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The Dilemma of Banned Books: Questioning the Ethics of Censoring Literature in Schools

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"If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. Were an opinion a personal possession of no value except to the owner; if to be obstructed in the enjoyment of it were simply a private injury, it would make some difference whether the injury was inflicted only on a few persons or on many. But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."

- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

Introduction

Literature, specifically in the form of novels, has been a vital organ of the public education system within the United States. Not only does reading such works transform us into better close readers and strengthen our vocabulary, but the texts at hand can be very essential to analyze specific contexts or issues that might have existed either throughout history or even in the present day. In today's country, the issue of banning certain books from school curricula has become as prevalent as ever, where mostly Southern Republican officials are calling for lists of books to be restricted from teaching due to controversies in their language, violence, and sexuality. One prominent recent example would be a school board's decision in McMinn County, Tennessee to ban Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which details the history of the Holocaust. However, Spiegelman depicts different groups as anthropomorphized animals, with Jews shown as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs. In response, the cartoonist told the *New York Times* "This is disturbing imagery...but you know what? It's disturbing *history*" (Smithsonian Magazine; emphasis added). We tend to counter bans by celebrating "Banned Books Week", which will be from September 18-24 in 2022. On their "About" page, the observance is to "bring together the entire book community...in shared support of the freedom to seek and express ideas, even those

some consider unorthodox or unpopular,” which this essay will champion. This essay aims to reject such actions of banning and suppression on ethical political grounds while emphasizing the immense educational value controversial texts have in facilitating students’ developments during their adolescence.

Courts and Legal Precedents

The first political observation that contradicts the action of banning literature within public schools is our inherent right to freely express ideas via speech or the press as stated in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Courts throughout the country have heard cases regarding this specific right within the context of books in schools. The first of which was decided in 1976, where the Strongsville City School District in Ohio ordered that Heller’s *Catch-22* and Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* be banned from the school library. The court ruled in favor of the students by reasoning that the “library is a storehouse of knowledge” and students have a First Amendment right to receive information and the librarian has a right to disseminate it (University of Cincinnati).

The most important legal decision however was made by the United States Supreme Court in 1982 for the case *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico*. A high school student named Steven Pico led a group of students who sued the board for ordering the removal of books on the grounds that they were “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy.” Ruling in favor of the students, Justice Brennan held that the First Amendment includes the right to read library books of a student’s choosing and even though school authorities have significant authority to control the content of speech in schools, the power is not absolute (University of Cincinnati). Also, school boards may not remove books solely on the basis of disliking the ideas within those books. Justin Driver, a Yale University law

professor, emphasizes the case's relevance today, and he claims "*Pico's* bottom line has enjoyed considerable vitality in lower courts" (Walsh). Court precedents like the few listed above epitomize how school boards do not have the final authority to prevent books from being in libraries or eventually being taught in the classroom. Controlling what we cannot read, in these instances, is a clear abuse of power.

The highest court in the country has also issued opinions placing great value in the vast marketplace of ideas within the United States, so authors of novels that have been classified as a part of the acclaimed literary canon are also contributing their ideas by writing. Even though the cases that facilitated these opinions might not have related to banning books directly, we can apply legal precedents in the current era. One of the more universal 'tests' to gauge whether or not speech could be protected is the Brandenburg test coined in its namesake 1969 decision. The *per curiam* majority opinion in the decision held that a state could suppress speech "except where such advocacy is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action" (Justia). Observations reveal that high school students do not tend to participate in 'lawless action' if they stumble upon a controversial text required for a course. Alyssa D. Niccolini, a 11th- and 12th-grade teacher in Brooklyn, conveys how "exploring banned books can...offer an invigorating entry point for bringing a [youth lens] into the secondary classroom. In reading and discussing banned books, secondary students gain an opportunity to think through adolescence as a social construct" (23). Policymakers and school boards insist on removing certain texts to shield children from edgy material that contravenes an ideal adolescence, but if texts are removed, children and their parents will lose the opportunity "to discuss issues and material they will inevitably be exposed to and also because many children have already been exposed to these difficult situations in their real lives," books however "may provide an opportunity for children

to explore their own conflicts with relatable characters” (Ferguson 355). Any fears of indoctrinating our youth in topics surrounding sexuality and violence while containing questionable language need to be stopped, as it is impractical to declare what materials can and cannot be accessed in a high school setting.

The Issue of Identity

Another component we have to consider when banning acclaimed novels in schools is one centering around identity. Several works, both classic and contemporary, highlight the lives of minority or ostracized groups. In January 2022, a Seattle-area school board voted to remove Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the district’s ninth-grade reading curriculum after complaints rose regarding its “racial insensitiv[ity]” (Betz). Teachers can still use the text, but it is no longer required. Novels such as *Mockingbird*, while controversial in the subjects of race through its use of slurs and the interpretation of Atticus Finch as a ‘white savior’, give students great insight into historical and social contexts such as the early twentieth century. Anthony Zurcher’s piece “Why are certain school books being banned in US?” writes that uses of racist epithets in other novels like John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* have led to their limited teaching in northern school districts like Mendota Heights, Minnesota, and Burbank, California (BBC). From my own experience, I believe that children can be exposed to nuance issues like race even before high school through such works that use epithets that are controversial in the present. For example, I can recall reading Taylor’s 1976 novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* around eighth grade, which was another novel not shy about depicting discrimination and punishment for African-Americans. Kwame Anthony Appiah, a philosopher and current President of the American Academy Arts and Letters wrote *The Ethics of Identity* in 2005, which theorized the steps it takes to take on a certain identity. I argue that the following steps can be tied into

controversial books concerning discrimination on the basis of race as well as sexuality, and even though the identities could be deemed offensive by today's standards, people can still identify with them and learn from the past.

Appiah begins his analysis by discussing the importance of words or terms that are used to mark certain subsets of people. A collective identity, according to him, "requires the availability of terms in public discourse that are used to pick out the bearers." What is arguably more important about this first step is that the words have to be known among the society as a whole and their definitions must be understood to apply to individuals. Tying this into the realm of literature, novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* are widely known and challenged on the basis of using outdated racial slurs to classify characters like Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman. While we frown upon and highly discourage that kind of language in the present, the more important information for high school readers to gather is that the labels *existed* and remained in the discourse for a reason. Appiah's second element of social identity is "the internalization of those labels as parts of the individuals who bear the label," suggesting that those people 'targeted' with the term or label have to discern whether or not it directly applies to them. Through repeated uses and varying connotations, individual characters within novels of race and sexuality would be fully aware that they are a part of the 'community' associated with the word at hand, even if it doesn't have a positive association, such as a slur. The third and final facet of Appiah's construction of social identity is perhaps the most important. It is "the existence of patterns of behavior toward an individual such that s/he is treated as that social identity," detailing how other people react and treat others on the basis of the identification term. Appiah himself notes how this treatment "is often the focus of invidious discrimination," causing tensions to rise between majority and minority sectors of the community. "Histories of sexism,

homophobia, racism, and ethnic hatred” sprouted from the aforementioned steps, and these histories have been documented in works of literature, whether they are fictional or realistic (Appiah 66-69).

Hatred in essence is morally unjust, but it would assist readers, especially those transitioning into another stage of life, to learn about instances of discrimination so that they can learn from history’s past mistake and continue their lives through a lens of seeing the best of all groups of individuals. Lin et al. support this notion, for they claim that programs can “expose students to controversial issues on a daily basis that helps them develop social awareness;” consequently, they “can help students build confidence in their capacity to become active citizens” (116-117). For those who identify and are labeled as part of an ostracized group or community, “a particular form of media such as banned books may be a positive influence for some individuals enhancing their mood states” (Ferguson 355). Mike Hixenbaugh of NBC News interviewed a 17-year-old girl from Katy, Texas about the banning of books such as Rosen’s *Jack of Hearts (and Other Parts)* that feature LGBTQ+ characters and themes. She finds solace and relief within the texts: “As I’ve struggled with my own identity as a queer person, it’s been really, really important to me that I have access to these books...and I’m sure it’s really important to other queer kids. You should be able to see yourself reflected on the page.” Amber Kaul, a bisexual student in the same piece, also believes “reading those books helps kids realize that the feelings that they’ve already had are valid and OK, and I think that’s what a lot of these parents are opposed to (Hixenbaugh). Impressionable students can empathize with characters within a fictional narrative so that they can establish a connection between their common identities as Appiah describes.

Consulting Prior Data

Studies and observations have revealed that reading books that are included on banned lists can help them become productive citizens of society. Ferguson's research of a sample of 282 youth from a small city in South Texas included asking whether they had read any books from a list of 30 identified by the American Library Association (ALA) as commonly challenged works because of content (356). One of the core outcome materials of interest was the impact of banned books on civic behaviors, which was found to be positively related, specifically to interests in politics, elections, and participating in charity events (357). On the opposing end of the spectrum, banned books were not predictors of nonviolent or violent crime commission (357).

Table 3
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control Predictors on Civic Behavior

	β	95% CI	t-value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	.14*	(.02, .25)	2.24	.02
Female gender	.07		1.09	.28
Step 1 $F(2, 249) = 5.51, p = .005 \Delta R^2 = .04$				
Neuroticism	.02		0.34	.73
Antisocial personality	-.04		-0.57	.57
Step 2 $F(2, 247) = 0.29, p = .75 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Family attachment	.14*	(.02, .25)	2.21	.03
Delinquent peers	.04		0.56	.58
Step 3 $F(2, 245) = 3.25, p = .04 \Delta R^2 = .03$				
Hours reading for school	-.01		-0.07	.94
Hours reading for fun	.03		0.48	.63
Banned books	.23*	(.12, .34)	3.06	.002
Step 4 $F(3, 242) = 5.09, p = .002 \Delta R^2 = .06$				
Total model $F(9, 242) = 3.91, p < .001$ Adjusted $R^2 = .10$				

Table 3 from Ferguson 358

Table 5
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control Predictors on Nonviolent Crimes

	β	95% CI	t-value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	-.01		-0.11	.91
Female gender	.09		1.34	.18
Step 1 $F(2, 252) = 0.66, p = .52 \Delta R^2 = .01$				
Neuroticism	.10		1.57	.12
Antisocial personality	.07		1.05	.29
Step 2 $F(2, 250) = 6.83, p = .001 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Family attachment	-.09		-1.47	.14
Delinquent peers	.22*	(.11, .33)	3.16	.002
Step 3 $F(2, 248) = 6.31, p = .002 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Hours reading for school	.01		0.13	.89
Hours reading for fun	.04		0.48	.63
Banned books	.02		0.29	.77
Step 4 $F(3, 245) = 0.24, p = .87 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Total model $F(9, 245) = 3.19, p < .001$ Adjusted $R^2 = .07$				

Table 5 from Ferguson 359

Table 6
Multiple Regression Results for Banned Books and Control Predictors on Violent Crimes

	β	95% CI	t-value	Significance
Study variable				
Age	-.01		-0.14	.89
Female gender	-.01		-0.16	.87
Step 1 $F(2, 252) = 0.17, p = .84 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Neuroticism	.06		0.92	.36
Antisocial personality	.18*	(.06, .29)	2.58	.01
Step 2 $F(2, 250) = 6.24, p = .002 \Delta R^2 = .05$				
Family attachment	-.03		-0.40	.69
Delinquent peers	.04		0.62	.54
Step 3 $F(2, 248) = 0.25, p = .78 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Hours reading for school	.01		0.14	.89
Hours reading for fun	-.03		-0.38	.71
Banned books	.03		0.46	.65
Step 4 $F(3, 245) = 0.10, p = .96 \Delta R^2 = .00$				
Total model $F(9, 245) = 2.23, p < .04$ Adjusted $R^2 = .03$				

Table 6 from Ferguson 359

From this data, while reading banned books might not directly *cause* the increase in civic behavior, it is something we must consider when school boards and officials decide to pull texts from the curriculum as a ‘shielding’ method. Observations like Ferguson’s highlight the unethical nuances of limiting what students can read in their schools, for classic works have been accepted into the literary canon due to their remarkable innovations and commentaries on relevant conflicts in certain periods. Newer texts covering sexuality and even contemporary texts that give readers insight into systemic racism (like Coates’ *Between the World and Me* and Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist*) are being openly dismissed due to their portrayal of the United States as imperfect, flawed, and perhaps ruined. I would argue that suppressing students’ liberties to read such insights into the unequal social realm of the present United States would create more imperfect and flawed individuals than if they actually couldn’t consume them. Failure to accept the depicted social climates and failure to acknowledge inequalities aimed at communities such as African-Americans and LGBTQ+ will facilitate more discrimination and less awareness as a whole.

Conclusion and Outlook

The new movements to bar controversial texts from high school curricula violate not only students’ First Amendment rights to speech and expression of ideas, but they also violate students’ abilities to become capable citizens knowledgeable of social and political conflicts. Even though legal precedents through the courts possibly favor students’ rights, the conservative majority on the current Supreme Court could reverse prior decisions if a new case is appealed to it. Books are not the only entertainment medium that has been questioned or can be described as controversial currently. Violent video games had been theorized to cause violent behavior within players; however, Oxford debunked the myth with a 2019 study, finding that there is no

correlation between playing violent games and adolescent aggression (Oxford 2019). Movies and film would occupy a similar sphere, and even from a younger age, children can be exposed to slapstick violence in cartoons like *Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*. Another prominent medium that has exponentially grown in popularity is that of music, especially via streaming platforms. The influence and dominance of pop music and rap is immense, and a good portion of its content features explicit language and content including, but not limited to sex and drugs. This kind of music is played and advertised frequently, but yet no one has really questioned if artists should be allowed to create such content and have it played on the radio and streaming platforms everywhere. If the nation generally accepts these forms of entertainment, why have books become the villain recently? Why should we prohibit students from becoming more cultured and well-versed in heated discussion areas? The answer is that we shouldn't, and we should embrace banned and controversial books for the details they bring to light about the complexity of the world's problems.

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