

ENG 110

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Books Bans Destroy Empathy

In the past few years, there's been a growing number of books banned that contain LGBTQ+ themes. In Duval County, Florida alone, 1.6 million books in classrooms and school libraries were reviewed to keep to standards with the "Don't Say Gay" law and the "Stop W.O.K.E." act. In theory when a book is reviewed, the process is to keep it on the shelf until "proven guilty," but in practice this is not always the case. There have been many instances of books being taken off the shelf during or even before the review process. Diverse literature has proven important for developing empathy in students and developmental malleability is crucial for effective learning. Therefore, banning books on LGBTQ+ themes and/or by LGBTQ+ authors due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity deprives people of necessary stories required to develop empathy.

The "Don't Say Gay" bill and the "Stop W.O.K.E." act have been in everyone's ears lately, but what do they do? An ACLU article summarizes the "Stop W.O.K.E." act nicely, "a classroom censorship law which severely restricts Florida educators and students from learning and talking about issues related to race and gender in higher education classrooms" [6]. The act specifically references "higher education," which in America means any optional education after high school. These students are not children. The "Parental Rights in Education" bill, also called, the "Don't Say Gay" bill, or "HB 1557" caused quite a stir upon its announcement. The Williams Institute, "the leading research center on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy" [10], summarizes the bill's intention. They say that it, "prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity before the 4th grade and requires such instruction to be 'age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate' thereafter" [3]. The wording of "age-appropriate" and "developmentally appropriate" are vague and allow for the definitions to be misconstrued

in various ways. For example, an educator might morally believe that a love story between two men is not “age-appropriate,” but might view a love story between a man and a woman otherwise, due to their experience of their heterosexual nuclear family. This is unfair to children who are living in a family that differs from the educators. This can even lead to conflicts at home. The truth is that students will learn about the things in the world—whether they are in the classroom or not. I believe it is a school’s job to present these topics in a respectful, appropriate and thought-provoking way.

This greatly affects teachers and creates a scenario like a witch-hunt: teachers can get “caught” for teaching anything remotely close to gender identity or sexual orientation. The punishments for being caught can be life-altering. A teacher in Iowa was placed on administrative leave after teaching a short story about the transgender athlete Schuyler Bailar’s first time swimming for Harvard’s men’s team [5]. This fear creates a rather toxic atmosphere in children’s education. Teachers already work on average 52 hours per week—which is well over the 40-hour recommendation by the U.S. Department of Commerce [11; 2]. Where are they supposed to find the time to intricately search through their lesson plan for any mention of something that might get them in trouble, especially with such vague definitions? Both the “Stop W.O.K.E.” act and the “Don’t Say Gay” bill overlap in such ways that restrict all educational conversations on gender identity and/or sexual orientation. The lack of a conversation around these topics severely reduces the ability to promote empathy between students and school faculty.

Teachers aren’t the only ones that are being affected by these regulations. Today, queer students’ identities are being more unfairly underrepresented compared to their peers than ever in the last decade. The number of books banned that contain LGBTQ+ themes per year is skyrocketing from 9% back between 2010-2019 to more than 47% in 2023 [12]. This is nearly a 50% increase over 4 years. When students’ identities are omitted from the books they read, it’s incredibly damaging to their confidence. It also does not stop students from being queer. The removal of queer authors and literature does not remove queer populations. Rather, it prolongs their lack of comfort and resources for coming out.

The debate of whether LGBTQ+ books should be allowed in the public library is harmful—even before the books are banned. These public dialogues question more than just the literature itself, it's a public questioning of a group's identity. This is especially harmful to students that are still growing and maturing into said identities. This negativity greatly impacts students' mental health. There's been a lot of psychological research to prove that mental health is directly linked to student success and dropout rates [8]. Schools that have an LGBTQ+ inclusive policy and curriculum are associated with lower suicide attempts for queer youth and higher GPA compared to schools that don't have an LGBTQ+ inclusive policy or curriculum [8]. As Schuyler Bailar put it, “when we affirm children's identities, we can actually save their lives” [5].

These book bans even affect students who don't identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Seeing and reading about characters that identify differently from students sets up their expectations for the real world. These characters prove to students that there isn't a singular human identity. To show students that the world is dominated by only a certain type of people is to lie to them. Our country is run by a vastly diverse set of people. In America, around 1 in 10 people self-identify as an LGBTQ+ member [4]. This is a significant amount of the population—almost 34 million Americans. It would be morally unjust to tell students that these people don't exist, they clearly do. A student's education is made up of many diverse topics, LGBTQ+ stories and history are significant enough to be one of those topics. The lack of this education greatly affects students' ability to empathize with these people. The chance that a student will encounter a member of the LGBTQ+ is rather high—1 in 10. If students don't believe that they exist, the encounter will cause a logical contradiction. The student will never see eye-to-eye with the member due to a lack of foundational acknowledgement of their identity.

Queer book bans greatly affect LGBTQ+ authors too. Over the past few years, authors of queer books have been seeing a shift: the criticism they receive is increasingly focused on the content they are writing, rather than errors in the writing itself. Because of this, Sarah Prager, an author of several queer history books for children and young adults, has developed a feeling of dread when they receive feedback, rather than intrigue. Some of

the “feedback” Prager has received includes accusations of being a groomer and a pedophile [1]. She has become afraid that when more people see her writing, her books are more likely to be banned [1]. Authors should not be afraid to publish their books in fear of being accused of such horrible things. I believe that it is our job as intellectual consumers to judge writing not strictly based on content. This is not to say that the content does not matter, but that the handling of such should be done appropriately.

A very common argument against queer literature in schools is, “reading LGBTQ+ characters will make students gay.” This has been proven false. LGBTQ+ identity cannot be forced through heterosexual/cisgender indoctrination or vice versa. Jared Fox, an English teacher in the Cleveland School District in Ohio, is living proof. He grew up reading heterosexual literature throughout his childhood, yet he came out as gay later in life [7]. Dr. Tiffany Wright, Interim Chair of the Department of Educational Foundations at Millersville University in Pennsylvania, is also a good example. She grew up with an extreme lack of queer representation not only in her childhood, but also her adult life as a college student [7]. Yet, she still came out [7]. LGBTQ+ literature will not “turn” students gay. The identity is determined internally. It is wrong to deny or invalidate a student’s identity based on the educational content they have consumed. Education is meant to open doors and start conversations. These conversations can allow students to form thoughts on their own identities. This is extremely foundational to the idea of self-realization. It is much easier to understand others, when you understand yourself; by knowing your own thoughts, emotions, and motivations, you are better equipped to recognize and empathize with similar experiences in others.

Overall, LGBTQ+ book bans are extremely damaging to the education system. They create a toxic atmosphere in the classroom and damage LGBTQ+ students’ mental health. In combination with the “Don’t Say Gay” law and the “Stop W.O.K.E.” bill, they will stop all educational conversations on queer subjects, will cause teachers to lie to their students about the world demographic and will under develop students by denying diverse perspectives. In the end, LGBTQ+ literature plays an important role in a student’s education. It provides them with accurate identities that exist in the world and allows them

to properly process these identities that may differ from their own. Queer characters and stories allow students to see themselves and create a sense of self-validation. Therefore, by banning LGBTQ+ books or queer authors, based solely on the content and themes, we deprive people of the stories necessary to form proper empathy.

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