault was pornographic, saying, "When it goes into describing sex organs and describing the pain and actual act of rape, I think it's pornographic" (Donelson 5). This type of challenge is similar to that of *Maus* when Art Spiegelman's mother dies, where depictions of nudity or sexuality is misunderstood as something sexual instead of something disturbing. The portrayal of sexual assault brings attention to a subject that is still considered taboo, and yet it is something that children have unfortunately experienced for a long time. But including this horrific part of Maya's childhood

serves as a testament to her resilience and ability to overcome the worst of tribulations. Students who have been in a similar situation as Maya can see their own experience reflected in the novel and will feel inspired by her strength in overcoming such hardships. In addition to childhood trauma, a great part of the novel focuses on Angelou's experience with racial discrimination and how that affected her own position in the world. She shares her experience growing up as a black girl in the segregated American South in the 1930's and 1940's, highlighting the economic and social inequalities she faced. She witnessed violence inflicted on black people, discrimination in the healthcare system, and she herself fostered internalized inferiority in a world that valued whiteness.

Since historical context is so important to understanding Angelou's story, students can do a research assignment about the Jim Crow era in America. They can address questions related to segregation and discrimination during that time period. How did the law discriminate against people of color? What kind of racially motivated violence occurred during those years? Students can also read some pieces of Angelou's poetry to compare her attitudes and beliefs in those works to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Suggested poems include "Phenomenal Woman" and "Still I Rise", both of which cover themes of self-empowerment, overcoming oppression, and self-acceptance. Adolescence is an incredibly difficult time for people, and reading stories about self-love and overcoming adversity is a powerful way to encourage resilience and confidence. While the novel explores darker themes of racial prejudice and internalized hatred, it is also a story of resilience and overcoming the adversity that you face.

An additional text that addresses racial discrimination among African Americans is *The Hate u Give* by Angie Thomas. This work explores racial tension, injustice, class division, and police brutality through a young adult lens. The novel centers on Starr Carter, a 16-year-old

African American girl who witnesses the police shooting of her best friend, Khalil, during a routine traffic stop. The novel deals with the aftermath of the shooting as Starr is torn between two worlds: her predominately black neighborhood and her mostly white prep school. This novel has been the subject of controversy due to its portrayal of drug use, profanity, and negative views towards the police (Knox 1). But while the subject of police brutality is one that is difficult to grasp, it is an unfortunate reality for many African Americans. Some students first hear about these issues as young adults, but others have conversations around police brutality when they are very young.

In the classroom, students can connect the novel to current, real-world issues by researching news articles, documentaries, and legal cases related to police brutality to understand the context of when this novel was written. This issue is still ongoing in America today which makes the story even more relevant. Teaching this unit can begin with class discussion on what everyone has heard about police brutality or what they have seen on the news. The class can then do research on what major police brutality protests have looked like, especially during 2020, and what specific cases served as the foundation of those protests. Similar to the previously recommended teaching possibilities for *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, students can follow the book with the film adaptation and make comparisons between the two, focusing on which elements of the novel were highlighted the most and which ones were not.

To give attention to a different medium in the classroom, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is a great way to introduce graphic novels. Not only is *Maus* a true account of Holocaust survivors, but it offers a detailed look into one of the darkest parts of human history. The graphic novel format helps to engage students with the story by providing illustrations to visualize characters and settings. In *Maus*, the characters are all portrayed as different animals; this concept is an

excellent way to start discussion in the classroom. Students can analyze how the illustrations impact the story and how readers respond to it. While the violence in *Maus* can be difficult to learn about, it is essential that future generations grasp the horrific parts of history. Not only does learning about the evil of the past help to prevent them it ever happening again, but novels like *Maus* emphasize specific stories of victims. It is easy to think of Holocaust victims as a statistic instead of individual lives. This narrative about Spiegelman's father humanizes his experience to highlight how the war effected victims during and after the Holocaust and how some struggles are still present in families today.

To integrate this graphic novel into the classroom, it is first important to understand how this medium is beneficial for English teaching. Today's pedagogy has moved beyond just the standard classic novel or play. In a media-dominated society, one traditional form of literacy is no longer sufficient. Young adults interpret different forms of mass media, which now includes social media and video platforms. When studying graphic novels, students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of character, plot, and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering (Schwarz 2). In *Maus*, the characters are all portrayed as different animals, so this concept is an excellent way to start discussion in the classroom. Students can analyze how the illustrations impact the story and how readers respond to it. Why are Jewish people portrayed as mice and the Germans as cats? What about other ethnicities/nationalities are present in the novel? How do the illustrations approach graphic content as it pertains to the Holocaust?

After incorporating these texts in the classroom, students can reflect on how they felt about the sensitive subject matter in each novel. This reflection can pertain to why these books have been challenged frequently, how the sensitive content made students feel, and if students should

have a choice in what books are included in the class. Senior English teacher Jen Denzin reflected on the responses her students gave when she asked them how they felt about censorship in schools. 94.7% felt that schools should not censor texts that students choose to read in class. One student remarked that violence, language, and drug use are not grounds to censor materials because those are categories featured on the news daily (Denzin 3). Students are being exposed to more today than ever before because of social media, so it would arguably be better to read about sensitive topics in a classroom setting than from a random person on an app like Facebook.

To safeguard the future of free speech and expression in schools, educators must consider several factors when including sensitive material. PEN America offers several suggestions for how anyone can get involved with keeping books on shelves. Reviewing school policies concerning challenged books can help teachers understand the process and that the First Amendment is protected without personal bias interfering. Upon assigning books that may be sensitive for some, prepare an explanation as to why the books have merit. Contact and inform groups like the ALA in the event of challenges so that data on book challenges remains up to date. For students, teachers can promote the Take the Reading Without Walls Challenge, which has three steps: read a book about a character who doesn't look like you, read a book about a topic you don't know much about, and read a book in a format you don't normally reach for (PEN America 2016). One benefit of this challenge is that it helps students discover new books of their interest and promote literacy, which is more important than ever for students in an age dominated by electronics and social media. If students become more engaged with reading because of diverse characters and topics, it would validate the necessity for diverse books in classrooms.

Beyond the classroom, there are many other ways for educators and community members to advocate for banned or challenged books. Participating in Banned Books Week is one way to bring awareness to the growing issue of book censorship. Calling attention to frequently banned books brings exposure for what is being targeted so that students and educators can research specific titles for themselves. Joining non-profit organizations like We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) builds up a community of people who want to protect books and make them accessible in classrooms and libraries. WNDB provides several resources for teachers and librarians, articles, and scholarship opportunities for students.

Connecting with adolescents through literature is more important than ever. Advocating for literacy is essential for an era where technology is developing rapidly, and artificial intelligence is making its way into classrooms. As experimental AI programs like ChatGPT are being used to write essays, encouraging students to read will help for a future where students enjoy reading again. Removing books from classrooms is the exact opposite of what the education system needs right now.

For educators, librarians, and school administrators, the inclusion of texts in educational settings should boil down to freedom of expression and academic merit. Educators should have plenty of options to choose from when planning English instruction. They should not be afraid of losing their jobs for including novels that might have sensitive material. Educators are undervalued and overworked as it is, and they need all the support that can be given right now to ensure that students continue to receive the best quality education possible. Most importantly, the students themselves need the opportunity to have access to a variety of diverse texts to develop social and emotional learning, empathy for others, and a broader understanding of diverse worldviews. The lines between shielding and protecting students are becoming more blurred

with each new challenge against a book. But students, especially adolescents, need exposure with difficult topics so that they can approach them thoughtfully as adults in the real world. The United States is more of a melting pot than ever as diverse populations continue to grow pertaining ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation. The books that are offered in schools should reflect these identities, not deflect them. Schools and libraries cannot leave these people behind going forward or this country will not properly reflect its values of freedom and opportunity.

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